

Stream Of Consciousness Technique: An Inquest On Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient

Evangelin. A, Poonkodi. M

Department of English, Karunya Institute of Technology and Sciences, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

In Michael Ondaatje's (1992) The English Patient, the idea of ancient history and that of the contemporary history has been carefully knitted and woven within the personal memories of the characters. This article explores how Ondaatje (1992) has implemented 'stream of consciousness' technique in reading fragmented minds and memories of the characters. It also provides a thorough knowledge about how symbolic representations of these characters and their traumatic experiences constantly compel them to remember and re-live in their pasts. The characters that are portrayed are caught between the real and imaginary self due to the impact of World-War II. The research also traces the invisible interlinks that exist between the past and the present and how the post-world war's traumatic experiences play a predominant role in the transformation of the characters in the novel. The article unfolds the intersection between the Western and the Eastern civilization by challenging, attacking and dismantling the colonial map-making and colonization through the streams of thoughts as exhibited by several characters.

Keywords: *Stream of Consciousness, war, love, World War –II, Almàsy, memories, past, Michael Ondaatje*

INTRODUCTION

In Michael Ondaatje's (1992) *The English Patient*, the idea of ancient and contemporary history has been carefully knitted and woven within the personal memories of the characters. Reading this novel is like travelling by a time machine. Roy captures the time sense and says, "The English Patient is that rare novel which gets under your skin and insists you return to it time and again, always yielding a new surprise or delight" (Roy, 2018). This novel which has been published in the year 1992 is based on the desert explorations made during the period of World-War II. Here, Ondaatje's (1992) storyline begins with a journey to the past. This article mainly concentrates on how the writer like dismantling the bomb has dismantled the structure of the novel. The background stories of each character are revealed through contemplation and a sense of remembrance of their former self as mentioned by Lobnik (2007). Thus the novelist has created a mysteriously thrilling history blended with the reality with which the novel uncovers its entirety at the end. Ondaatje (1992) has deliberately used stream of consciousness technique to read the fragmented minds and memories of the characters. The main purpose of the research lies in tracing the invisible interconnections that existed during the course of time and in examining how the sharing of World-War II's traumatic experiences plays a predominant role in the affective transformation of the characters. With the help of stream of consciousness technique Ondaatje (1992) has merged the natural chaos of thoughts, emotions and feelings of the characters whose minds are caught up between their real and imaginary self.

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS TECHNIQUE

'Stream of Consciousness' is one of the styles in writing. It was developed and pioneered by a group of literary writers at the dawn of twentieth century. The term 'Stream of Consciousness' is originally coined by an American Psychologist named William James (1883). He, in his book, *The Principles of Psychology* describes this style of writing as:

[...] it is nothing joined; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' is the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let's call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or subjective life (James, 1883: 233).

William James (1983) describes the thought patterns as ‘nothing joined’ and non-cohesive in itself. The writers mainly employ this technique in their writings to express in words the flow of thoughts and feelings that are prevalent in the minds of characters. In other words, the writers intend on exploring the mind and its thoughts in order to shape out a physical form for it. The writers make use of the attributes of this narrative style to closely follow the psychological life-style of the characters. This technique provides the readers with an impression of experiencing the thoughts of the characters and to navigate with them. It also renders the flow of multitudinous impressions such as auditory, visual, associative, physical, and sublime feelings that influence the consciousness of the character. In novels where stream of consciousness is adapted, the characters are “[...] suddenly blown into the past” (Baudrillard, 1989: 35).

Twentieth century modernist writers like Virginia Woolf (1925), James Joyce (1922) and others have pioneered the art of implementing stream of consciousness technique in their works such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses* to exhibit the power, speed, subtlety and profound luxury of the human mind at work. They even incorporated the pieces of incoherent thoughts, events, images and ideas to associate freely at a pre-speech level.

