

Contemporary Literature

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Good morning. Today, we are going to begin with Michael Ondaatje's celebrated novel *The English Patient*, which won the Booker Prize for the best novel in 1992. The film was adapted for an academy award winning movie also. I am sure most of you are familiar with this is starring Ralphie Anson, Juliette Binoche and William Defoe directed by Anthony Mingeola. So, the movie is set during the Second World War and the exact location is a place called Villa San Girolamo in Tuscany, Italy. I will read the epilogue.

Epilogue is the way writers begin generally their works and just to set the tone of the work. We are told that this excerpt is taken from the minutes of the Geographical Society meeting of 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 Kabir followed later by the disappearance of his wife Catherine Clifton, which took place during the 1939 desert expedition in search of Zerzura.

I cannot begin this meeting tonight without referring very sympathetically to those tragic occurrences. The lecture this evening ellipses. Now, what does it tell you? The very epilogue tells us that we are going to encounter two characters, Catherine and Geoffrey Clifton. Geoffrey died during a desert expedition. So, we now know that this is a novel which is primarily set in the deserts of particularly of North Africa and in search of Zerzura.

Perhaps, this is the 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. Sorry, not exactly 1947, but during the war, during the expedition in 1939. So, this is a tragic affair that is recalled and remembered. So, the English patient has got lots to do with the idea of memory and we have just finished the remains of the day, which is another novel about memory. If you remember, Mr. Stevens who recalls most of his life set during the years between the first and the second world war. So, that is a 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 far away lands not in their own lands because the very construct of identities and nationalities is interrogating in the English patient.

So, these are the keywords that we will be looking at memory, death, loss, identities. English patient is the most famous work of Michael Ondaatje's and it is extremely lyrical in style. The novel's principle themes are continuation of themes that appeared in two of Ondaatje's earlier works and we will be talking about those earlier works soon. The characters in the English patient Count Almásy and Count Almásy is the English patient. I am giving away the suspense at the right at the beginning at the introduction of the novel.

Count Almásy is the English patient who is not an English man. 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 a French Canadian nurse Hannah.

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, Catherine Clifton and Geoffrey Clifton husband and a wife who died in 1939 and they are mentioned at the very beginning in the epilogue. Another very important character is Villa San Girmo where the novel Veda action takes place. So, Villa is also an extremely important character. Michael Ondaatje who was born in 1943 wrote another important works earlier to the English patient.

One is the Dainty Monsters 1967 and the collected works of Billy the Kid left handed poems. It was written in 1970. So, 1967 the Dainty Monsters, the collected works of Billy the Kid 1970. So, unlike 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 dangers of complicity with the ruling elite, something that we found in the remains of the day also in a very understated manner. The English patient is also concerned with the fiery 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 the many manifestations of the so called outsider.

So, as we were talking about it 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, the 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 novel is structured or constructed because there are several gaps and gaps is an 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 the English patient.

We will be talking about that soon. Stylistic conventions, now that stylistic conventions that emerge in the English patient appeared first in Ondaatje's poetry. Remember, Ondaatje is also a renowned poet, an acclaimed poet besides being an award winning novelist. So, the stylistic conventions that are most obvious, one is fragmentation. The novel is fragmented.

It is 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 moves back and forth in time because after all, it is a novel of about memory. We have several interruptions and intrusions 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 of time at a particular time and at a particular place.

Suddenly, with one switch of memory, they are transported to a totally different place and time. So, completes subversion of the linear way of story telling or narration. Any 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 Mr.

Stevens, the butler, but here we find that there are several points of view. We have Caravaggio's point of view. Of course, we have the English patient's point of view who is the hero of the novel, the so-called hero of the novel. We have Hannah's point of view and we have Kripal's perspective also, Kip's perspective on things. So, there are multiple perspectives and each perspective adds to a specific dimension of the novel.

Rending of the genre is another recurring stylistic convention in the works of Michel Andraste. 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 themselves give you an overview of how difficult it is to define the genre of the English patient. Genre is a category. Of course, we all know that genre is a category.

We have several kinds of genres in literature. We have a romantic genre of novel writing. We have an adventurous novel. We have a detective or spy novel where the hero is a spy.

