

Contemporary literature
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Module No. # 01

Lecture No. # 32

Good morning, today we are going to begin with the Michael Ondaatje celebrated novel *The English patient* which won the Booker prize for the best novel in 1992, and the film was adopted for an Academy Award winning movie also. I am sure most of you are familiar with this historian and son a Julliard Binoche - *The Ninth* - and a William Defford directed by an Thrimangla.

So, the movies set during the second world war, and the exact location is a place called villa san giralomo in Tuscany Italy, I will read the epilogue; epilogue is the way writers begin generally their works and just to set that tone of the work, and we are told that this excerpt is taken from the minutes of the geographical society meeting of 19, sorry, November 1947 London.

So, it begins like this, most of you I am sure remember the tragic circumstances of the death of Geoffrey Clifton at Gilf Kebir followed later by the disappearance of his wife Katharine Clifton which took place during the 1939, desert expedition in search of Zarzura. I cannot begin this meeting tonight without referring very sympathetically to those tragic occurrences the lecture, this evening ellipsis.

Now, what does it tell you, the very epilog tells us that we are going to encounter two characters Katharine and Geoffrey Clifton; Geoffrey died during desert expedition, so we now know that this is a novel which is primarily set in the deserts particularly of North Africa, and in search of Zarzura perhaps, this is a name of a particular desert, and Geoffrey Clifton who is an expert cartographer or geologist. He along with his wife perished tragically in 1947 November yes, sorry, not in exactly 1947, but during the war, during the expedition, in 1939.

So, this a tragic of affair that is recalled and remembered. So the English patient has got lots to do with the idea of memory, and we had finished the remains of the day which is another novel about, if you remember, a mister Steven's who recalls most of his life said during the years between the first and the second world war.

So, that is the novel of memory, and so is the English patient, so remembering two dead people who just disappeared in one of the desert expeditions in 1939. So, this epilogue sets the tone of the novel, it is a novel of loss, it is a novel of death, it is also a novel about people who live in exile in faraway lands, not in their own lands because the very construct of identities and nationalities is interrogated in the English patient.

So, these are the key words that you will be looking at memory, death, loss, identities. English patient is the most famous work of Michael Ondaatje **that these** and it is extremely lyrical in style, the novels principle themes are continuation of themes that appeared in two of on that these earlier works, and we will be talking about those earlier works soon. The character's in English patient Count Almasy, and Count Almasy is the English patient, I am giving away the suspense right at beginning at the introduction of the novel, Count Almasy is the English patient, who is not an English, where he is a Hungarian, so as we were talking about just now the very construct of identities is challenged.

The English patient is not exactly English that is the idea, then we have French Canadian nerds, hanaa, we have a spy - a Canadian spy - Caravaggio and he is also an interesting character, we have an Indian Sikh called Kripal Singh, but who has abbreviated his name to kip. And we have of course, Katharine Clifton and Geoffrey Clifton, husband and a wife who died in 1939, and they mention at the very beginning in the epilog, and another very important character is vilas san giromo, where the novel, where the action takes place, so now that villa is also an extremely important character.

Michael Ondaatje who was born in 1943 wrote another important works up earlier to the English patient, one is the Dainty monsters in 1967 and the collected works of Billy the kid **left handed poems** it was written in 1970, so 1967 Dainty monsters and the collected works of Billy the kid 1970, so like these two works the English patient also explores the themes of love, memory, exile, death, the conflicted sense of national identity, the

political and moral dangerous of complicity with ruling a lead, something that we found in the remains of the day also, in away the understated manner.

The English patient is also concerned with the fairly intensity of love along with the postmodernist sense of history as a function of perspective, the tension between creative and destructive energy and most importantly many manifestations of the so called outsider. So, as we were talking about at in the beginning English patient is also a novel about identities who is an outsider, who is the other, and who is the insider, and who belongs.

So, very construct of identities is extremely fluid, who is what, we do not know, so that is also that is perceptible in the way the novelist structured a construct, because there are several gaps, and gaps is then important aspect of the many pleasures of reading the English patient. So, we have to understand what are these literary gaps and how do they accentuate the literary pleasure of reading English patient, we will be talking about that soon.

