
THE PHENOMENON OF LONELINESS IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S THE ENGLISH PATIENT

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Abstract:

Michael Ondaatje in his prize-winning novel, *The English Patient* has dealt predominantly with the phenomenon of loneliness. Loneliness encompasses Ondaatje's novel and exists at every level within the text. It is found in the narrative, in the characters, and in their emotions. The novel is a chronicle of loneliness and loss – a tale of four people who are and always will be alone together. The author here tries to emphasize that the stylistic, thematic and structural features of *The English Patient* suggest and reflect the intricacies and characteristics of loneliness. The main characters in *The English Patient* withdraw into the safety of the Villa and spend most of their time on their own or with a few other people. The narrative technique helps to reinforce the sense of loneliness that pervades the text. Ondaatje represents lonely characters who lead lonely lives. The novel when broadly analyzed indicates that it is written using a fragmented, episodic and complicated flashback structure which steadily reveals each character's history and preoccupations. The novel's characters are never fully known or understood because the reader is not offered an all-inclusive and open description of each character or the manner in which the characters are linked. Ondaatje captures a lonely landscape in the description of the Villa and the characters living in it. The English patient and his room symbolize loneliness and thereby offer a way of exploring the nature of existential isolation. The readers are left to wonder about the meaning of existence, relation to cultural and spiritual symbols and personal experience of the world. The patient is without identity as he is merely a scarred and burned shell of a human being. Without history, he is no longer real.

Keywords: loneliness, emotion, identity, memory, history, desert, heat, symbols, representation

'The others wrote out their love of solitude and meditated on what they found there' Michael Ondaatje, the English Patient

Introduction:

Ondaatje is a SriLankan born Canadian diasporas writer and his novels are a fusion of fact and fiction. Ondaatje has attempted to re-write the history of the minority, the colonized, and the immigrants ever on the margins, to transform them to bring the marginalized at the center of focus in the globalized world. The parallel between Michael Ondaatje's life and the situation of the characters is remarkable. Ondaatje describes the characters in his novel, *The English Patient* as wanting a sense of belonging: Those migrants don't belong here [in the villa] but want to belong here and find a new home. (Watchel,259). Like Ondaatje, who found a new home in Canada, the characters are looking for a home for themselves in a bizarre place far away from their home countries. As part of their reading experience, other readers of the novel may relate to this and perhaps find parallels to their own situations in life.

Loneliness is a universal phenomenon but critical study of the representation of loneliness in literature is almost not seen much through the terms loneliness, alone, lonesome, solitude, isolation and alienation have been present in some form in popular literature for centuries. This paper explores the phenomenon of loneliness in Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* and it is a study of how loneliness is communicated through literature. Robert Cummings Neville, a Confucian, writes that loneliness is to be understood in terms of certain kinds of disorientation and loss of poise (Neville, 19). When one loses one's bearing, a sense of loneliness accompanies the feeling of being aimless. Living in various locations and interrelating with numerous cultures contributes to a sense of being out of place. Cultural dissimilarity can result in misunderstanding and bewilderment. The less one interacts with society in general, the more likely one is to feel lonely. Incremental withdrawal from society is evident in Ondaatje's novel. The main characters in *The English Patient* withdraw into the safety of the Villa and spend most of their time on their own or with a few other people. This narrative technique helps to emphasize the sense of loneliness that pervades the text. Ondaatje represents lonely characters who lead lonely lives.