Michael Ondaatje (1992), who is “fostering new Canadian writing” (Bennett, 2010: 929) has followed the footsteps of these modernist writers in his novel *The English Patient*. During an interview he mentioned that, “*The English Patient* is mysterious, partly because of how it’s structured, and partly because it’s so rich and the narrative is fragmented” (Dafoe 1997: 16). The setting of this novel is at the end of the World-War II where the main characters meet each other at a deserted Villa San Girolamo in Italy. The Sphinx like English Patient who is burnt beyond anyone’s recognition, travels back to the past mainly due to the effects of morphine. Hana, the young Canadian nurse undergoes emotional shell shock because of her painful experiences during war. The writer later introduces a character named Caravaggio, a thief who recollects his days as a spy during World-War II. He later joins with Hana and the English Patient at the Villa. His suspicion and curiosity in unraveling the secrets, reveals the true identity of the English Patient. Finally Kirpal Singh, a Sikh soldier who worked under the British Army during WWII, struggles due to the constant dilemma between his duty towards the western colonizer and the love for his home land. This character stands as a symbol for the never-ending quarrel that prevails between the Eastern and the Western culture. He focuses mainly on dismantling unexploded bombs that are left behind by the German Army during the course of World-War II.

The characters that are portrayed undergo Proustian moments of *mémoire involontaire*. “*Mémoire involontaire* involves precisely the recreation of a moment in the past and a memory of the body rather than the mind” (Lobnik, 2007: 86). Raymond Younis (1998) comments on these characters that though they have been “[...] brought together in a time of conflict and enmity and yet manage to forge between themselves something that is quite beautiful and lasting in the architectural ruins that surround them [...]” (Younis, 1998: 4”).

THE ENGLISH PATIENT: THE DESERTED MIND EXPLORER

The protagonist Almàsy who is burnt beyond anyone’s recognition had once been a well-known desert explorer. The name ‘Almàsy’ and some of the characteristics have been adapted from the life of Ladislaus de Almàsy, a Hungarian desert explorer who lived during World-War II. The story begins where the English Patient and his young Canadian nurse take refuge in a ruined Italian Villa called the Villa San Girolamo. The plane crash, which the English patient had encountered lately had toppled his love, sense of identity and the sea of knowledge that he had acquired as a desert explorer. This unexpected dreadful accident has erased his memories as he couldn’t remember his name and has only been called as a nomadic English Patient, “A man with no face [...]” (Ondaatje, 1992: 50). Even though he had ‘no identification’ and had an “unrecognizable” (Ondaatje, 1992: 101) face, he uses his ability of speaking to the fullest. Almàsy’s mental instability continuously drags him to enter into the door of his past and to recollect the random memories to narrate it in the form of a story. Ondaatje (1992) here

implements ‘narrated stream of consciousness’ wherein the protagonist’s thoughts are presented from the perspective of an omniscient narrator/writer. The protagonist Almàsy frequently oscillates between the third person narration and the direct monologue. The “burned patient” (Ondaatje, 1992: 29), describes his story in fragments to the young nurse, Hana as:

I fell burning into the desert. They found my body and made me a boat of sticks and dragged me across the desert [...]. Nomads, you see. Bedouin [...]. The leather helmet on my head in flames [...] (Ondaatje, 1992: 5).

The writer adapts ‘narrated streams of consciousness’ from the beginning of the story to render the narrative report on the character’s psychological state to the readers. The character is unaware of his narrative point of view and there are multiple gaps in the narration. The Libyan Desert that the narrator is describing reflects the baroness and emptiness in the minds of characters’ at present state. The representation of the desert during the early life of the narrator foreshadows his final days at the deserted Italian Villa.

The anonymity of the desert had drawn the attention of Almàsy who comes to a realization that, though there were Britishers, Hungarians, Germans and Africans, their nationality became insignificant to all of them. “Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations [...]. The desert could not be claimed or owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones [...].” (Ondaatje, 1992: 147 - 148). He recalls how he despised ownership and wanted to be one with the desert. He hates the sense of belongingness and the expectations that arose out of it. He desires to be ‘invisible’ like the invisible mystic Zerkura, that he has been exploring about during his time in the desert. The exploration of the unknown desert symbolizes the self-exploration that the patient is concerned about during his final days. He lost his identity when he took off with dead Katherine and symbolically died in the plane crash thereafter.

