

Publications

Postmodern Narrative Technique in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

T.Vijayalakshmi
Assistant Professor
Department of English,
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women
Coimbatore- 641 004. Tamilnadu

Abstract: Postmodernism is an entirely different style of thinking about the world. Structurally Ondaatje's *The English Patient* does not have any chronological order narration between the present action in the Italian Villa and the flashbacks to memories of a mysterious desert romance, which is gradually unfolded. In the fragmentary structure the remains of history continue to haunt the present. Fragmentation is one of the significant features of postmodern techniques and it is revealed through fragmented language. The relationship between past and present is not that of a linear progression. Instead, through such fragments, the past is drawn into the space of the present. The glimpses of personalities and shadows of stories merge together.

Keywords: non-linear narration, fragmentation.

Postmodern Narrative Technique in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

The term 'postmodernism' is applied to many areas of human activity, including art, architecture, literature, film and music. Postmodern literature is an art that raises fundamental questions about the nature and function of art which emerged in the eventful post II World War years. An interest in the nature of language and the relationship between language and reality is another significant concern of postmodern thought. The postmodern narrative plays with intricate perspectives on a fairly simple story. It is a style and movement in the art that features a deliberate mixing of different styles. The postmodern techniques such as fragmentation and non-linear narration are special features focused in this study.

Michael Ondaatje who contributed a lot to the postmodern world through his writings was born in 1943 in Colombo, Ceylon, and moved to England at eleven, then to Canada at nineteen. *The English Patient* is Ondaatje's most acclaimed novel to date. Set in Tuscany, Italy, at the end of World War II, the novel depicts both the present dramatic circumstances and astonishing pasts of the characters in this epic tale of the physical and emotional damage inflicted by war and love. In addition to winning another Governor General's award for fiction in 1992, it earns Ondaatje a share of the prestigious Booker Prize, the first ever awarded to a Canadian. The novel *The English Patient* portrays the real and imaginary events and places mixing by analysing the pre-war period, represented by the Geographical Expeditions organized by the British Geographical Society, together with the situation in North Africa during the Second World War. Ondaatje takes full advantage of the possibilities of narrating in different tenses, alternating between present and past as he changes scenes. He uses flowing transitions to move from present action to flashback, mirroring real action and remembrance.

Structurally the novel does not have any chronological order-narration between the present action in the Italian villa and the flashbacks to memories of a mysterious desert romance, which is gradually unfolded. The magnificent technique of the novel is made out of the developments of complicated relationships among the four characters in the novel and the gradual revelations of their past through remembrances. All the four characters are haunted by their memory in the past and the lives of their past is revealed by fragmented flashback more than a collective history. Shifting more and more quickly between past and present, the fragmentary memories in *The English Patient* endeavor to supplement the past with the present and the present with a moment in the past. The relationship between past and present here is not that of a linear progression. Instead, through such fragments, the past is drawn into the space of the present.

The story-telling is the most important occupation of the characters in the novel. It is mostly a third-person narrative involved with a community at Villa San Girolamo. It is narrated in the past. Telling each other about their individual past, the characters of *The English Patient* become a small community of war-sufferers, united by their experiences. As Novak observes: "Past and present bleed into one another, and meaning comes only through a sliding and shifting play of signification, which threatens to destabilize it" (209). These kinds of fragmented memories occur in the lives of the characters as the result of Second World War and they are put together to make the novel coherent.

Through bits and pieces of past and present, of thought and dialogues, Ondaatje is re-writing of Almásy's life before and during the war. The structure of the novel which is dispersed, broken, and divided, manages to present a multiplicity of stories and of voices. It describes the patient as "The character who has most completely developed his human potentialities" (TEP 45). The English patient's self is too fragmented and decentered to remain alive. He has no face, and no body. He has no unified self, his identity is defined merely by his memories which means a collection of stories characterized by narrative discontinuity and disconnection. To quote, "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" (TEP 50).

