

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* as a Post-Apocalyptic fiction

Ms. P.Saranya
Research Scholar (Ph.D Part Time)
Govt. Arts College
Coimbatore

Abstract

Michael Ondaatje, as a diaspora writer depicts civil war in his country Sri Lanka and the world war, in his works. His novels like *Anil's Ghost* and *The English Patient* exactly picturised the post war period during the time of civil war and post-world war respectively. These novels depicted the world after war and the life of survivors. Post-Apocalyptic situation in the novel *The English Patient* is brought out in this paper. The novel has got only handful of characters the English patient, Hana, Kip and Caravaggio. All these characters are hailed from different nation and spaces but they have undergone a horrific experience during the World War II. Polytrophic identity and geographical dislocation of the characters are discussed in the paper.

Key-Words

Post-Apocalypse- Polytrophic identity -Geographical dislocation- broken life- Psychological trauma

The beginning of twentieth century marked the emergence of a new form of fiction in the field of literature. In this tradition, emerged apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic fiction. Apocalyptic fiction is a sub-genre of science fiction which is concerned with the end of civilization due to existential catastrophe such as world war, nuclear war, pandemic disease, cybernetic revolt, supernatural phenomena, climate change and natural disaster. Post-Apocalyptic fiction is set in a world after such disaster. These novels deal with the theme of chaos, focusing on the psychology of the survivors or the existence in the pre-catastrophic civilization which have been forgotten. This type of genres acquired popularity after World War II. The survivors want to repress the apocalyptic memories in order to keep going and put in the position of facing the fact where there is neither hope nor end. In these novels everything is suddenly blown into past and it does not bring any progress in the future. The future is usually

reversed. It looks back where the world ended, at apocalyptic experience. The memories of the characters become narration. The life of the characters becomes saturated at a point and the apocalyptic experience is narrated in the post-apocalyptic period. The Post-Apocalyptic experiences are horrific and painful and it is just a matter of existentialism.

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* was set in the final stage and immediate aftermath of World War II. It does not tell the story of war won rather it depicts the war torn scenario. The story is not a linear narrative of war but it recalls the flashback of characters and their experiences. The story is told in a broken manner as like the scattered pieces of mirror and the characters also remain broken till the end. Simpson pointed out in his essay on *The English Patient*,

the advent of nuclear age, blasting nations and people on all the points of the imperial map past time and space. Point a limit in the historical imaginary, renders such forgetting impossible precisely because its apocalypses enflames a rage for mourning. (229)

This concept of rage flows into every part of Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. The novel represents a handful of people who find themselves after a fall in which they become both physically and psychologically ambiguous. They try to re-stabilise their life in the post-world war era and fails.

Identity crisis plays an important role in apocalyptic fiction. The multiplicity of language, landscape, spaces, background and ethnic diversity has brought a polytrophic identity of the characters and their situation. There are only four major characters in the novel the English patient, Hana, Kip and David Caravaggio who have gathered under the same Italian roof after the war.

Almásy, who is known as the English patient, is a Hungarian by birth whose body is burnt during the time of war. His body has transformed into a desert with Oasis of burned skin. He has no name, no identity card and his face resembles a burnt piece of paper, which others translate as

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 a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid, that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eyes was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet, there was nothing to recognize in him. (50)

He helped the Germans to navigate the desert, although his duty is to sketch out the name in a sense possess the unmapped desert. But in the end his own identity which is the map of his features, has been erased and he is known only as the 'English Patient'. All the characters of the novel are escapers of war who have sought the asylum at the Italian Villa San Giralamo. Here

they find new identity different from their homeland and form a new community, isolating themselves from the outside world of war and violence.