The desert is a place without boundaries, cities or nations. That was the only place where Almàsy felt comfortable, truly himself, truly at home. Almàsy describing the desert as his ‘home’ reflects the ‘emptiness’ of his inner self. Rachel D. Friedman (2008) comments on the characteristics of the protagonist saying:

We gradually discover that Almàsy’s erased identity after he is burned serves as a fitting emblem for his identity even before the crash when he was obsessed with the purifying space of the desert and the power it had to erase national boundaries and identities (Friedman, 2008: 56).

Though the storyline has the backdrop of world-war II, wherein many nations are fighting against each other to extend their boundaries, Ondaatje (1992) has given the ‘nationless’ or ‘boundless’ characteristics to his protagonist, who contradicts the whole concept of warfare with the aspect of ‘nothingness’. The ravaged villa where the English Patient, Hana, Kip and Caravaggio have taken refuge too denotes the dejected and fragmented mind of the characters. In one of the descriptions about the villa, the narrator says that the villa has a “destroyed chapel” (Ondaatje, 1992: 12) and that “some rooms could not be entered because of rubble” (Ondaatje, 1992: 8).

These descriptions about the villa portray the ‘rubble’ minds of the characters and that some part of their memories cannot be remembered or recalled by them as they have been shattered into million unmatchable pieces. The places that are mentioned in the novel play a predominant role to help characters return to their conscious mind. Roy (2018) comments on the writer’s impeccable skill at expressing himself in his writings as: “Ondaatje’s imagination acknowledges no borders as it moves between Cairo, Italy, India, England, Canada – and between deserts and villas and bomb craters” (Roy, 2018).

HANA: THE REDEEMER OF THE ENGLISH PATIENT

Hana, the Canadian young nurse is described as a stubborn but a dedicated woman. Though she is only twenty years old, she had encountered the pure evilness of human beings. She is portrayed as a survivor, whom Almàsy is narrating his story to. For instance, like unwrapping the mask he is wearing after his death (the plane crash). The English Patient is trying to explore the “inner voice” (Elsaesser, 1991:69) through his streams of thoughts as his ‘inner turmoil’ represents the physical and mental conflicts of his body and soul along with the “strong emotions” (Durgnat, 1991: 136) which he is asserting throughout the novel. Hana’s eyes wander as she scrutinizes the patient “whose sleeping body is probably miles away in the desert” (Ondaatje, 1992: 37). The familiarity between them helps Almàsy to communicate naturally with her. “He whispers again, dragging the listening heart of the young nurse beside him to wherever his mind is, into the well of memory he kept plunging into during those months before he died.” (Ondaatje, 1992: 4)

He remembers his days when he was under the care of the Bedouins, “[...] he doesn’t know if these are dreams, the cut so clean it leaves no pain, and he must wipe the blood on his skull (his face still untouchable) to signal the wound to his captors” (Ondaatje, 1992: 24). This represents not only that he continues having stream of thoughts after settling in the abandoned villa; but also the frequent trance he experiences during his days of healing with the Bedouins. Ondaatje (1992) has implemented ‘free association’, which is one of the characteristics of the stream of consciousness technique wherein the characters freely associate their present environment to that of their past. Hana, while playing piano struggles to remember her mother’s hand which resembles how ordinary things have in-depth connections to the valuable memories of the characters.