The English patient remembers great detail from his past and his discovery in the desert after his accident about Bedouins and their continuous treatment of his injuries. He gradually unfolds the mystery of his identity through a past that is intriguing. He highlights the acts of European expeditions into the desert in the 1930's, but also about the desert itself. "There is a whirlwind in southern Morocco, the *aaajej*. ... There is the *africo*, which has at times reached the city of Rome The arifi ... aref or rifi The *bist roz* leaps into Afghanistan (TEP 16). The patient's exploration unravels the details of the desert, war and about his affair with a fellow explorer's wife. Flashbacks are usually not directly linked to the frame narrative but by means of triggers, i.e. objects, sounds that remind the remembering character of a certain event. The first memory the Patient has in the villa, for instance, is introduced by a sequence beginning with a close-up of the Herodotus on the nightstands, bulged and battered copy suggests past adventures undertaken. There are many slips of paper, clippings and pictures and so on that has been collected between the pages. The following sequence is even more explicit in its representation of the triggering of memory. The author describes it as: "It is the book he brought with him through the fire- a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writings in his own observations- so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus.... He begins to talk across the darkness. The Bedouin were keeping me alive" (TEP 16)

The patient's experience with the Bedouin in the present draws his attention back to a moment in the past. This fragment of the past is then represented in a memory experience in the present. Past and present are inseparable in the novel. The unknown past, and the explanation for the curious present are unfolded gradually. In the quotations used from *The Histories*, by the historian, Ondaatje connects the past with the present. For example: "But we were interested in how our lives could mean something to the past. We sailed into the past. We were young. We knew power and great finance were temporary things. We all slept with Herodotus" (TEP 142). The way the past is described suggests not a linear progression but a fragmentary structure in which the remains of history continue to haunt the present. This can be proved when the author remarks: "The last mediaeval war was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944. Fortress towns on great promontories which had been battled over since the eight century had the armies of the kings flung carelessly against them. Around the outcrops of rocks was the traffic of stretchers, butchered vineyards, where, if you dug deep beneath the tank ruts, you found blood axe and spear (TEP 69). This non-linear passage leads fragmentary structure when it talks about the period of war around 1940's and explains about the battle in the eighth century. The author suddenly shifts to the present condition of the landscapes that have been affected during the war. In the above passage things like 'the tank ruts' and 'blood axe and spear' represents the remains of history that haunt the present. Thus the past lies just beneath the surface of the present and is continually repeated.

The splintered memory of the patient does not reveal the past as it really was, but instead, draws forth disjointed instances of dancing, encounters with women, and music heard somewhere perhaps, in 1938 or 1939 into a single account. These splinters of memory provide a distorted image that draws our attention back to a prior moment, which remains untranslatable. The relationship of past to present is not solely one of casuality, nor is the past finished and left behind. Lying blind and wounded in the desert, the patient is asked by the Bedouin who have rescued him to pair together various guns and ammunition. In the midst of this moment, an earlier memory comes to him. "When was a child he had grown up with an aunt, and on the grass of her lawn she had scattered a deck of cards face down and taught him the game of Pelmanism.... Each player allowed to turn up two cards and, eventually through memory pairing them off...now, with his face blindfolded in a mask of grass fibres, he picked up a shell and moved with his carriers, guiding them towards a gun, inserted the bullet, bolted it, and holding it up in the air fired (TEP 20-21). The image of the past here is not the past as it was when he was a child. The meaning of the past moment in the garden and the moment with the Bedouin is neither stable nor self-evident. Thus in *The English Patient* fragmentation with no linear progression shifting from the past to the present and present to the past becomes a striking feature.

References:

Novak, Amy. "Textual Hauntings: Narrating History, Memory, and Silence in *The English Patient*." *Studies in the Novel* 36.2 .Summer. 2004. Print.

Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. London: Bloomsbury Publication, 1992. Print.

----. Interview with Maya Jaggi. *Wasafiri* 32. 2000.Print.

----. *An Interview with Michael Ondaatje with Gary Kamiya*. 18 Nov. 1996. Print.

