

“Almásy’s Desire for Identity ‘Erasure’ in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*”

By Ahmad M.S. Abu Baker

The English Patient consists of two texts. The first is the one which tells the story of Kip and the others, and the second is that of Almásy, Katharine and the Bedouins. Each of these texts has to suspend its ‘other’ in order to continue. In other words, the presence of one depends on the absence of the other. Hence, these texts are ‘centres’, each of which substitutes for the other. They exist in a state of ‘différance’. These two texts join together to form a third or ‘triple’ text: *The English Patient*. They leak into each other, destabilising the first-text/second-text binary by removing the slash (/) in between. A ‘triple’ existence is brought to life.

In *The English Patient*, the narrator as an authoritative presence and ‘centre’ of signification is absent since the English patient’s identity is suppressed. He uses the third person to narrate his story. Jonathan Culler notes that “the self is broken down into component systems and is deprived of its status as source and master of meaning” (p.33). Hence, the narrator’s identity is erased as a ‘transcendental signified’ to allow the ‘play’ of the ‘centre’. Like the desert, the identity of the English patient is without fixed contours. The colour of his skin, a racial marker, is burnt away. He is Hungarian yet he is mistaken for an Englishman. “He had rambled on, driving them mad, traitor or ally, leaving them never quite sure who he was” (p.96). His identity is erased and he becomes the anonymous English patient. Consequently, he attains the freedom of transcending borders between nations, even transcending ethnicity and identity. Another example of how erasure causes free ‘play’ in the novel is the case of Kip. To him, bombs are a ‘centre’. He unplugs his human feelings and focuses on deconstructing the bombs, an act that is similar to deconstructing the text of a novel. Only after the explosion of the nuclear bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki does he look for another ‘centre’. In other words, after the ultimate erasure of the population, “[t]he death of a civilisation” (p.286), he loses his ‘centre’ and gains the freedom to ‘play’, to leave Italy and go back to India.

Almásy’s story is released when the English patient’s consciousness is drugged by morphine. “He rides the boat of morphine. It races in him, imploding time and geography the way maps compress the world onto a two-dimensional sheet of paper” (p.161). Morphine allows him to transcend time and place. In other words, the ‘presence’ of his conscious is an ‘absence’ of his unconscious and vice versa. The binary opposites of conscious/unconscious exist in a state of “différance”. The ‘presence’ of the English patient’s self means an ‘absence’ of Almásy’s and vice

versa. These two selves form the binary opposition English patient/Almásy, which in turn justifies the differences between the two characters (Almásy and the English patient).

The English patient, unlike Almásy the mapmaker, desires “to walk upon such an earth that had no maps” (p.261). These two “selves” exist in one body in a communal way. Hence, the English patient notes that “[w]e are communal histories, communal books” (p.261). This reference also suggests that the body is like a text. It can be deconstructed, and its narrativity can be interrupted by another. In the novel, the body is just like a text. For instance, Caravaggio’s thumbs are erased after his identity is discovered. The English patient notes that “I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography—to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map” (p.261). He wonders if he is “just a book” there “to be read, some creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies, loose vegetation, pockets of stones” (p.252).

The English patient narrates the story of Almásy under the effect of morphine. Hence, his authoritative presence as an author is erased, because his reliability as an author is removed. His use of third person to refer to Almásy also removes his authoritative presence. The reader is left wondering whether to believe the historical documents that detail Almásy’s role as a German spy, or Almásy’s own representation of the truth. Hence, reality/imagination and/or history/imagination are allowed ‘play’ since they are decentralised. This decentralisation creates the impression that history is just a representation. Almásy carries with him the book of Herodotus, *The Histories*. The name of the book itself suggests that history is nothing but a representation, and that there are many representations of history or ‘histories’. Nothing is fixed in the novel, just as nothing is fixed in the desert. Reality/imagination and truth/fiction are deconstructed and the lines separating them are erased. In other words, the slash (/) between these binary opposites is removed.

To Derrida, the stoppage of the ‘play’ of the ‘centre’ means “death”. He notes that “the absence of play and difference [is] another name for death” (Derrida 1978:297). To Almásy, ‘life’ is no longer the ‘centre’. He is “dead” in the body of the English patient. Therefore, he uses the third person to narrate the story. “*Death means you are in the third person*” (p.247). Further, “he reposes like the sculpture of the dead knight in Ravenna” (p.96) and Hana “dislikes his lying there with a candle in his hand, mocking a deathlike posture” (p.62). Furthermore, he refers to “*Felhomaly*. The dusk of graves. With the connotation of intimacy there between the dead and the living” (p.170). He is caught in the zone between life/death. He is in a ‘play’ zone, which results from the removal of the (/) between the two binary opposites. Life and death are decentralised.

The death of the English patient will not stop the 'play' of the 'centre'. The story will continue to take place again and again. Kip feels that "he carries the body of the Englishman with him in this flight" (p.294) and this suggests that the English patient transcends death. Hence, his story will live on. This means that the 'play' of the 'centre' will continue since it is "infinitely redoubling" (Derrida 1978:297). "And my words which I have put in thy mouth shall not depart out of thy mouth. Nor out of the mouth of thy seed. Nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed" (p.294). These words of Isaiah also suggest the continuation of the 'play' of the centre. More to the point, the references to medieval wars as being similar to modern ones, and the reference to "the Tree of Good and Evil inserted into the mouth of the dead Adam" (pp.69-70) suggest "infinite redoubling", 'play' and/or 'repetition' since they imply that present events are an echo of and caused by past events.

Brandabur highlights the presence of "the question of namelessness which runs through the narrative" (2000). This namelessness is a form 'erasure'. Ondaatje burns out the defining white skin of the English patient, makes Europeans "desert Europeans", and removes the blue eyes of the dead Katharine Clifton who hated to die without a name, hated deserts, and wanted green fields with water, and whose bones withered away from the burning plane and became somehow united in a mystical experience with the desert, which removes all identification.

Works Cited

Brandabur, Clare. "Parody and Pastiche in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." An unpublished article presented at the Yarmouk University (Irbid-Jordan) Conference on Literature, Linguistics and Translation, April 2000.

Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. London: Routledge, 1981.

Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, trans. Alan Bass, 1978.

Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. London: Picador, 1993.