Stylistic convention, now stylistic convention that emerge in the English patient appeared first in on these poetry, remember, Ondaatje is also renowned poet, and client poet, besides being in award winning novelist, so the stylistic conventions that I most obvious. One is fragmentation the novelist fragmented, its broken, but that adds to its pleasure, it also has the kind of action that we found in Ishiguro's the remains of the day, that the action is non-linear, it move back and forth in time because, after all it is a novel of about memory.

We have several interruptions and inclusions in the story and subversion of absolutely any kind of linear narration, we do not know how the characters go back while they are in conversation at one point at the particular time, and at the particular place and suddenly with one swish of memory they have transported to a totally different place and time. So, completes of virgin of the linear way of a story telling or narration, shifting narrative points of view is also an important aspect of the English patient.

We have also seen how point of view is an integral part of any narrative, in the remains of the day we noticed how the entire story unfolds through the perspective or through the point of view of mister Stevens, the butler, but here we find that there are several points

of views, we have curvaceous point of view, we of course, we have the English patients point of view, who is the hero of the novel, the so called hero of the novel, we have Hana's point of view, and we have Kripal's perspective also - Kripal's perspective on things.

So, there is multiple perspectives, and each perspective adds to specific dimension, bending of the **jauner** is another recurring stylistic convention, in other works of Michael Ondaatje, and one thing is that you never know how to read the book. I will give you the titles of the chapters, and it tells you, it may give you a glimpse about the various kind of, the titles itself - themselves - give you an over view of how difficult it is to define the **jaunt** of the English patient.

Jaunt is the category of course, we all know that **jaunt** is the category, we have several kinds of **jaunts** in literature, we have romantic **Joyner** of novel writing, we have an adventures novel, we have a detective or spy novel where the hero is a spy, we also have love stories, we have a family novels, we have adventures novels, but it is very difficult to pigeon hole in the English patient in any particular category, so that contents of the chapters go like the villa - that we were just talking about villa san giromo.

In near ruins, so this is in near ruins itself is the very deceptive title, what exactly is in near ruins, is it the villa, is it the life of a new particular character, or maybe you know the world falling apart, because remember this is a world, this is a story which took place during the second world war. So, world an entire way of life civilization going a center, some time a fire, what exactly south Cairo 1930 to 1938. So, perhaps that period is extremely important 1930 to 1938, but remember 1939 is the time and Geoffrey Clifton died along with his wife.

So, whatever happened between 1930 to 1938 must have been extremely important, Katharine and an entire chapter devoted to Katharine, you know the title **I am is** she must be so important to some of the characters that we have a full lengths chapter dedicated to her, it is her name that figures. And talking about names form an integral part of the English patient as we saw, just even the title itself is so intriguing, the English patient. So, a nameless entity what is he called, and names are an important aspect of the English patient, I will read out a couple of paragraphs, and that will perhaps substantiate, what I am saying.

A Beirut plan **insutive**, the holy forest, the cave swimmers august, now just a mere glimpse at the titles of the chapters tell you that it is very difficult identify the **Janour** of the English patient and that is what we were talking about, lets also talk about the idea of names, you know because names are a vital aspect of our identities, all of us get recognized by our names.

We are known by our names qualifies us, but here the construct of names are extremely, you know, what Ondaatje does is, deal with the romance of names, deal with the glamour of names, and you find names all over the novels, if the entire novel is full of names of people of books of even winds, and desserts, and places, and every name has something significant, every name has something significant aspect to it.

So, this is how the novel begins very intriguingly, she has stands up in the garden where she has been working and looks into the distance, she has sensed a shift in the weather, there is another guest of wind, a buckle of noise in the air and the tall suppresses way, she turns and moves appeal towards the house climbing over a low wall, feeling the first drops of rain on her bare arms, she crosses the lousier and quickly enters the house, in the kitchen she does not pause, but goes through it and climbs the upstairs which are in darkness and then continues along the long haul, at the end of which is a wage of light from an open door, she turns into the room which is another garden, this one made up of trees and bowers painted over its walls and sealing. The man lies on the bed his body exposed to the breeze, and he turns his at slowly towards her as she enters.