----. "Imploding Time and Geography: Narrative Compressions in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33.2. 1998. Print.

JOURNEY TO SELFHOOD IN RAJAM KRISHNAN'S *LAMPS IN THE WHIRLPOOL*

T. VIJAYALAKSHMI

Assistant Professor, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

Regional languages are rich in making great literature. The translations include texts written originally in regional, even local languages such as Tamil, Malayalam, Oriya, Punjabi, Bengali, and Marathi, among others. According to Mini Krishnan the hope of the editors is that, along with their literary value, these novels: "will express most of the ideas, customs, unquestioned assumptions and the persistent doubts that have characterized Indian life for at least a thousand years, and, more recently, after the impact of western ways of thinking on it" (v).

KEYWORDS: Tamil, Malayalam, Oriya, Punjabi, Bengali, and Marathi

INTRODUCTION

The only way to let western people look inside the Tamil culture is through the rendering of it into a major language like English, and thus translation plays an essential role. Rajam Krishnan, a prolific feminist writer occupies an important place among Tamil Women novelists who always presents the plight of woman in Indian society in her works. She offers an insightful analysis of a woman in an orthodox Brahmin family to find her 'self' and come out by breaking the conventions in the orthodox set- up in the novel *Lamps in the Whirlpool*. The novel was originally published as *Suzhalil Mithakkum Deepangalin* 1997 and the two translators in charge of this translation were Uma Narayanan and Prema Seetharam. This paper is an attempt to study the protagonist's psychic geography by tracing her journey from the physical to the spiritual. She struggles to free herself from the so called custom and seeks redemption in her family.

Rajam Krishnan's concern and sympathy are primarily for the women and their struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity. Entrenched in an Indian setting her novels illustrate the human condition and the individual conflict of woman to fulfill herself as a human being, independent of her traditional role as a wife, daughter- in- law and mother.

Lamps in the Whirlpool is an enchanted novel translated into expressive English, a triumph for both the novelist and the translators. The details about the family core in an orthodox Brahmin community is essential to understand the behavior of the protagonist all throughout the novel. One of these concepts is *madi*, which designates all the rituals and observances that constitute the social ideology of a Brahminical household. Madi controls and determines the protagonist's identity in her family. Here the translators have taken pain to explain the term 'madi' which means 'Aacharam' for the people who is introduced Tamil culture for the first time. She explains:

"Two different meals had to be prepared; first, one for her husband and children, and after another bath, the second, a madi meal for her Mamiyar... Though fully aware that touching the filling would pollute it, she grabbed a handful and dashed to the terrace... Mamiyar had decreed that the rubbish bin... should not be allowed inside the house, since it was a receptacle for the remains of meals... all considered 'polluted'

by the orthodox” (LW 1)

Translators have used exact Tamil words of *mamiyar* and *purusha* in order to make them feel the original flavour of the language.

Identity can only be realized through discovery of one’s own self and not by the imposition of social expectations on the individual by society. This novel presents a woman’s journey towards selfhood. Woman is everything for the family. She plays multiple roles a lovable wife, affectionate mother and an unselfish daughter-in-law of all. Rajam Krishnan portrays how Girija, the protagonist journeying across life and search her actual identity. The story reveals an intense study of her personal traumas and tribulations that she faced in her married life bereft of emotional bonding. She attempts to define her ‘self’ as a woman and to create a space within her and around her in order to assert the legitimacy of her hopes. In the beginning of the novel Rajam Krishnan says: “Girija was intensely charming, she was utterly unselfish, and she was excelled in winning the hearts of the family members totally she was an Angels” (LW 1). She emerges from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity.

