

Confluence of Nationalities in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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Abstract

Humanism tends to transcend all hard emotions. It promotes brotherly affection despite of all differences like caste, creed and even nationality. The paper aims to portray the confluence of nationalities on the base of humanism. Michael Philip Ondaatje has sketched the novel *The English Patient* on the dire canvas of Second World War. The magnetic force of humanism had attracted all human beings to the life of promising future despite of the nationality, ethnicity and creed.

The current COVID 19 pandemic – a supposed bio-war - has brought to limelight the humanistic concerns of medical professionals, especially nurses. The job of nurses' demand utmost dedication and sacrifice but the society fails to acknowledge their sacrifice. This paper is intended to explore the humanistic overture of a nurse - Hana, whose sole decision on the basis of humanism marks the confluence of characters from different nationality that sets the foray of the novel *The English Patient*.

Humanism is the ray of hope to all the remnants of war. War is the outcome of loss of humanism and selfish ambition. It only creates a state of utter chaos, confusions and pandemonium. The novel *The English Patient* weaves the life of four main characters - Almsy, Hana, Kirpal Singh, and Caravaggio- of different nationalities, narrated in lose fragments shuttling between past and present under the chaos of Second World War.

The novel unlocks the traumatic effect of War during the year 1945. Hana, the young nurse treats her dying burnt patient in the Italian Villa, who is actually a Hungarian but supposed to be

English. Kirpal Singh, known as Kip and his friend both are sappers reach the Villa on hearing the music played in the Villa. Kip is an Indian Sikh and a sapper in the British Army. Next Caravaggio, a friend of Hana's father joins them. He is a Canadian but born in Italy. He is a thief, a spy and a prisoner of German army.

Hana, a young Canadian nurse is the catalytic force of humanism. She is posted to Italy by her government to treat the wounded soldiers of the Second World War. She is surrounded by her patients all through her day that naturally makes her to extend her humanistic concern in serving the victims of war instead of going to her step mother Clara in Canada. The very sight of Hana itself fills all the wounded soldiers with joy and happiness despite their pain. The Germans retreat the Italians by hiding bombs and mines everywhere making the land dangerous to live, even to tread.

Hana sees the English Patient for the first time in the Pisa hospital. To her he appears as an ebony figure. Ondaatje writes:

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. (*TEP* 48)

To Hana, the English patient, who is the last patient, appears like a burned animal taut and dark and simply a pool. The patient possesses a book of Herodotus which is his only past possession. Ondaatje writes:

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. All that is missing is his own name. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless without rank or battalion or squadron. (*TEP*96)

Hana's humanistic concern makes her to stay in the dilapidated Tuscan Villa of San Girolamo in Italy, when her comrades chose to go to safe places. She treats her with utmost care and dedication that even the slightest touch of hers would give him extreme pain.

Hana's humanism is the outcome of her personal loss. The loss of her loved ones and the miseries of war has made her mature beyond her age. She had fed the war with the lives of her father, Patrick, her friend, Jan and her lover. She identifies her English Patient to her father Patrick whom she could not attend at the time of his death but was completely burnt. This emotional connection has created a strong bond between the patient and her. Her loss has strengthened her both mentally and physically. She despite of witnessing the pains and miseries she falls in love with Kip. Hana. The Canadian woman is in confluence with an Indian sapper into the romantic bliss, transcending all boundaries of nationality, culture and language.

The humanism of the Bedouin tribe is revealed through the character of Almasy. It is the humanism of this nomadic tribe made them to rescue Almasy from the burning plane. From the words of Almasy,

I fell burning into the desert. They found my body and made me a boat of sticks and dragged me across the desert... They strapped me onto a cradle, a carcass boat, and feet thudded along as they ran with me... He could Sense one silent man who always remained beside him, the flavour of his breath when he bent down to unwrap him every twenty-four hours at nightfall, to examine his skin in the dark. (TEP 5 -6)

They exhibited their sense of humanism in treating a half deadly burnt human being who is beyond recognition. They were resolute enough that they had deputed a person just for him to feed, clean and monitor his recovery. Almasy recounts, "What great nation had found him, he wondered. What country invented such soft dates to be chewed by the man beside him and then passed from the mouth into his...The Bedouin silenced themselves when he was awake." (TEP 6) They treated him just because he was a human being no matter of nationality or ethnicity.

