

Evidence of Reading in Reading Michael Ondaatje's Novel "The English Patient"

Mr. M. Rajapandi

Ulakkudi, Thoothukudi,

Tamil Nadu, India

rajaeng93@gmail.com

Abstract

The main aim of the book reading is to gain knowledge and contains numerous sources of information. Reading makes a person to be depth on subjects. Literature is a unique creation by human to expose, understand, to share self experience. Reading offers human to escape from the present, detects from problems and responsibilities in day to day lives. Moreover, reading literature exercise into the world of imagination. Everyone enjoy stories, it offers a reader to meet with many characters and to journey into their world, in attempting with their happy and unhappy. A person will be creative by reading a lot in perceiving truth, making valuable decision, dealing with complex situation in life and also reading helps one to use the logic and to reason well. Reading books continually make more satisfied with life and happiness; it makes one to feel the activities and the involvement by them in life are worthwhile. Michael Ondaatje works characterize in countless ways the best of contemporary

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Canadian Literature in English. Michael Ondaatje writing focuses not only on Canadian Literature but focus on the world prospect. This paper highlights on the evidence of reading books in Michael Ondaatje's novel "The English Patient", the joint winner of Booker Prize for fiction in 1992 and was made into an Academy Award-winning film in 1996.

Keywords: Reading, Literature, Books, Characters and Listening.

Introduction

This novel narrates the story of four people who's started living together by wish in an abandoned Italian villa, **San Girolamo** at the end of Second World War. The four main characters are Almasy (the English Patient) whose has burned beyond recognition during flight accident at the time of his exploration in World War II. The second one is Hana, a French – Italian nurse from Canada, who cares the English Patient in the villa. Third one is Kirpal (Kip) Singh, a 25 – year – old member of the British Army, a bomb dismantler from India. The fourth one is David Caravaggio, a friend of Hana's father who worked as a spy during the war. There is no less room for mystery in the novel, Hana's patient, a severely burned man whose identity is the mystery at the heart of this novel. All of these characters dislocated by the war, find themselves disconnected from home and finds a calm shelter in the abandoned villa. Caravaggio befalls on the true identity of the patient. Caravaggio trusts the patient to be a Hungarian who worked as a spy for the Germans and absolutely not an English man. Intermingled into the lives of these characters collectively in Italy, each character was recollecting their past including the patient's hallucinatory memories of a torrid love affair, of desert exploration, and of friendship and betrayal. The villa is filled with characters recollection of their past.

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Hana is a twenty-year-old Canadian Army nurse torn between her youth and her maturity. Being a good nurse, she quickly learns that she cannot become emotionally attached to her patients. She calls them all "buddy,"^[4] and forgets them immediately once they die. Her lover, a Canadian officer, is killed and because of this, Hana comes to believe that she is cursed and that all those around her are doomed to die. As Susan Ellis argues, Hana's wartime decision to refer to everyone she meets as "Buddy" indicates that she has been so affected by the deaths of soldiers whom she has nursed that she abandons "the relational imperative created by [all] names" (28).

In contrast, upon hearing of her father's death Hana has an emotional breakdown. She then puts all of her energy into caring for the English Patient. She washes his wounds, reads to him and provides him with morphine. Meanwhile Hana and Kip eventually develop a romantic relationship in the villa. When the hospital is abandoned, Hana refuses to leave, staying with her patient. She sees Almásy as saint-like and falls in love with his pure nature.

Evidence of Reading:

Reading is evident in many places in the novel *The English Patient*. Hana used to read books to Almásy (the English Patient) according to her mood, time and situation. Most of the time, the English Patient is used to think about his past, a man who lives in the past. He used to recollect the incidents which are happened in the past during his exploration in the North Africa. When Hana finished her work and if she does not have any other works then she will read books to the English Patient. Hana never selects books specifically or by referred, she just take books from the library downstairs. She sits near by the English Patient to read books for him to follow her words. He consumes those words of her like water. Sometimes, the English Patient will not sleep even at 2:00 am reminiscent the past. It is evident in the following lines from the book.

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“She reads to him from whatever book she is able to find in the library downstairs. The candle flickers over the page and over the young nurse’s talking face, barely revealing at this hour the trees and vista that decorate the walls. He listens to her, swallowing her words like water” (pg – 5)

Human beings reads books, the reading will take them into another creative world. Reading a book which gives a great human companion to the reader and it is way to escape from one’s loneliness and depression. Hana is habituating in the Italian villa in order to care the English Patient but actually she is exempted, disconnected herself from the existing world. If her mind wants to escape from the villa and to enter the existing world is only one way that is engaging her in reading. As it means, books are the only source to escape from the suspicious place. It is evident in the following lines from the book.