Rajam Krishnan depicts Girija as an unselfish daughter-in-law. She belongs to the orthodox Tamil Brahmin family. She is educated well. She has completed her post-graduation and worked as a teacher in a village school for nearly eight years. She inspired the students and colleagues. She has been married to Mr. Swaminathan only to regard being a dedicated wife and daughter-in-law. After being married to Mr. Swaminathan, she resigned her job and beget three children Kavitha, Charu and Bharat. She is not permitted to exhibit her talents and to express her personal views and ideas according to her desire. She exclaims: “The old woman had been conditioned to believe that the purusha, the husband, was both the sthula and sukshamasarira, perceived and unperceived form of God, who gave refuge to his wife who was like a wisp of straw in the waves of the ocean (LW 37).

Here the word ‘purusha’ has taken from the Tamil word and the translators have given translated meaning for the western people who is not aware of Tamil. Footnotes have been given for words like ‘Sthula’- ‘the Perishable body’, ‘sukshamasarira’ – ‘the imperishable inner being’ for non-Indian reader. Even meaning for the words like amma, appa, chitti, chittapa have been given in the foot notes.

Girija obtains the traditional role and serves to her mother-in-law and engaged in her daily household tasks in order to obey words of elders, but she is treated like a slave and unrecognized personality. Her physical and mental stress is not considered, due respect is not provided and priority is not given by her family members at any place. But her devotedness is not recognized by her husband and mother-in-law. She was treated badly and she has to obey the madi rules strictly to serve for her family. Girija faces inconvenience because of her mother in law. She says: “Kavi and Charu ran naked like slum children. If they wore clothes and touched her, she had to bathe again before cooking! She had been so ashamed of their appearances, especially when friends and students visited her” (LW 11).

The majority of the novel depicts the psychological suffering of Girija, the frustrated housewife. Owing to an unbridgeable gulf between herself and her husband after giving birth to two children of their long married life, she herself remains clouded with terrors sparked off by various reasons. Her dreams of happy married life are shattered. She has understood that she carries her own hell within her and there is no hope for her. The realization of animalism of her husband and mother-in-law’s behavior under the sophisticated cover of culture is a shock for her. She achieves her personhood, her self-realization. She has her own voice-clear and strong. Her return to life-to-hope-to-rejuvenation- is like

achieving wholeness. She has overcome her identity crisis. A knock at the beginning and at the end encompasses the journey of Girija in search of her selfhood. She understands that each has to fight one's own battle all alone and now, she is prepared for it thinking that her life is her own. She takes her life in her hands and act with clarity, realizes that she is not hopeless and is not dependent and transformed to a new empowered woman.

As a result of this she is awakened by the talk of consciousness raising by Ratna, her husband's niece. She incites Girija's consciousness by her talk telling that *madi* concept is quite outdated and only a means to torture people. Her sense of right and wrong finds a voice through Ratna. The wrongs done to women in the name of "*madi*" have extremely impaired her. She is traumatized to know that she has been subjugated both by her husband and mother in law. All along she has been a sufferer of the austere rules of orthodoxy. Finally she finds about her children are starved of the joys of being embraced and fondled by their mother from a tender age, as it would deny the *aacharam*. The title of the novel is significant as the tiny leaf boat with the burning wick symbolizes the courageous woman like Girija who is striving to reach the shore among all odds.

The novel assertively exhibits man-woman relationship in Indian society, that women should have an assertive individuality which includes the capability to take decisions about their life and carry them out with a sense of responsibility. Within the societal roles she can be herself by erasing her conditioning, and freeing her from her inhibitions. The haunting riddle of the ultimate purpose of a woman's life within the family can be solved when she learns to assess her worth as an individual and shuns to be guided by pre-fixed norms about it.

REFERENCES

1. *Benjamins. John B. V. Less Translated Languages. Ed. Albert Branchadell, and Lovell Margaret West. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 2005. Print.*
2. *Krishnan, Mini. Foreword. Lamps in the Whirlpool. By Rajam Krishnan. Trans. Uma Narayanan, and PremaSeetharam. Madras: Macmillan India. 1995. Print.*
3. *Krishnan, Rajam. Lamps in the Whirlpool. Trans. Uma Narayanan, and PremaSeetharam. Madras: Macmillan India. 1995. Print.*