

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 11, November 2018

www.ijellh.com

Mr. BabasahebRamdasKangune

Assistant Professor of English,

Department of English,Chhatrapati Shivaji College,

Satara, Maharashtra,India

babasaheb.kangune@gmail.com

Study of Love, Mystery and History in Michael Ondaatje's Novel 'The English Patient'

Abstract:

Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lanka born Canadian writer. 'The English Patient' is the Booker Prize winner novel written by Michael Ondaatje in 1992. The novel 'The English Patient' is the unique combination of love, mystery and history. Different shades of love and human psyche one may notice in the novel 'The English Patient'. Hana's love for an unknown English patient is pure and noble. The English patient, Almasy's love for Katharine Clifton is the main love-story in the novel. Mystery is an inseparable part of the narrative of the novel. Everybody in the novel unfolds his or her own past experiences. The study of the novel 'The English Patient' is incomplete without referring to the history of World War-II and ancient Greek historian Herodotus. Therefore, the present research paper is an attempt to analyze and discuss the study of love, mystery and history in Ondaatje's novel 'The English Patient' as predominant theme.

Key Words: Love, Mystery, History, World War-II

Introduction:

Michael Ondaatje is Booker Prize winner writer of late 20th century. Ondaatje is a Sri Lanka born Canadian writer who writes about tensions inherent among races, cultures and nationalities. 'The English Patient' is the Booker Prize winner novel written by Michael Ondaatje in 1992. The novel is deeply rooted in World War-II Italy. Writer has employed successfully the flashback technique in order to unfold mystery, love and history through characters representing varied psychological traits as well as national identities. The study of love, mystery and history is the recurring theme of the novel.

Love is an abstract phenomenon. Different shades of love and human psyche one may notice in the novel 'The English Patient'. Hana, the nurse, devotedly takes care of the English patient. Hana's feeling of love for the English patient is somewhat different. He is her despairing saint. The English patient introduced in the first chapter is a man without identity. He is a man without name. His body is completely burned in the plane crash. Villa San Girolamo is the place where by accidently or coincidently Hana, the English patient, Almasy, Caravaggio and Indian Sikh, Kip come together. Hana's love for Almasy, the English patient is purely spiritual. Villa San Girolamo is set in the hills of Tuscany north of Florence. The place where Hana and the English patient are living was a nunnery once upon a time. But, during the time of World War-II, the Germans occupied the villa and it was used as an Allied field hospital.

When the war in Italy was near its end, the entire hospital staff left the battle-ravaged villa. Only the English patient and Canadian nurse, Hana remained behind. Hana deliberately refused to leave the place for the sake of the English patient. Hana's love for an unknown English patient is pure and noble. That is the true love and for the sake of the English patient, she does not want to share love with anybody. Hana has to do everything for her English patient. She reads books loudly in order to entertain her patient. In real sense, she is caretaker

of the belonging. She has to maintain the garden and to cultivate adequate fruits and vegetables for their livelihood. This is true and spiritual love.

The English patient, Almasy's love for Katharine Clifton is the main love-story in the novel. The English patient narrates his bygone love-affair with Katharine Clifton. Katharine Clifton is wife of adventurer Geoffrey Clifton. As an explorer and a person who is engaged in mapping of deserts and other unknown lands, the English patient was somewhat alienated from human love and passion. The English patient i.e. Almasy was working for "Oasis Society", a small group of explorers who used to map and explore the desert. In 1936, a young man Geoffrey Clifton with his newly married wife joined the group in Cairo. Geoffrey was a wealthy man and he had a plane. One night, Katharine recited poetry to them. According to the English patient, that night in real sense, he fell in love with her voice.

"That night I fell in love with a voice. Only a voice. I wanted to hear nothing more".
(The English Patient, p.144)

A few months later, Katharine waltzed with the English patient in a party, but both of them were half-drunk and not necessarily lovers. According to the English patient, Katharine was studying him. Otherwise the life of a geographer or an explorer like the English patient was filled up with desert charts and maps. It was Katharine who created the feeling of love in the heart of Almasy, the English patient. Katharine was fifteen years younger than Almasy. Katharine asked him about the copy of his Herodotus for reading. But having his own notes within the book, Almasy declined her demand. However, after returning from the journey, Almasy offers her the book. In the party, Katharine reads the famous story from *The Histories* by Herodotus. That was the story of King Candaules and his queen. Actually, Almasy does not want that Katharine should read that story. However, Katharine reads the story in the party. The implied meaning behind her selection of the story of King Candaules was that, she had fallen in love with Almasy.