Now, so much of detailing, how she walks, how the women walks, how she goes across the length and breadth of the place, but we are not told who she is and what is her, more importantly what exactly is her name, and he lies on the bed but we do not know who he is.

His body is exposed to the breeze and he looks at her he watches her, so, so much of pronouns but no absolute, it is Dane rather for names, but names are very important. What about Michael Ondaatje? Michael Ondaatje was born in Srilanka in 1943, his parents Marvin Ondaatje and duress were prominent members of the inhabitanace of what ones comprised the Ceylonese colonial society.

Michael Ondaatje was a tea and rubber plantation, engineer, supervisor, and Doris Ondaatje's mother perform part time as a radical dancer. So, you know a very interesting mix of parent's, father is a supervisor for the tea and rubber plantation, mother is kind of a performing artist. His parents separated in 1954, and he along with his mother brother and sister migrated first to England and later move to Canada, so Michael Ondaatje is basically known today as a Canadian writer.

So, Canadian post colonialism is something that we have to look at while doing being English patient; Ondaatje received his a bachelor of arts degree from the university of Toronto in 1965, and his masters degree from the quince university 1967, and then he also taught for a number of years at various universities in Canada. So, the English patient is the continuation of an earlier Ondaatje novel, in the skin of a lion, which was published in 1987 which first introduces as to the character of dived Caravaggio, who is the masteries spy in the English patient. So, a sense of continuity, a sense of continuity of characters form from one novel to another, it is a very postmodernist aspect also, if you remember in one of earlier lecture and postmodernism, we talked about how characters from one a novel appear or emerge in another novel of the writer is the very postmodernist technique, adds a sense of inter-textuality, and a sense of you know continuation.

So, Michael Ondaatje started his carrier with writing poetry's or poems, and his first poem as your just talking about was Dainty monsters, also notice how he just opposes to very opposing images in his very first literary work. Dainty monsters and a result explodes some very seemingly in congress elements an ideas, at rate that is common to most of his works. He has also written a serial poem, at the man with seven toes in 1969 and this was inspire by paintings by an Australian artist which was about a true story of a women living among the aborigines after a ship track.

So, this interest in historical narratives - fragmented narratives - and visual arts also has become a signature styled in most of in Ondaatje writing. Both the collection of poems, the collected works of believe the skin and his first novel coming through slotted 1976, they were inspire by films for photographs, historical fragments, as well as oral legends, many of which are included in the final publish works, in the skin of a lion in which we saw that the character of David Caravaggio appears and also his first novel, it takes place in Toronto within the Macedonian emigrant community.

So, look at the common idea then themes that interconnect most of his works, the idea of exile, immigration this blurring of boundaries and identities, perhaps a reflection on his own life, on his own identity.

Michael Ondaatje realized heavily on historical documentation for inspiration viewing it into a kind of fictional story. Two characters from the novel turn up again, you know, that from the skin of the lion they turn up again in the English patient, so which is another history based on historical archives, after all it's a novel which was set during the second world war, and during the course of his historical research Ondaatje also relied heavily on true incidence of course, it is a fictional narrative, but he interweaves fiction with a historical facts.

In 1982 he published his fictional kind of a biography of his childhood in Ceylon, it was called *Running in the Family*, and he uses plenty of oral history of his family to try and reconstruct his family's past. Then, after the English patient on the next major work was *Anil's Ghost* which was published in the year 2000, **set emits** the civil war and Sri Lanka during the late 1980's and the early 1990's. So, according to Ondaatje, the conflict in the island has three sides, the government side, the anti-government insurgents, and the separatist, the gorillas, and the story focuses on the character of its heroin very mysteriously called Anil.