We also have love stories. We have family novels. We have adventurous novels, but it is

very difficult to pigeon hole in the English patient in any particular category. So, the contents of the chapters go like the villa that we were just talking about, villa san girmo in near ruins. So, this is in near ruins itself is a very deceptive title, which what is, what exactly is in near ruins? Is it the villa? Is it the life of any particular character or maybe you know the world falling apart because remember this is a world, which this is a story, which took place during the second world war. So, the world, an entire way of life civilization going asunder.

Sometime a fire, what exactly South Cairo, South Cairo, 1930 to 1938. So, perhaps that period is extremely important 1930 to 1938, but remember in 1939 is the time when Geoffrey Clifton died along with his wife. So, whatever happened between 1930 to 1938 must have been extremely important. Catherine and an entire chapter devoted to Catherine, you know the title is she must be so important to some of the characters that we have meant. We have a full length chapter dedicated to her.

It is her name that figures and talking about names, names form an integral part of the English patient. As we saw, even the title itself is so intriguing, the English patient, so a nameless entity. What is he called? 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 buried plain, in situ, the holy forest, the cave of swimmers, august.

Now, just a mere glimpse at the titles of the chapters tell you that it is very difficult to identify the genre of the English patient and that is what we were talking about. Let us 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. Names, you know qualify us, but here the construct of names are extremely, you know, what on that it does is deal with the romance of names, deal with the glamour of names and you find names all over the novel. If the entire novel is full of names of people, of books, of even winds and deserts 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 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 gust of wind, a buckle of noise in the air and the tall, a cypress way. She turns and moves uphill towards the house, climbing over a low wall, feeling the first drops of rain on her bare arms. She crosses the loggia and quickly enters the house. In the kitchen, she does not pause, but goes through it and climbs that stairs which are in darkness and then continues along the long hall at the end of which is a wedge 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 ceiling. The man lies on the bed, his body exposed to the breeze and he turns his head slowly towards her as she enters. Now, so much of detailing how she walks, how the woman 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 disdain rather for names, but names are very important here. A word about Michael Ondaatje. Michael Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka in 1943. His parents Mervyn Ondaatje and Doris were prominent members of the inhabitants of what once comprised the Ceylonese colonial society. Mervyn Ondaatje was a tea and rubber plantation engineer, supervisor and Doris, Ondaatje's mother performed part time as a radical dancer.

So, you know very interesting mix of parents. Father is a supervisor for the tea and he 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 moved 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 the English patient. Ondaatje received his bachelor of arts degree from the university of Toronto in 1965 and his master's degree from the Queens university in 1967. Then, he also taught for a number of years at various universities in Canada. So, the English patient is a continuation of an earlier Ondaatje novel in the skin of a line which was published in 1987 which first introduces us to the character of David Caravaggio who is the master spy in the English patient. So, a sense of continuity, a sense of continuity from of characters from one novel to another is a very post modernist aspect also.

If you remember in one of our earlier lectures on post modernism, we talked about how characters from one novel appear or emerge in another novel of the writer. It is a very post modernist technique. As a writer, we have to look at that as a sense of intertextuality and a sense of continuation. So, Michael Ondaatje started his career with writing poems and his first poem as we were just talking about was Dint monsters. Also, notice how he juxtaposes to very opposing images in his very first literary work Dint monsters and as a result, explores some very seemingly incongruous elements and ideas, a trait that is common to most of his works.

He has also written a serial poem, the man with seven toes in 1969 and this was inspired

by paintings by an Australian artist which was about a true story of a woman living among the aborigines after a shipwreck. So, this interest in historical narratives, fragmented narratives and visual arts also has become a signature style in most of Ondaatje's writing. Both the collection of poems, the collected works of Billy Duckett and his first novel coming through slaughter in 1976, they were inspired by films, photographs, historical fragments as well as oral legends, many of which are included in the final published 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 immigrant community. So, look at the common ideas and 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 relies heavily on historical documentation for inspiration, weaving it into a kind of a fictional story. Two characters from the novel *Turn up again*, from the skin of the lion, they turn up again in the *English patient*, which is another story based on historical archives. After all, it is a novel which was set during the Second World War and during the course of his historical research on that, they also relied heavily on true incidents. Of course, it is a fictional narrative, but he interweaves fiction with historical facts. In 1982, he published his fictional kind of a biography of his childhood in Ceylon, which was called *running in the family*.

He uses plenty of oral history of his family to try and reconstruct his family's past. After the *English patient* Ondaatje's next major work was *Anil's ghost*, which was published in the year 2000, set amidst the civil war in Sri Lanka during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. So, according to Ondaatje, the conflict in the island has three sides, the government side, the anti-government insurgents and the separatist, the guerrillas. The story focuses on the character of its heroine, very mysteriously called Anil.