Hartog argues that because the boundary of the self is culturally determined, the interface at which loneliness occurs varies among cultures (Hartog, 508). In the West, individuality is confined to the body and so politics of the body overrides any sense of affinity. Later, he argues that both an overload and an absence of outward stimulus can lead to loneliness and that loneliness and isolation are not merely by-products of technology and rapid sociocultural value change, but are really unavoidable components of civilization and the human condition. (Hartog,522). Hana chooses to care for the patient in an isolated location because she wants to leave the literal and figurative assault of the war. In a sense, she exchanges one form of

loneliness for another, and in so doing she exchanges one form of stimulation for another. The English Patient is the tale of four people involved in and damaged by, the Second World War. Hana is a Canadian nurse who is tired of being surrounded by death. The identity of the patient she tends is vague – he is known merely as the English patient, the title of the novel. His body is completely burnt; he is immobile and close to death. Later Hana and the patient are joined by Caravaggio, a thief-turned-spy, who was a friend of Hana's father in the past in Toronto where she and her father lived before the war. Kirpal Singh, an Indian sapper for the English army, completes the group. The four characters all come to reside in the Villa San Girolamo in northern Italy. Nikki Singh offers the following description of the Villa:

[t]his Italian building, once a convent is exposed and enclosed – many of its shelled walls and doors from the war open into the landscape. Our four charred victims (psychologically, and even physically as in the case of the English patient), find shelter in the Villa. The fragmented architecture of the Villa expresses their selves, and its open-cum-closeness, the secrets they begin to share with each other. The war breaks their walls too and just as the rooms of the Villa open up to the sky and gardens, their secrets and emotions reach out to one another. As their days pass, their wounds begin to heal. (Nikki, 13)

We are told that [f]rom the outside, the place seemed devastated (Ondaatje, 14) and that Hana and the English patient were protected by the simple fact that the Villa seemed a ruin. But she felt safe here, half adult and half child (Ondaatje, 14). The obvious comparison between the Villa and the phenomenon of loneliness is clear. Both appear bleak, inaccessible and remorseless. The Villa has been left damaged by bombs during the war and the surrounding landscape is barren and inhospitable. The broken building houses damaged souls, hence Ondaatje uses the words ruin and devastated to good effect. The Villa houses lost souls and it is a place of asylum and isolation; similarly the body – the contained physical manifestation of an individual's existence on earth – is the place in which we experience loneliness. It may come as a surprise, after the glaring and unrelenting image just described, that the Villa has been described as an Eden-like sanctuary, isolated from the horrors of the war that has mutilated the neighboring countryside and continues to propagate destruction outside of Italy. (Roxborough, 239) In an interview, Ondaatje describes the Villa as an Eden, an escape, a little cul-de-sac during the war. (Roxborough, 239)

Ondaatje presents the reader four cynical characters: Hana, Almásy who comes to be known as the patient, Eden, after all, is the perfect place, not somewhere perfect in spite of destruction, Kip and Caravaggio. Together, they use the Villa as a sanctuary from the war and from their pasts. The Villa is sprawling. The four individuals have space to move about freely, still interacting with one another but without disturbing one another unreasonably. With reference to physical closeness, Vello Sermat claims that there is no significant relationship between the degree of physical isolation from other people and the intensity of lonely experiences and that a study showed that more severe loneliness experiences tended to

occur in situations where the individual was not lacking human company. (Sermat,308) The Villa's inhabitants have not been completely isolated and they behaved normally in society before and during their period at the Villa. Yet each exists alone in their common world and each cannot seem to reach through to the other. Ondaatje writes that [a]t night sometimes when the English patient is asleep or even after she has read alone outside his door for a while, she goes looking for Caravaggio. (Sermat, 34)

Perhaps the notion of belonging should be refined. Belonging refers not only to externally identifiable relational links to other people in the form of family, culture, gender or sex, religious community, nationality or any other marker of social connection but rather to the individual's personal sense of connection to their own being as well as connection to external people and groups. Perhaps this is Ondaatje's representation of loneliness: four characters that cannot seem to belong, to themselves or to anyone else. This indicates that the residents choose to be alone even though they are able to spend time together. The hypothesis that loneliness is hindered by contact with others is deceptive. There is mutual loneliness which cannot be overcome simply through companionship within the Villa. We can see that loneliness is found in the structure and form of Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. This technique is at work within individual sentences in the text as well as at a global level. A broad analysis of the novel indicates that it is written using a fragmented, episodic, intricate flashback structure which gradually reveals each character's history and preoccupations. This interfuses an incipient sense of loneliness into and through the text as a whole.