Almasy, was a member of the crew in Geoffrey Clifton's South Cairo Expedition. He was so much attracted to Katharine, the wife of Geoffrey Clifton that they had a secret affair. Clifton turns furious on discovering their secret affair plots to commit suicide along with his wife and Almasy in a plane crash. Clifton dies in his attempt but Katharine and Almasy get injured. Almasy's humanism is revealed when he gives a proper burial to Clifton even though he knew that it is his planned attack to kill him. He takes the wounded Katharine to the Cave of Swimmers and rushes for aid. Almasy is arrested under suspicion and all his attempt to save Katharine is nullified there by his humanism also becomes futile.

Kip, the Indian sapper is attracted towards the young nurse because of her humanistic concern. He is at war with himself when he happens to hear the announcement of the attack by America on Japan. He feels so much annoyed and curses the atrocity of the western world. He tries to kill the English patient whom he views as the symbol of West. In the end his humanistic values out powered all his hard feelings and emotions against Almasy. He leaves Hana and the English patient forever. Kip becomes a doctor in India and settles there with his family.

The loss of humanism breeds uncertainty to human lives. Survival becomes tough to all the characters as they are shuttled into the whirlpool of chaos and catastrophe. The destruction of war inherits inhuman feelings of hatred and revenge among nations. Ondaatje points out that loss of humanism is the root cause of miseries and violence in the world. The novel clearly portrays the vulnerability of human beings than their weapons and atomic power. Ondaatje expresses his dislike of war by saying that no one in the world favours war. Ondaatje desires to escape from the chaos of War, he speaks through Caravaggio, who says, "all four of the characters brought the disease of war. He understands that he has participated in the war, but finds no reason to remain living among its ruins"(Bussy 36). Rashmi Gaur comments on the utter and severe devastation due to war in the novel in the following words:

The spirit of war broods over the novel and images of death and devastation permeates its world. The desolation is clearly present in the surroundings of the villa. We have images of death, diseases and senseless devastation: typhus epidemic breaking out, people bombed inside tunnels and ships freshly mined underwater.(Gaur 4)

War, the result of inhumanness also creates a platform for the scope of humanism too. It teaches the values of people and life. The dying condition of the English patient gives a sort of hope to Hana's life who is resolute to save him. All the wars of the world threaten the entire humanity with its extreme violence, destruction and devastation.

The confluence of the four characters of the novel in the Villa is the outcome of their humanistic concern. They experience the horrors of war and its trauma. They become belonging to each other which Elizabeth A. Waites states, "[...] when a danger is commonly shared, those who share it sometimes escape the devastating sense of social isolation that so often magnifies trauma" (Waites 31). The bitterness of war is tasted by all which again Waites writes, "Even extremely painful or life-threatening experiences, for example, mean something different when they are socially typical and shared or even valued by the general community"(Waites 31). When the survival of individuals becomes a question, meanwhile the different people from different communities adjust themselves with each other in helping each other making the minimum level of survival possible. They believed that supporting each other could eventually brighten their choice of survival.

The modern-day man in most of his life strives to survive rather than living his life. His entire life goes accordingly to his identical and survival aspects. People move from one country to another in search of prosperity for and existence life. For everyone maintaining an identity stands first as it uncovers the worth of the individual. Ondaatje in his novel *The English Patient* visualises how the modern man creates an insecure life to his fellow men. Ondaatje's characters represent the importance of restoring identity and rebuilding the ways of survival which are the needs of the hour.

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