Almàsy acts as a “catalyst” (Younis, 1998: 2) to bring out some of the crucial changes and transformations in Hana’s life. The familial love between Hana and the English Patient seems to be the key for opening the doorstep of Almàsy’s mind. Hana is portrayed as a ‘redeemer’ and as “one who find an opportunity to exercise that compassion and care which she could not offer to her burned father [...]” (Younis, 1998: 2). Her unbreakable bond with the patient describes “her quest for a symbolic connection with the absent and painful figure of the father” (Younis, 1998: 2). Though herself being the healer for Almàsy, Hana adores him and calls him her “despairing saint” (Ondaatje, 1992: 3). As Ondaatje (1992) has fondness for the essence of reading book inside the story, he has inserted scenes where Hana reads book, especially Herodotus’ *Histories* to Almàsy. In one scene, Hana uses some miscellaneous books from the villa’s library to repair the broken stairs. She implements the same tool to mend the broken mind of the patient by reading books to him. Even the book Herodotus’ (1890) *Histories* with which the story has built-in is also a fragmented one, a ‘foreteller’ of the present. Through the book, the writer introduces the ‘reminiscent’ part of stream of consciousness technique in his narration. Ondaatje (1992) has also followed Marcel Proust’s (1909) method of adapting stream of consciousness technique. Proust (1909) has implemented the ‘reminiscent’ part of stream of consciousness in his magnum opus *À la recherche du temps perdu (In Search of Lost Time)*, to reflect on the loss of time and the absurdity of the world.

Hana, as a redeemer and an admirable companion unbinds the secret sealed scrolls of Almàsy’s past as she simultaneously searches to reclaim her lost identity by sharing her thoughts and associating with them. She recalls how she lost her unborn baby before a year and how it had hurt her. As she could visualize her pain through the cuts of the burned patient, she regards him as the visible solution for her invisible immense pain. Mirja Lobnik (2007) lays forward her view on the patient’s dilemma as: “[...] the former desert explorer and archeologist displays a deep concern with the numerous facets and dimensions of the past, ranging from the movements of grand armies to the minutiae of ancient everyday life.” (Lobnik, 2007: 74)

Hana met the English Patient only at the medical camp but she seemed to have dedicated her life to redeem the patient. The English Patient remembered Katherine who is described as an “unconquerable

face” (Ondaatje, 1992: 153) through Hana’s voice. The voice of Katherine made him to fall in love with her and the voice of Hana helped him to bring back his forgotten memories of love.

CARAVAGGIO: THE UNRAVELLER OF SECRETS

Caravaggio is a “man with bandaged hands” (Ondaatje, 1992: 29). He was admitted in the military hospital for more than four months where he heard about the “burned patient” (Ondaatje, 1992: 29) and Hana. Looking at his scars and the bandages he was praised as a war hero by the doctors and other patients in the military hospital. Ondaatje introduces him as the unraveller, so as to unravel the secret memories hidden in the psyche of the other characters. At present as “he has no plots to set in motion”, (Ondaatje, 1992: 42) he is concerned in disentangling the entangled past of Hana and Almàsy.

Ondaatje here focuses on the sensory factors such as the sound and the vision to bring their memories back. The “snapshots” (Lobnik, 2007: 86) of the character’s past memories form a part of the mind’s abstract patterns which can be observed in the narration. As Caravaggio is a friend of Hana’s father Patrick, she encounters frequent flashbacks of him and her father. She revisits the happy childhood through her memories. She is able to recreate the image of her father as a result of her close association with the two fatherly characters namely; Almàsy and Caravaggio.

Caravaggio focuses on the English Patient as he recalls his days as a spy during World -War II. He suspects that the “burned patient” (Ondaatje, 1992: 29) might hold the answer for his unanswerable horrible past. Meanwhile his curiosity has been elevated as he injects morphine on the English patient in-order to force him to slide back into his past memories and disclose the mysteries. He is bewildered at “the clarity of discipline in the man, who speaks sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person, who still doesn’t admit that, he is Almàsy” (Ondaatje, 1992: 262). The English patient does not oppose Caravaggio’s actions; rather he indulges himself in assisting him to restore the past from his well of memories. He looks back at the history of the world and of his self in every stroke of his breath.