The English patient survives as an apollonian figure whose identity is consumed by the fire of African desert and only the parts of it remain. Even the water in the desert has polytrophic identity as like human beings. The novel shows the double symbolic aspect of the desert. Thousands of years ago Sahara was a sea and had water. But now it is only a desert as it has no water. The Nomads had “water-drawing songs”, and one of the caves in which the English Patient took refuge is called “The Cave of Swimmers”. After the fall of the English patient, he was burnt and was found by a community of people called Bedouins, who wrapped him in an oil cloth like a placentas. He was preserved by them in the cave. While travelling with them, he found the path familiar to him as he has travelled in the same path earlier. Their stories have become his stories and they say:

In the desert you celebrate nothing but water (25).

Though I was in dry sands, I know I was among water people...Even today caravans look like a river. Still, today is water who is the stranger here. Water is the exile, carried back in cans and flasks, the ghost between your hand and your mouth (50).

In the desert the presence of water is celebrated through its absence, as like the pre-apocalyptic experience is celebrated in the post-apocalyptic period. When the pilot is taken by Bedouins to an Italian hospital, he refuses to declare his identity and he is not ready to go with any one and finally stays with his nurse in the villa which was half destroyed. The description of the villa, the nurse and the English patient are narrated as:

She and English man insisted on remaining behind when the other hurses and patients moved to the safer locations in the south. (4)

He is her last patient in the villa San Girolama, their war was over, both of them refusing to return with others at the safety Pisa hospitals. (44)

The identities of the characters become barren as like their lives. Hana also obtain polytrophic identity as like the English patient. She is tied, connected and left behind in her voluntary exile in the Italian villa: “I wanted to go home and there was no one at home. I was sick of Europe. Sick of being treated like gold because I was female” (90-91). The Italian villa becomes her home land and she never recognizes Canada as her home country. She refuses to go back to her country because her father was burnt in the war, she lost her child and the only relation left in the country is her step mother, Clara. She got fed up with Europe, as Europe before the war treated her like gold. It gave her different identity but after the war she stands as a broken image which has lost its clarity. She finds her correspondent in the deserted man, the English patient:

She herself preferred to be Nomadic in the house with her pallet or hammock, sleeping sometimes in the English patient's room, sometimes in the hall, depending on the temperature or wind or light (14)

The identity of Hana is questioned when she thinks about her golden life in Canada. She was affected psychologically as she lost all the relationship in the world. When other decided to leave the ruined villa Hana did not. She wanted to be there in taking care of the English patient. According to her, the past brings no fruit, and she has to lead the present life in devastated condition. Hana tries to make the villa a fertile one by cultivating vegetables which is necessary for them, even the bombed earth has become fertile but the life of people after the war remains unfertile.

David Caravaggio who lived under variety of masks also experienced polytrophic identity. He stands as an example for Dyonisian type for there found instability in his existence. He was an Italian traveller, thief, double agent, drunkard, lover and friend. He taught Hana lessons of dancing and brings the gramophone for her to dance. He asked her to sing and taught the lessons of love. He narrated the stories of a man always in love to Hana. While Hana listened to the stories of Caravaggio, she also confesses her story to him. Caravaggio can be viewed as a traveller-translator for he is able to read the identities of other people. While Hana narrated her story Caravaggio could read her face when it was in war and in love. But he never succeeds in understanding the polytrophic identity of the English patient. According to Caravaggio, the patient is a mysterious book and for the Italian "are mystical creatures". Even to the patient Caravaggio seems to be a book. Both of them try to try to translate the untranslatable book.

Kip is physically displaced from his native country, India to the Italian villa. He came to fight for the allies in the Second World War. Even Kip has lost his name Kirpal Singh after war and it was changed as Kip. He attains the status of hybridity in the Italian villa. Kip is different from other characters as he never looks back at his past. Whereas the other characters of the novel are struck in their nostalgic feeling of the past. Even at the end of the novel, Kip is expecting to have a family of his own.

