

Textuality and Subjectivity: Post-Modernist View of the Novel ‘The English Patient’

Sajid Ali

Assistant Professor

Govt.Postgraduate College Samundri, Distt.Faisalabad, Pakistan

Tel: 92-300-661-1960 E-mail: prof.sajidali@gmail.com

Muhammad Shahbaz Arif

GC University Faisalabad, Pakistan

Tel: 92-034-6405-0900 E-mail: drshahbazarif@gmail.com

Sajid Ahmad (Corresponding author)

Assistant Professor

Govt.Postgraduate College Samundri, Distt.Faisalabad, Pakistan

Tel: 92-300-667-3763 E-mail: greatbaigg@yahoo.com

Malik Shehbaz Afzal Bezar

Lecturer in English

Govt.Postgraduate College Samundri, Distt.Faisalabad, Pakistan

Tel: 92-300-666-4766 E-mail: shahbazaf@gmail.com

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Abstract

Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon that has changed the very concepts regarding

architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, philosophy, linguistics and so on. It dismantles and deconstructs the traditional notions about language, identity and etc. The present research is a qualitative content analysis which tries to figure out how language in the text of the novel ‘*The English Patient*’ is manipulated to convey the idea of disseminated identities of different characters through mini-narratives, intertextuality and rapid narrative shifts thus, gives the post-modernist view of the novel ‘*The English Patient*’.

Keywords: Textuality, Mini-narratives, Fragmented identities, Subjectivity, Posrmodernism

1. Introduction

One of the most influential postmodern theorists Ihab Hassan while offering the table of difference between modernism and postmodernism says that postmodernism is the ‘process’ of making the product; it is absence within presence; it is dispersal in contrast with centering; it is anarchy within hierarchy; it is intertext within text. He further elaborates that postmodernism wallows in the play of meanings, it surfs these meanings and is concerned with performance, play and process. It delights in the ever changing play of appearances, rather than with sources, roots and origins. He offers a table of difference between the two movements as quoted by Jim Powell (2001: 17).

Modernism	Postmodernism
Form(conjunctive/closed)	Antiform (disjunctive/open)
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Art object/Finished work	Process/Performance/Happening
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Root/Depth	Rhizome/surface

Derrida’s scepticism had a considerable appeal as it allows his followers to attack those who believe that philosophy, science or the novel really described the world accurately so poststructuralist philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard (1994) defines postmodernism as ‘*incredulity towards metanarratives*’. Fredric Jameson points to a defining sense of postmodernism as ‘*the disappearance of a sense of ‘history’*’. According to Hans Bertens “*Postmodernism unsettles and deconstructs traditional notions about language, about identity, about writing itself and so on*” (2001: 141). Linda Hutcheon defines postmodernism as

“Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and subverts, the very concepts it challenges-be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics or historiography” (1988: 3).

The dominant attitude in postmodernism is disbelief. So, postmodern disbelief is extended first and foremost to language. Linguistic theories of Ferdinand De Saussure call into questions the idea that language is simply the means through which we convey reality. The anti-realism which characterizes postmodernism can be explained to this basic idea. The most important point for anti-realism input into postmodernism is the relationship between the signifier and the signified which is arbitrary and non-stable. Further poststructuralist philosophers especially Jacques Derrida advocates that meaning is not present in sign. There is continual flickering, spilling and defusing of meaning what Derrida calls dissemination.

This idea further creates gulf between the world of language and reality. “*The gap this opens between language and world is the space into which all postmodernist theorizing and explicitly Postmodernist literature enters*” (Gregson 2004: 3). Postmodern art undermines such principles as order, values, meaning and control. Further it questions the centralized, totalized and hierarchized closed system as Hutcheon says “*Postmodernism challenges some aspects of modernist dogma: Its view of the autonomy of art and its deliberate separation from life; its expression from individual subjectivity*” (1988: 43). Postmodern fiction has also destabilized perceived notions with regard to language, representation, the subject and it has effectively undermined all metanarratives and beliefs:

“The postmodernist novel puts into question the entire series of interconnected concepts that are associated with liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, universalization, system, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy,

homogeneity, uniqueness, origin” (ibid: 57).

The classical realist sees the text as simply referring to the world. Such a view fails to take into account the ways in which language mediates and determines what is seen in the world. On the other hand, a structuralist sees the world as having no absolute existence but as being entirely constructed by the text. They say that the text has an organizing principle or centre or it is autonomous in generating meaning. To poststructuralism, the centre, the clear organizing principle by which meaning can be determined does not exist because we can never reach a final meaning. The notions of the work of art as a closed, self sufficient, autonomous object deriving its unity from the formal interrelations of its parts have been subverted in postmodernist view. In this regard Lyotard says

“A Postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they can’t be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work” (1984: 81).