Anil usually is a boy's name - a man's name, in 2007 on that they published *Divided* a novel which maps the lives of three characters through their journey's across California of the 1970's, San Francisco of the 1990's, and the present day France. So, again noted the preoccupation with traveling across space and time the sheer blurring of boundaries, the idea of travel journey and emigration. *Divided* is influenced by the literary styles of Joseph Conrad and Kawabata the Japanese writer; Ondaatje has also done short movies plays and photography.

So, again to just do a quick recap, most of his themes deal with constructs of identity, among the post colonial feminist and Greece theories of the 1980's and 1990's. There is an increasing concern with the relation between literature and the larger socio political contexts within which it develops. We familiar with theories like **adversity** who wrote the seminal work *Orientalism*, and also the works of Gayatri Chakravarty's *Pibeth* and *Holy baba*.

So, these theories postulate that English culture exist not simply as a representation of elegance and higher culture, but also as a reflection of massive enterprise of hegemonic influence and self validation of the colonizing elates, and this is something that was also refer to not exactly the post colonial work, but if you look at the kind of dominance that the ruling class, or the kind of control that the ruling class at the elate people exert over the so called smaller people, then this idea was explode in great depth and detail in the remains of the day as well.

As we were talking about it, when we were reading the novel that the remains of the day need not be a novel about races per, say, but it is all about how human beings control one another, how they exerts certain kind of authority and power over those who are powerless, thus a rendering them completely you know almost impotent, the English patient also is very, you know, when we read the English patient we cannot ignore the post colonial theory, and post colonial theory of course, is concerned with examining the mechanisms and processes through which the colonizing powers persuaded the colonized to accept a foreign culture as something which is better than their own native way of living.

Suppose, colonial theories focus on the discourses and articulation of voices of those who were formally colonized, here we come across a very popular term the binaries; the term binary which means the exact opposite of a particular term, for example, black and white, good and evil, sewage and civilize. So, Edward sign in oriental's describes at length that the west's construction of the orient the so called east, it projects all the things that the west considers negative, so this means that all the things and there you know when we talk about a slash the binaries, so on the right hand side of the slash, an exist in a binary opposition to whatever exists in the orient.

So, the orient becomes the place where body as oppose to the mind exist evil and not good, ignorance as oppose to enlightenment, and feminine as oppose to the masculine they reside. So, by just apposing all these negatives on the orient side according to other side, the west positions its self has infinitely better or superior and positive, so one of the major concerns of the English patient is also exploration of these so called binaries. Colonial literature of course, is heavily influence by the post colonial theory, so if some of you who are interested in that particular idea can look it up. In Canadian literature as its true of the most literature form of colonies, the idea of the nation, you know what

constitutes a nation exerts a powerful influence in the context of, particularly, in the context of globalization, the problematic histories and political functions of literary nationalism assume new meaning, and urgency. So, Canadian literature remains a vital site where we can locate discussions of complex socio political relations.

One of the major aspects of, you know, we were just talking about the idea of post colonialism, and then the romance of names in the English patient, and also the very interestingly, it deals with the idea of body. So, various bodies are described at length, in cultural studies will look at the construct of bodies, what do bodies mean to ourselves and to the people, how do people perceive bodies. And here as I was just reading it to you, the man lies on the bed his body exposed to the breeze, and he turns his head slowly towards her as she enters, every four days she washes his black body beginning at the destroyed feet, she wets a wash cloth and holding it above his ankles she squeezes the water on to him looking up as he smiles seeing his smile, above the shins the burns are worst beyond public view. She has nursed him for months and she knows the body well, hip bones of cries, she thinks he is her despairing saint, he lies flat on his back no pillow, looking up at the foliage is painter on to the sealing is canopy of branches and above that blue sky, so look how tenderly the body of a burnt man is described.