Another technique Ondaatje employs to produce a sense of loneliness in the text is the effort in narrative perspective and time frames. The extract above begins with an objective, third-person perspective and quickly moves into first-person subjective as the patient speaks about the weeks he spent in the desert. The lack of punctuation in the monologue and dialogue sequences adds to the alienating effect of the text. The subsequent paragraph returns to an objective perspective. Later a first-person perspective is resumed, but this time it is Hana's perspective when she asks the patient 'How were you burned?' (Ondaatje 82). As the patient continues to describe the plane crash the narrative returns to the past tense, only to return to the present as Hana questions the patient about his identity. Ondaatje's stylistic choice to move continuously between individual and shared narratives is both disturbing and alienating since it forces the reader to question and reinterpret the text. It is the fragmented form of narrative structure that creates gaps, wastelands, in the reader's understanding of the novel. Loneliness resides in the lacunae of signification. Hana asks the patient who is you? I don't know. You keep asking me. You said you were English. (Ondaatje 14)

This exchange is undermining and dislocating in several ways. The most distinctly disrupting factor is the patient's lack of identity. Identity assists in the understanding and categorization of people and personality types. In short, identity makes people knowable. The patient is an unknown entity and this is disconcerting to Hana as well as the reader. Hana asks the patient a direct question but he avoids a satisfactory response by indicating that he is unaware of his

identity. Ondaatje offers this simple response in order to open up numerous possibilities for the narrative and for an analysis of the patient. Could it be that the patient suffers from amnesia and cannot remember who he is? Possibly, the trauma he has endured has caused him to question what he understood himself to be; perhaps he refuses to assign a particular personality to himself. Ondaatje does not offer the patient's response after Hana suggests that he is English. This clearly troubles Hana, as the patient comments that she keeps asking him who he is. The reader cannot feel secure and is denied the consolation of being fully included as an implied witness or auditor in the narrative. The novel's characters are never fully known or understood because the reader is not offered a comprehensive and open description of each or the manner in which the characters are connected. Evidence Ondaatje uses the endless possibility offered by the phrase to breathe life into an entire narrative. Interpretation of the characters and events in the novel is left to the reader. Because of this, the 'truth' and reliability of the characters (and through this, the narrative) is called into question. Because of the gradual and incomplete revelation of each character's history and preoccupations, the text appears to be fragmented and dislocated. This unresolved reading experience leaves the reader feeling unsure and isolated, ultimately alienating the reader from the text, which in turn reinforces the overriding sense of loneliness present in the novel. Ondaatje creates an ineffable sense of dislocation, awkwardness and, ultimately, loneliness. The cumulative impression of loneliness is not palpable – something that the reader can draw conclusions about and actively construct in the narrative – but persists as a felt presence, something interfused and apprehended, a quality that is just there.

Conclusion:

Loneliness can be categorized into three main areas: illness, disease or condition, behavioral pattern, and psycho-emotional phenomenon. Several stages of loneliness can be delineated. These include existential loneliness, pathological loneliness, and real loneliness, loneliness according to the life cycle, as well as emotional isolation and social isolation. We could infer from this that a combination of these leads to a complete sense of the complexity of loneliness and that Ondaatje presents a combination of all of the complexities of loneliness in *The English Patient*. The causes of loneliness are many and varied. Loneliness may also be caused by the death of a loved one or failure in some personal endeavor. There is a tendency to conflate and oversimplify the concept of loneliness, even though several factors usually work concomitantly, rendering loneliness a complex and layered state.

Thus, the writer brings to the text a subjective interpretation of reality and the reader brings an equally subjective interpretation of reality to the written text. The reader then taps into that creativity when reading, and, constructs meaning from the text, creating her own meaning around the text as well. Loneliness pervades Ondaatje's novel and exists at every level within the text: in the narrative, in the characters, and in their emotions. The novel is a chronicle of loneliness and loss – a tale of four people who are and always will be alone together.

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