Ondaatje being the postcolonial and postmodern writer encapsulates the postmodernist view of identity in his most famous and well known novel “*The English Patient*”. So he advocates the decentered notion of autonomy of text which means text is not solely meaning generating source and further it is non-unified, non-coherent and non-reliable. To construct the identities of different characters in *The English Patient*, Ondaatje uses a non-conventional text structure in postmodernist and poststructuralist’s perspective.

2. Literature Review

Michael Ondaatje presents the decentered and destabilized notions regarding the subjectivity and Textuality in his masterpiece *The English Patient*. The characters and the structure of *The English Patient* present the Postmodernist view of identity. In this context, a brief review of the previous researches by different scholars is presented here to locate the gaps and lapses to be filled in by my research work. The first reference in this regard is by Kristina Stankeviciute (2003). The main stance dealt in Kristina’s research is regarding the

construction of postmodern identity in *The English Patient*. The article sheds light on the different aspects of postmodern identity with detailed analysis of the main character (The English Patient).

Another research article “*Diagnosing The English Patient: Contribution to Understanding the Schizoid Fantasies of Being Skinless and of Being Buried Alive*” by Norman Doidge (1999) mainly deals with the medical and clinical terminologies. The treatment and the main attributes of schizoid state are the main stance of this article.

Sumara (2001) also endorsed the same as “*Canadians seem to define themselves in very much the same terms as postmodernism is defined... Canadian identity tends to cluster around claims that Canadians are not overbearing, not totalizing, not monolithic, not unified, not static...*” John Bolland (2002) also propounded the same idea of post-modern identity and textuality regarding the novel *The English Patient*.

3. Research Methodology

Post-modernist approach forms the theoretical framework and the whole analysis has been done following the qualitative content analysis methodology.

4. Text Analysis

4.1 Mini-narratives

The text is an extremely important concept in postmodernism. The idea of a text includes artistic works and spoken statements. The philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism as “incredulity towards meta-narrative”. Hans Bertens quotes Lyotard’s comments that “*little narratives and modest system of belief are always of their provisional nature and they are local rather than their universal validity.*” (2001: 143) Contemporary western discourse is characteristically unstable, fragmented, dispersed not a world view at all. Little narrative are fragmentary, non-totalizing and non-teleological. In the West, grand narratives have all lost their efficacy and their legitimacy. Their legitimating is now plural, local and contingent. The mini-narratives deal with a general story that unites the people and promotes a social relationship among individuals.

We may observe the same in *The English Patient*; story telling is the most important feature of its characters. They tell each other of their individual past, and hence form a small community of war-wounded people, where they shed their earlier prejudice and develop a sense of communal self-awareness: In the case of *The English Patient*, it seems that he is alive only to tell his story to his audience. He tells his audience the most important stories of his life e.g. his relationship with Katharine, Katharine’s death and how he discovered the oasis of Zerzura etc. In this concern we have the first mini-narrative in the following lines “*I have spent weeks in the desert, forgetting to look at the moon...*” (Ondaatje 1992: 4). We observe the second mini-narrative about *The English Patient* in the following lines, “*They wrapped the mask of herbs from his face...*” (ibid: 8). Thirdly, we have another mini-narrative when we see *The English Patient* describing about his treatment at the hands of the desert tribes In the following lines, “*The tribe that had saved the burned pilot...*” (ibid: 101). Another mini narrative that we have in the text is when *The English Patient* describes

about his first meeting with the woman of his life Katharine. It starts in the following words, “*when I met Katharine she was married...*” (ibid: 243). We have yet another mini-narrative by The English Patient in the following words “*on the floor of cave of swimmers...*” (ibid: 263).

Another example of these mini-narratives by The English Patient is when he shifts to his past once again as in the following lines “*I think you have become inhuman...*” (ibid: 252). The fragmented and disseminated narratives of The English Patient thus become a text that can be read and re-read, a construct that may be re-arranged and utilized to gain any desired effect. If we arrange the fragments of his story, we may find his character development in the following pattern: He is a famous desert explorer of Africa, the Hungarian Count Ladislaus De Almasy. During his adventure in Africa he meets Katharine, who is there with her husband Geoffrey to a desert expedition. Almasy and Katharine fall in love. Geoffrey comes to know about this relationship due to which Katharine breaks with Almasy. But she is unable to suppress her emotion. Geoffrey decides to finish the story by killing all three of them in a plane crash in the desert. He does not succeed because he is the only one who dies. Almasy survives and Katharine receives severe injuries which later on cause her death. Almasy goes to get rescue for her but manages to return three years later. During these three years he works as a German spy-leader in the desert. He comes back in a plane but while he is on his way back the plane explodes. Almasy burns and falls down. He is fortunately found by a group of Bedouins who carry him to the British base from where he is taken to nunnery hospital of Florence Italy where he meets Hana who decides to stay in the Villa San Girolamo after the hospital shifts to the Pisa. It is also in this Villa that The English Patient meets Caravaggio and Kip.