So, we have the women, the setting is villas san giromo Tuscany Italy, we have a woman looking after a burnt man, the severely burnt man who is so destroyed - so damaged - that he cannot even move, for his basic necessities also he needs the help of this woman. So, who is this woman, we are not told their names so far, this woman is Hana, a French Canadian nurse, who cares for a single patient, so she is nurse by profession, and she is attending to the needs of severely burnt patient which we have just seen. And neither he is, so badly burnt that one cannot recognize his face, or his identity or his nationality, he is absolutely, but so it could also be a metaphor, for you know doing away with the constraints of all physical boundaries, because after all the English patient is also about exploration about cartography, about maps and territories, and also about national and personal identities.

So, by making the hero totally burnt character, so badly burnt that one cannot even ascertain his nationality; Michael Ondaatje's perhaps driving home a particular point. Most people believe in the villa that this man this burnt man is an English man.

However, his not English at all his real name is count Laszlo de Almasy, he is a Hungarian a member of the royal geographical society which is the group of cartographer, so create maps of the north Africa dessert, especially, shortly before the outbreak of the second world war.

So, count Almasy is not an English man, he is a Hungarain cartographer, but he has managed to a blur or concealed his identity, so well that no one can make out that his not an English man. So, Hana the women that we just looked at, she is a nurse, and she has seen worst human destruction, she also had, you know, a string of her own personal problems, that we will be looking at, but at the movement we find here dealing with patients and she has seen severely damaged bodies, people who would die within an hour of getting admitted in the hospital, she has tended to them, she has witnessed as a nurse during combat, the specific war related deaths of several of her own near and dear people.

She is just 20 years old, and she remember soldiers coming to her in bits and pieces, that is Ondaatje's sentence - on Ondaatje's line - falling in love with her just for an hour also before dying, she is a lovable person, she is kind and generous. She is extremely maternal just 20, but she embodies everything which is maternal, compassionate and kind, and people fall in love with her including the English patient, so severely damaged is Hana because of her personal tragedies that it takes a while for her to recognize love when it comes.

So, coming to Hana, as the war near sits end, Hana welcomes the solace that she finds in taking care of a single patient, that is our single patient in the (O) of villa's san Giramo. So, it is here that the English patient who comes to trust Hana starts confiding in her and slowly unravels his personal history or personal story which he had never ever told anyone before. So, we are to remember that English patient is a burnt man is also under the influence of heavy doses of morphine which Hana administers to him periodically to alley his pain. So, his narration is a non-linear, intermittent and full of gaps, so these fragmented narratives, these fragmented stories make up for the story of English patient.

The entire narrative covers almost 7 years as we have just seen 1930-1938, and it is constructed and reconstructed from the ever shifting multiple points of view. So, what do we see here, we find discussions of nationalities and identities which are interconnected

in the English patient, functioning together to create a web of structures that tie the characters to certain places and time, despite their best efforts to evade such constraints, for example, Count Almásy, all his life he had been desperately trying to elude the hoses of nationality. So, much that he prefers to live in a desert, live a life as scholar, a cartographer, and almost blurring his identity no one could ever make out that he is not an English man and this is something that he has chosen to do.

This is how he forges his identity through his works and through his interactions with other people. So, this is not an identity which he has inherited, he has chosen this identity, and the environment in the novel, the descriptions are such in the novel, that they add to the idea, they lend credence to the idea that national identities can indeed be erased.

So, in a way this is an argument, the entire novel is an argument for erasing these manmade boundaries, I will take you to page 116, sorry, page 16 where what happens to names, and as well as what happens to identities, how fragile they are and how they can be consumed at any moment, this idea given very beautifully on page 16.

He describes the winds, he is an explorer, his specialties cartography of deserts and here we find him describing the desert winds. So, look at the names, and look at also the preoccupation with the identities that come along with the needs, there is a world wind in Southern Morocco - the **adjudge** against which the fellahin defend themselves with knives, there is the Africo which has at times reached into the city of Rome. So, there is this desert wind which comes from somewhere in Africa and which can reach Rome, so you see this desert - this wind which comes from Africa which has an Arabic name and it reaches Rome.