Love that transcends place and time is one of the predominant themes of the novel. The English patient's passion for Katharine is the best example that shows how the love transcends place and time. May be the desert or battlefield, the feeling of love is an inseparable part of human life. Love can cross the boundaries of nation. Furthermore, the love between Indian Sikh, Kip and Canadian nurse, Hana was the mutual attraction and need. Just like, Kip and Hana, Katharine and Almasy belonged to different nations, but it is love that brought them together. In addition, Almasy as an explorer never believed either in 'nation' or 'nationality'. He comments:

'Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations'. (p.138, *The English Patient*)

'Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert'. (p.139, *The English Patient*)

Sacrifice is another name of love. Moreover, sacrifice is the pivotal aspect of love affair between Katharine and Almasy. In the love story of Almasy and Katharine, sacrifice strengthened their attraction towards each other. One day, Katharine confesses Almasy that they could not continue their affair as her husband Geoffrey will go mad after realizing it. Besides, she tells Almasy that they cannot see each other again. Whatever the English Patient, Almasy narrates as the tale, may be the suicidal attempt made by Geoffrey to kill three of them in plane accident or how he rescues the life of Katharine and carries her to the safer place in the cave; all these stories appeal to the readers to realize the intensity of love between Almasy and Katharine.

In the novel, 'The English Patient', there is no single narrator. Each character, may be the English Patient, Almasy, the Canadian nurse, Hana, the sapper, Kip or Caravaggio, everybody narrates his or her story. Mystery is an inseparable part of the narrative of the novel. Everybody in the novel unfolds his or her own past experiences. Therefore, his/ her

narration does not remain impartial. For example, Caravaggio knows a lot about the past life of the English patient, the man without name and identity. It is Caravaggio, who tells Hana that the English patient is not an English man in real sense, but he is a Hungarian man named, Almasy. There are variations in the English Patient's narration of his past life and whatever Caravaggio tells Hana about the English Patient's previous life. It is the major reason that makes the plot complex. Thus, the novel 'The Patient' exposes the mystery of individual characters like the English Patient, Almasy, Hana, Kip and Caravaggio.

World War-II provides the major historical and political background to the development of the plot of the novel 'The English Patient'. The opening of the novel in flash-back creates a mental picture of war before the eyes of readers. That is the period between 1940s and 1950s. The happenings before and after World War-II provide background to the novel. While reading novel, one gets acquainted with how each character in the novel is affected directly or indirectly by World War-II. World War-II connects major characters in the novel and that is the main cause behind important happenings in the novel 'The English Patient'. The English patient, Almasy is the follower of ancient Greek historian, Herodotus and he often refers a copy of 'The Histories' by Herodotus. Besides, as an explorer he writes his own notes, observations, and memoirs in the book. Thus, as an explorer, Almasy was creating the maps of unknown lands; simultaneously giving identification to unexplored lands; thus exploring the histories of nations.

Conclusion:

To sum up, Michael Ondaatje's 'The English Patient' is the rare combination of love, mystery and history. The study of the novel 'The English Patient' is incomplete without exploring these three distinct angles of the novel i.e. love, mystery and history. The love of Almasy and Katharine ends tragically. However, Almasy, the English Patient spends his

remaining life in the memory of his first and last love experience. Almasy does not have any hatred or revenge on anybody; besides, he feels pleasure in narrating his love story to Hana, the Canadian nurse as well as others. That is the true love which neither decays nor dies. The love story of Almasy and Katharine is the main attraction of the plot of the novel 'The English Patient'.

The unique narrative technique employed by the writer makes the novel mysteries of characters. All the major characters in the novel possess their own secrets. Everybody in the novel shares their own past experiences, and everyone tries to unfold his/ her previous life in flashback. Furthermore, readers become curious to know the mystery and history of individual characters in the novel. The references of Greek historian Herodotus and his book 'The Histories', the World War-II, Italian Villa, finally, United States drops atomic bomb on Japan; all these happenings in the novel give important hint of the history of nations during World War-II to the readers. Thus, Ondaatje's 'The English Patient' is the unique mixture of love, mystery and history.

WorksCited:

- Balachandran, K, ed. *Canadian Studies in India*. New Delhi: Arise Publishers and Distributors, 2012.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. London: Picador, 1992.