In the novel, even love seems to have polytrophic identity. It looks at the whole civilization in a different angle. The gestures and the feelings of the beloved are transcribed into a different vision in love. In another case, both body and self are buried deep because the lovers burn all the social rules of the society. Kip and Hana fall in love in the deserted Italian villa forgetting their post-apocalyptic situation, whereas the English patient and Katherine fell into the desert, as their relationship is also committed as the desert. The love story of Hana and Kip goes parallel with the love story of the English patient with Katherine Clifton. It shows the different identity of the lovers being in love and after it. The love story of the characters is considered to be:

A love story is not about those who lose their heart but about those who find that sullen inhabitant who, when it is stumbled upon, means the body can fool no one,

can fool nothing- not the wisdom of sleep or the habit of social graces. It is a consuming of oneself and the past. (104)

In love making there can be a whole civilization. (237)

The Italian villa gives a different identity during the time of war and after it. It is like a desert, a place of refuge for those who deserted their race, nation, and language, anything that is artificial and divides human beings. There are no racial boundaries in the villa which the four major heroes of the novel practice. It has become the place of love and passion after the war. The symbols, characters and the motifs of the novel show polytrophic identity as they were deserted by the influence of war.

On one hand post-apocalyptic fiction brings out the identity crisis faced by the people after war or any disaster. When people come across such disaster they dislocate themselves from their homeland leaving their ethnicity, culture and language. This makes them to acquire a new tradition and culture for leading their life. The aftermath of war leads to such geographical dislocations. This concept of space and dislocation of space also plays a vital role in the apocalyptic novels. Many novels of literature focus on this concept, and analyses the psychological aspect of these characters that undergo geographical dislocation. It also deals with the history of a country and its people, who dislocated from their country.

The crossing of borders and exploring new routes made people to move from one part of the world to another. When the colonisers settled in the colonized nations, a sort of displacement took place which made them to establish their culture, language and tradition in the settled country. The settlers finally attain an ambivalent position losing their identity and acquiring a new identity and they live in a third world. Novels written on the concept of third world were called as third world fiction. The characters of these fictions occupy a third space in the world where they live. The novel *The English Patient*, when it is analysed as a post-apocalyptic fiction, the main problem discussed would be the identity crisis and the next is geographical dislocation found in it. The characters who settled in the Italian villa after the Second World War was not real English men, as they all belong to different nations and of different ethnicity. The narrative moves in various directions focusing towards different characters.

Of the four people in the villa, three are social or political outcasts or marginalized people, whereas Hana is a self-exile. The English patient is named as an English patient after the war but he is a Hungarian who speaks High German, and he supports the allies during the time of Second World War. When Almsy involved in desert exploration, he identifies himself and others with Bedouin tribe. While reading Herodotus' *The Histories* to Katherine, Almsy realizes the multiple realities existing simultaneously. Almsy while recording his history with Herodotus' *The History*, he reconstructs it with his present situation. In the same manner, after the war, when English patient tells his story to Caravaggio, Hana or Kip, they relocate or reconstruct the history based on their present condition. Even during the time of war and after war, history is displaced by the experience of the characters.

When Hana reads the book of Herodotus to the English patient, the great cities were dislocated in different manner. Hana reads as:

For those cities that were great in earlier times must have now become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before.... Man's good fortune never abides in the same place. (151)

This was found in the history of Herodotus. Geographical dislocation of the world from the fifth century till twentieth century was recorded in the book. Ondaatje succeeds in recording the history and its displacement in different centuries. Almasy as an explorer finds himself displaced in the desert. He neither calls him as a Hungarian nor an English man. Rather the word only 'Human' prevailed in the exploration. All the travelers were considered equal in the expedition of Zerzura. Almasy narrated his identity in the desert as:

There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans 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. (147)

By using the term 'nationless', Ondaatje tried to bring the term oneness among different nations. Almasy dislocates himself by crossing linguistic as well as national boundaries therefore remains unidentified. The English patient speaks various languages- English, German and the tribe's dialect rather than one language thus crossing his linguistic boundary.