So, what makes for an identity how do you define boundaries that are the question? The alpe the all wind out of Yugoslavia the **arific** also which scorches with numerous tongues; these are permanent winds that live in the present tense. So, these are those winds that are still going on, and these names still survive, there are others less constant winds that change direction, that can knock down horse and a rider, and realign themselves in anticlockwise, the best rose leaves into Afghanistan for 170 days bearing villages.

So, you see national identities can be erased such is the force and power of these winds arising from the deserts of Africa, they reach Afghanistan, they reach Rome, and in Afghanistan they can be villagers and what happens to the identities of those villages and the people. There is the hot dry gublee from Tunis, which roles and roles and produces and nervous condition the **hubbub**, a Sweden dust storm the dresses and bright yellow walls a 1000 meters high and it followed by rain.

The hermartine which blows an eventually drowns itself into the Atlantic in, but a sea breeze in north Africa, some words that just side towards the sky, night dust storms that come with the pool, the come scene dust in Egypt from march to may named after the Arabic word for 50.

Blooming for 50 days the ninth plague of Egypt that to out of gibrato which carries fragrance, there is also and there is a big blank, there is no name, so we do not know the identity of this wind, and it is these secret of wind of the desert whose name was erased by a king after his son died within it. So, name has been erased but you cannot erase the wind, you see the wind may not bare a name, it has been detector, a king, a ruler has the power to erase that erase names, but you to erase the so called surface identities, but you cannot erase the inherent force of nature.

Although it exist namelessly, and a blast out of Arabia the measure violent and cold south westerly known as bur bus, as that which plucks the poufs, the Bishaba a black and dry north easterly out of the caucuses, black wind the simian from turkey poison and wind used often in battle as well as the other poison winds the Simon of north Africa and the Solano with whose dust plucks of rare petals causing greenness other private winds travelling along the ground like a flood, blasting of pain throwing down telephone poles transporting stones and statue heads the Hampton blows across the Sahara fill with red dust despair entering and coagulating in the locks of riffles. Malines call this red wind the sea of darkness, red sand fogs out of the Sahara were deposited as north as day when producing showers of mud.

So, great this was also mistaken for blood; blood rains were widely reported in Spain in 19 no one, there are also always million of tones of dust in the air just as there are millions of cubes of air in the earth and more living flesh in the soil, warm, beetles

underground creatures, than there is gracing and existing on it, hereditaries recalls the death of various armies and gulfed in the Simon who were never seen again.

One nation was, so enriched by this evil wind that they declared war on it and marched out in a full battle at array only to the rapidly and completely entered, does it storms in three shapes the whirl, the column, the sheet. In the first the horizon is lost, in the second you are surrounded by voicing gins, the third the sheet is copper tinted, the nature seems to be on fire.

So, various faces of the nature; nature not just the calm, the pleasant one, but also it violent and destructive aspect, everything exists and coexists with names and sometimes it may not have names, but still it has the power, it has the force. Environment is also such that it can engulf identities and erase nation and engulf it is people, so then what constitutes identities - the question remains. The importance of the villa san gioroma so important because that the place also functions as a sight where national identities are unimportant as people connect to each other.

For example, kip, the Sikh from India who has been participating in the war, he so becomes emerged in the idea of western society, that for a long time he becomes oblivious to his own identity; count Almásy as we have already seen he has no sense of identity or national identity as well, and then of course, we have Hana who considers herself a global citizen rather than a French Canadian person. So, these ideas recur, they sort of form a lake motive in the structure of the English patient.

So, while we were talking about the acoustics of body, you know, you have erase the damage body of count Almásy which has erased all signs and symbols of any identity, we have kip who bares his you know these his religious identity quite well, you know, he is a Sikh, so all the hallmarks and all the defined features are there but he is still, he considers himself more of a westerner than a person from anywhere else.

So, his dark and lath body also becomes a subject of discussion, especially for Hana and then we have the Vilyui body of Katherine. So, her body that too is a sight for which is extremely significant and monumental, so these are the ideas that we will be or these are themes that we will be looking at in greater detail and greater depth, and we continue with our discussion of the English patient in the next class; thank you very much.