Anil usually is a boy's name, a man's name. In 2007, Ondaatje published *Divisadero*, a novel which maps the lives of three characters through the journeys across California of the 1970s, San Francisco of the 1990s and the present day France. So, again notice the preoccupation with traveling across space and time, the sheer blurring of boundaries, the idea of travel, journey, exile and immigration. *Divisadero* 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 the constructs of identity among the postcolonial feminist and race theories of the 1980s and 1990s.

There is an increasing concern with the relationship between literature and the larger socio-political contexts within which it develops. We are familiar with theories like

Edward Said who wrote the seminal work *Orientalism* and also the works of Gayatri Chakravarti Spivack and Homi Bhabha. So, these theories postulate that English culture exists not simply as a representation of elegance and higher culture, but also as a reflection of a massive enterprise of a hegemonic influence and self-validation of the colonizing elites. This is something that was also referred to not exactly as a postcolonial work, but if you look at the kind of dominance that the ruling class or the kind of control that the ruling class and the elite people exert over the so called smaller people, then this idea was explored 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 it need not be the remains of the day need not be a novel about race per say, but it is also about how human beings control one another, how they exert certain kind of authority and power over those who are powerless and thus rendering them completely almost impotent.

The English patient also is very when we read the English patient, we cannot ignore the postcolonial theory and postcolonial 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. So, postcolonial theories focus on the discourses and articulation of voices of those who were formerly colonized. Here, we come across the 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, savage and civilized. So, Edward Said in *Orientalism* 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 on the when we talk about a slash the binaries.

So, on the right hand side of the slash exist in a binary opposition to whatever exist 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 juxtaposing all these negatives on the orient Said according to Edward Said, the west positions itself as infinitely better or superior and positive. So, one of the major concerns of the English patient is also exploration of these so called binaries. Canadian literature of course, is heavily influenced by the post colonial theory.

So, if some of you who are interested in that particular area can look it up. In Canadian literature as it true of the most literature from the former 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 the and then the romance of names in the English patient and also very interestingly it deals with the idea of body.

So, various bodies are described at length. So, various bodies in cultural studies will look at the construct of bodies. What do bodies mean to ourselves and to other 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 washcloth and holding it above his ankles squeezes the water on to him. Looking up as he murmurs seeing his smile above the shins the burns are worst beyond purple bone.

She has nursed him for months and she knows the body well. He bones of cries she thinks he is her despairing saint. He lies flat on his back no pillow. Looking up at the foliage painted on to the ceiling a scannopy of branches and above that blue sky. So, look how tenderly the body of a burnt man is described. We have the woman, the place is the setting is villas and germalmo in Italy.

We have a woman looking after a burnt man, a severely burnt man who is so destroyed, so damaged that he cannot even move for his basicness. His city is also he needs the help of this woman. So, who is this woman? We are not told their names so far. This woman is Hannah, a French Canadian nurse who cares for a single patient. So, she is nursed by profession and she is attending to the needs of a severely burnt patient which we have just seen.

Neither he is so badly burnt that one cannot recognize his face or his identity or his nationality. He is absolutely burnt. So, it could also be a metaphor for doing away with the constraints of the patient or 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 a totally burnt character, so badly burnt that one cannot even ascertain his nationality. Perhaps, driving home a particular point, most people believe in the villa that this man, this burnt man is an English man.

However, he is not English at all. His real name is Count László the Almasi. He is a Hungarian, a member of the Royal Geographical Society which is a group of cartographers who create maps of the North Africa desert especially shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. So, Count Almasi is not an English man. He is a Hungarian cartographer, but he has managed to blur or conceal his identity so well that no one can make out that he is not an English man. So, Hana the woman that we just

looked at, she is a nurse and she has seen vast human destruction.

She also had a string of her own personal problems that we will be looking at, but at the moment, we find her 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 remembers soldiers coming to her in bits and pieces. That is Ondaatje's sentence, Ondaatje's line falling in love with her just for an hour or so 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. People fall in love with her including the English patient, but so severely damaged is Hana because of her personal tragedies that it takes a while for her to recognize love when it comes. Coming to Hana, as the war nears its end, Hana welcomes the solace that she finds in taking care of a single patient that is our English patient in the quietitude of Willis and Girmo. 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 have to remember that English patient is a burnt man. He is also under the influence of heavy doses of morphine which Hana administers to him periodically to allay 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 the English patient. The entire narrative covers almost 7 years as we had just seen 1930 to 38 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 Almási, all his life he had been desperately trying to elude the forces of nationality. So much that he prefers to live in a desert, live a life of a 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 the 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 man made boundaries. I will take you to page 116, sorry page 16 where what happens to names and what happens to as well as what happens to identities, how fragile they are and how they can be consumed at any moment and this idea is given very beautifully on page 16.