“She would sit and read, the book under the waver of light. She would glance now and then down the hall of the villa that had been a war hospital, where she had lived with the other nurses before they had all transferred out gradually, the war moving north, the war almost over. This was the time in her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell” (pg – 6 & 7)

Some people like to read books by having something for taste like drinks or some eatables. Hana, while she reads books, she likes to sip some wine during night times. A man from town would come and visit the villa to sell some vegetables and wine regularly. At these times Hana do not have any other companion other than the English Patient to chat or pass the time. During night times Hana reads book until the English Patient get closed the eyes. If sleep has not invited Hana, she has to continue with reading alone by sipping wine. Every character in this novel deflects desire through the image of another character. For example, English patient desire of reading books through the image of Hana’s. Scobie argues that each “character deflects his or her true desire through the image of another,” and that the

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“nameless, passive” English patient becomes a “screen” onto which they project their own histories (99). It is evident in the following lines from the book.

“Some beans, some meats. The man had left her two bottles of wine, and each night after she had lain with the Englishman and he was asleep, she would ceremoniously pour herself a small beaker and carry it back to the night table just outside the three – quarter – closed door and sip away further into whatever book she was reading”. (pg – 7)

Once focus is broken, it can take up to 25 minutes to return to its original task. Studies suggest that it takes 5 to 15 minutes to refocus. The average office worker is interrupted anywhere between every 3-10 minutes. Some of these interrupts come in the form of colleagues, phone calls, and emails, etc. The most frequent interruptions are internal, about 44% of the time according to research. So thus the problem in concentrating one thing will be disrupted by any noise, internal thought and self assistance. The English Patient unable to read books because of the condition of his burned body condition so he listens to the words of Hana. While the English Patient is following the reading of Hana, he listens intently and some time not. His listening has gaps like a road’s atmosphere affected by strongly implying destructive or unpleasant weather. Sometimes the English Patient will lose a part of incident from the reading like a woven clothes, a part of cloth which was eaten by a type of grasshoppers. Again his unstable listening is described as like a mixture of lime (painting) had fallen away from a wall by a bombing. It is evident in the following lines from the book.

“So the books for the Englishman, as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night”. (pg – 7)

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During Second World War, the San Girolamo villa was a war hospital and it was destructed. The walls of the villa have big holes. During rain times rooms and some part of the library will be wet. Where, Hana takes books for reading. Hana never bothered about the missing plots of the books by the English Patient. She just takes the book and starts reading by telling any page number. This unbothered and disconnected reading is evident in the following lines from the book.

“She was not concerned about the Englishman as far as the gaps in plot were concerned. She gave no summary of the missing chapters. She simply brought out the book and said ‘page ninety – six’ or ‘page one hundred and eleven.’ That was the only locator.” (pg – 8)

Hana is a great care taker for the Englishman, where no one else could compare for patience. Hana never allow anything to disturb the Englishman, even her too. She moves around the library to find books without making a single noise, a noise would disturb the Englishman. One day she took *The Last of the Mohicans* and she stepped very slow as if there were someone in the room who has not to be disturbed. At some point of this life in villa, Hana’s body is full of sentences and situations, as if her body elevates from huge weight of dreams with invisible sources.

“She opened the book. The pages were joined together in a stiff wave. She felt like Crusoe finding a drowned book that had washed up and dried itself on the shore. A Narrative of 1757. Illustrated by N. C. Wyeth. As in all of the best books, there was the important page with the list of illustration, a line of text for each of them. She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams” (pg – 13)

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Conclusion

To conclude, a pure reading cannot be forced from outside instead it engage from one's inner side. The author Michael Ondaatje is not forced the characters to read in his writing but it seems the characters themselves would wish to read. In such a way, reading was constructed in this novella and any reader can feel it. Hana's voluntary reading is existed beyond authors assemble. While reading this novel, a reader can follow the reading of these characters in the novel by ignoring or forgetting that it was constructed by someone (author). Ondaatje gives much more individuality to his characters through reading. Despite the voluminous scholarship on *The English Patient*, little has been said about Ondaatje's Narrator. Some critics have even referred to Ondaatje as "the utterer" (Heble 110), arguing that his novels are as much about Ondaatje as about his characters. Thus the novel has more evidence of reading and Michael Ondaatje constructed this fiction in a wise and graceful way.

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