Ondaatje (1992) focuses on narrating a ‘story within a story’, a feature of the stream of consciousness technique. It is evident when Almàsy recalls his memories of Katherine reading a passage from Herodotus’ (1890) *Histories* that spoke about the tragic love story of King Candaules, the queen and the Lieutenant Gyges. This technique foreshadows the painful and ultimately tragic love affair of Almàsy and Katherine Clifton. He is haunted by the memories of passion, betrayal and the time he spent in the Libyan Desert.

Though the “eternally dying man” (Ondaatje, 1992: 121) spends his final days in the Villa San Girolamo, his clandestine memories whirls around his former lover Katherine Clifton. Almàsy mainly recollects his reflections on the phenomenology of memory and perception as stated by Paul Ricoeur (2004): “Recognizing appears at first as an important complement to recollection [...]” (Ricoeur, 2004: 39). When Almàsy was a desert explorer he made maps with each and every detail that he collected from various sources. At present, he tries to visualize the imaginary map that he has been drawing in his mind to travel beyond time.

KIP: THE DISMANTLER OF MEMORIES

The character Kirpal Singh is a sapper and a military engineer from Sikh community. He has been introduced by the writer in-order to represent the contradictions that prevails between the Eastern and the Western civilization. His thoughts are instable as he is caught between two distinct worlds both physically and psychologically. The sound of music to his attentive mind and his concern for the lives of innocent civilians endangered by war has drawn him towards the deserted villa. He came to Villa San Girolamo not because of his curiosity but out of his fear for the piano player (Hana). He was a man who cannot “[...] look at a room or field without seeing the possibilities of weapons there” (Ondaatje, 1992: 80). The only element that connects him to his nation is his past memories as he is far away from it now. Hana reminds Kip of his *ayah*, a South Indian, who took care of him during his childhood days.

Ondaatje (1992) deliberately includes 'free association' in his novel, where the characters unintentionally recall and associate the people from their past with that of the present. He has envisioned the unseen twine which binds the past experiences with the interests of the characters. Almàsy shares experiences of being a spy and as a desert explorer to Caravaggio. He shares about his knowledge on Lord Suffolk, sappers, guns and bombs to Kip. Their interests are entwined with their experience and thereby leading to familiarity in the context of their conversation. The protagonist Almàsy "not merely tells but recites stories from the past" (Lobnik, 2007: 79). During Kip's conversation with the English patient, he "[...] found him a reservoir of information about Allied and enemy weaponry [...]" (Ondaatje, 1992: 95).

When Kip identified that Almàsy had known about his eccentric teacher Lord Suffolk, he was even more fascinated to commute with him. While commenting on the relationship between him and Kip, Almàsy states that:

Kip and I are both [...] born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives. Though Kip doesn't recognize yet. That's why we get on so well together (Ondaatje, 1992: 189).

Though these two characters seem to get along very well, they have their own contradictory opinions. At the very end, when Kip comes to hear about Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear blasts he is infuriated on the English Patient whom he had considered as the representation of his colonizer.

CONCLUSION

Ondaatje's (1992) narration deals with the depiction of the characters' personal remembrance along with the historical remembrance. Though the novel is fragmented, it follows a specific invisible pattern that gradually describes about the transformation of all the major characters present in the novel. The characters in this novel are holding on to their memories as they visualize the 'memories' as their loyal and an unchanging companion. The characters are also drawn towards their past memories as they realized that people can leave and the memories last forever. The stream of thoughts flows continuously with the help of a person's experience and interest to relive their past. As Ondaatje (1992) has understood the combined power of literature and history, he depicts that in this novel effectively, therefore to repair and transform the lives of the characters.

The writer focuses on the traumatic experience of the people who lived during the period of World-War II, exploring their psychic state and reconstructing their shattered memories. The complexity of the human mind has been made simpler to comprehend as stream of consciousness technique has been implemented in the narration. The gaps and the abruptness present in the book reflects the uncertainty of the human mind. People from Western and Eastern worlds intersect in the arena of the novel *The English Patient* where the colonial map-making and colonization are challenged, attacked and dismantled by deconstructing and disclosing the past memories of the characters with the use of Stream of Consciousness technique.

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