The villa was half ruined by war as like the English patient. Even at this condition, the four characters tries to find a new life in the ruined or destructed villa hoping for a fruitful future. Post-apocalyptic fiction portrayed the physical reality of the world in a better way. The setting of the villa may seem most romantic: the ruin, the landscape, thunderstorm and lightening. War has ruined the ancient meadows and now is exploded by phosphorous bombs and explosions. Objects of everyday reality are filled with danger:

The retreating army had left pencil mines within musical instruments. Returning owners opened up pianos and lost their hands. People would revive the swing of a grandfather clock, and a glass bomb would blow out half a wall and whoever was nearby....Most pencil bombs were hidden in (metronomes)- the easiest place to solder the thin layer of wire upright. Bombs were attached to taps, to the spine of books, they were drilled into fruit trees so an apple falling onto a lower would detonate the tree, just as a hand gripping that branch would. (79-80)

As far as Hana is concerned, she dislocates within herself. She never feels the villa as an acquired place rather it is a place which gave new life to her. She wants to think about her past life but continues to narrate her story to the patient or Kip. She displaces herself from Canada and creates a new identity for her in the villa. Though Hana talks about her lost child, husband and father, she quiet manages to lead better life in the present. As the novel takes place in 1945,

Hana calls it as “a period of Adjustment” (57), where everyone finds more comfort without home, possessions and traditional kind of attachments. She prefers to remain in the ruined villa amongst disaster and destruction. Gradually Hana develops physical relationship with Kip who is one among the survivors of the villa.

Kip is the only character in the novel that does not go back to the nostalgic feeling of the past. As an Indian, Kip finds his dislocation from India to England and then to Italy as a sapper. The English patient finds similarity between him and Kip when both share a can of condensed milk. Almásy expresses the view that both he and Kip were international bastards “born in one place choosing to live elsewhere” (188). Again when Almásy talks about his desert experience, he again uses the term “just another possible second-rate spy. Just another international bastard” (267). These terms are ambiguous but still it gives the idea of crossing borders or dislocating self. The imperial conquest of the western countries over the Asians was felt by Kip only when bombs were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Till this incident Kip believed war as a common disaster all over the world but the present incident made him to identify himself as an Asian living in danger in Italy. He decided that he no longer continue to be in Italy and leaves the country.

Caravaggio has a past life of his own. He was involved in politics and spying. He was also a good friend of Hana's father Patrick. Though Hana knew Caravaggio already, she treated him only as a survivor in the villa. As like other characters, Caravaggio does not have memorable past but still he links it with the present life. He shared his experience as spy and the participation of countries in the war. He is both physically and mentally dislocated. He arrives the villa as “the man with bandaged hands”. He has lost his thumb cut off by the German army.

As a post-apocalyptic novel, *The English Patient* depicted the traumatic situation that the character underwent. It can also be considered to be an anti-war novel depicting the horrors of war. The novel is considered to be a post-modern fiction which pictures the struggle of survivors in the aftermath of war. Every incident of the novel is pictured with the image of a ‘lost reality’ which the characters celebrate in the present. The novel is narrated in fragments and the symptom of mental wound is traced out. Ondaatje has captured a passionate relationship among the four characters immediately after the war. The thematic rendering of the novel possess multiplicity.

The English Patient records the horrors of apocalypses and the failure of apocalypse promises. History is reconstructed in the narrative and constructed a new form of “facts”, “reality” and “identity”. The apocalypse of World War II has not just destroyed the physical realities of houses, cities and landscapes and ideas of coherence, stability and identity but also reveals the instability of matter. The novel depicts the movement of life and time soon after the great disaster. It does not speak about the winners of war but the survivors of war.

Works Cited

Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992. Print.

- Anghel, Corina Ana. "Polytrophic Identities in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." *Journal of the Indo-Canadian Studies* 1.2 (July 2001): 73-86. Print.
- Gaur, Rashmi. "Passion and Devastation beneath Ethnic and Polytrophic Identities in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." *The Commonwealth Review* 14.1 (Jan 2010): 136-144. Print.
- Pesch, Josef. "Post-Apocalyptic War Histories: Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." *Ariel* 28.2 (April 1997): 117-139. Print.