

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

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**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.

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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.

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