He describes the winds. He is an explorer. His specialty is 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 names. There is a whirlwind in southern Morocco, the Augech against which the Falaheen defend themselves with knives. There is the Africa 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 which has 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 is the question. The alm, a fall wind out of Yugoslavia, the Arifi also Christian, Arif or Rifi which is 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 rider and realign themselves anti-clockwise. The Bistros leaps into Afghanistan for 170 days. So, the winds 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 bury villages and what happens to the identities of those villages and the people? There is the hot dry wibbly from Tunis which rolls and rolls and produces a nervous condition. The Haboom, a sudden dust storm that dresses in bright yellow walls a 1000 meters high and is followed by rain. The Harmattan which blows and eventually drowns itself into the Atlantic.

Imbat, a sea breeze in North Africa. Some winds that just sigh towards the sky. Night dust storms that come with the cold. The Kamsin, a dust in Egypt from March to May named after the Arabic word for 50. Blooming for 50 days, the ninth plague of Egypt. The Dattu out of Gibraltar which carries fragrance.

There is also the and there is the big blank. There is no name. So, we do not know the identity of this wind and it is the secret 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 name, the wind may not bear a name. It has been a dictator, a king, a ruler has the power to erase the names, but to erase the so called surface identities, but

you cannot erase the inherent force of nature.

So, the wind exists although it exists namelessly. And the Nafat, a blast out of Arabia. The Mezurifolusan, a violent and cold south westerly known as Berbers as that which plucks the fowls. The Beshaba, a black and dry north easterly out of the Caucasus. Black wind, the same eel from Turkey poison and wind used often in battle as well as the other poison winds. The Simom of North Africa and the Solano with whose dust plucks of rare petals causing giddiness, other private winds. Traveling along the ground like a flood, blasting of pain, throwing down telephone poles, transporting stones and statue heads.

The Hamatan blows across the Sahara filled with red dust, dust as fire entering and coagulating in the locks of rifles. Mariners call this red wind the sea of darkness. Red sand fogs out of the Sahara were deposited as north as Cornwall and Devon producing showers of mud. So, great this was also mistaken for blood.

Blood rains were widely reported in Portugal and Spain in 1901. There are also always millions of tons of dust in the air just as there are millions of cubes of air in the earth and more living flesh in the soil. Worms, beetles, underground creatures then there is grazing and existing on it. Herodotus records the death of various armies and girl in the Simom who were never seen again. One nation was so enraged by this evil wind that they declared war on it and marched out in full battle array only to be rapidly and completely entered.

Dust storms in three shapes, the whirl, the column, the sheet. In the first the horizon is lost, in the second you are surrounded by walls and the third the sheet is coppedented. Nature seems to be on fire. So, various faces of the nature, nature not just the calm, the placid one, but also its violent and destructive aspect. Everything exists and coexist 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 nations and engulf its people. So, then what constitutes identities? The question remains. The importance of the villas and geraldmo is also important because the place also functions as a site 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 enmeshed in the idea of western society that for a long time he becomes oblivious to his own identity. Count Al-Mazi as we have already seen, he has no sense of identity or national identity as well and then of course, we have Hannah who considers herself a global citizen rather than a French Canadian person.

So, these ideas recur. They sort of form a late motive in the structure of the English

patient. So, while we were talking about the constructs of body, you have erased the damaged body of Count Al-Mazi which has erased all signs and symbols of any identity. We have Kip who bears his identity. So, he has a very good, his religious identity quite well. He is a Sikh. So, all the hallmarks and all the defining features are there, but still he considers himself more of a westerner than a person from anywhere else.

So, his dark and late body also becomes a subject of discussion especially for Hannah and then we have the willowy body of Catherine. So, her body that too is a site for which is extremely significant and monumental. So, these are the ideas that we will be or these are the themes that we will be looking at in greater detail and greater depth when we continue with our discussion of the English patient in the next class. Thank you very much.