Not only Almasy but also other characters of the novel develop themselves through these mini-narratives. In this regard we have an example of David Caravaggio. There is no logical order of character development in his case. It is again all up to the reader to read and re-read it and hence come to a definite conclusion about him. The sequence of age i.e. childhood, boyhood, adolescence, youth, and the old age is missing to a large extent in his character development. In his first mini-narrative, we see him lost in his memories of the time that he spent with Hana in her childhood. This mini-narrative starts with the following words, “*Accompanying a girl and her father to have her tonsils out...*” (ibid: 310). The second mini-narrative takes the reader into Tuxedo where Caravaggio spent part of his life as in the following words, “*I was in Tuxedo.....*” (ibid: 37) The third mini-narrative appears at the stage in near ruins as “*It was someone’s birthday party*” (ibid: 56). Another mini-narrative appears at the time when Caravaggio describes about his punishment at the hands of German army when he was caught by them and deprived of his thumbs as in the following lines “*They had handcuffed him to the thick legs of an oak tree*” (ibid: 62)

Hana’s character is no exception in this regard. Her character also develops through these mini-narratives. In her character development we are told firstly about the time when she was an army nurse and had her first chance of coming close to the dead and injured army officers. She describes in her first mini-narrative about the agony of that time as in the following words, “*Half a year earlier...*” (ibid: 43). Then in the second of his mini-narratives she

describes about the very first few days that she spent with The English Patient as in the following lines, “*After the first nights...*” (ibid: 49). The reader does not find the right order of description in the novel as the third mini-narrative by Hana takes her into her childhood period as in the following lines “*In her childhood her classroom had been....*” (ibid: 51). In the next mini-narrative we see him as a pregnant girl who is ready for abortion as in the lines “*I was almost going to have a baby a year ago*” (ibid: 87). The missing of the logical order of her character development is a symbol of postmodern tendency. Hence we can gather the idea of no totality and unity of text structure in the novel. With the help of mini-narratives the characters of the novel create their own selves. They work as an author creating a text, they arrange and re-arrange the most important episodes of their lives through these mini-narratives. Postmodern identity is fragmentary which is constructed through the combination of different mini-texts.

4.2 No Single Truth

The characters as well as the text of *The English Patient* show this tendency of postmodernism. In this concern The English Patient is one of the most significant characters who conceal his identity, there is no clue about his real name, his past history, his family background, his true nationality and his profession. It seems as if he were intentionally hiding his identity. He hides his real name till the very end of the novel. Throughout the novel we see him called by the name of The English Patient whereas his real name Almasi is disclosed at the last stages of the novel. He was not an Englishman rather he was a Hungarian named Count Almasi who worked for the Germans as a spy. The lines below show that English patient was amazed at watching Caravaggio in the Villa “*The Englishman saw Caravaggio then and his jaw dropped*” (Ondaatje 1992: 59).

In the beginning of the novel we find Hana asking him questions about his real name or nationality but he does not simply know who he is as the lines below suggest “*Who are you (Hana) I don’t know*” (*The English Patient*) (ibid: 5). He is a Hungarian spy by profession while throughout the novel we find him as An English desert explorer having no profession at all, only aiming to find the lost cities of Gilf kebir. He is burned, dehumanized and totally non-recognizable. We are unsure about his age, race, ethnicity, social class. He is somewhat recognizable by his sex as he is a male. Hana observes her burnt body during treatment of his body. Her remarks about her burned body prove that he is male as in the lines “*She has nursed him for months and she knows the body well, the penis sleeping like a sea horse*” (ibid: 3). One cannot come to a final conclusion about his age. It is through his stories that one perceives him as over forty years old.

Caravaggio certainly possesses this feature. He keeps his identity hidden and does not reveal it to the doctors who treat his injured thumbs. He does not tell them his name. What he tells them is only his serial number that identifies him as a part of the Allies as we see him “*He had revealed nothing, not even his number, which showed he was with Allies*” (ibid: 29). He feels safety in not revealing his identity as on another time we observe him “*That was how he felt safest, revealing nothing*” (ibid: 29). For postmodernism the truth and objectivity are not possible. *The English Patient* as a postmodern novel demonstrates that there is no single truth

in it. Almasry realizes that the desert is based on no single truth. Kristina Stankeviciute (2003) says

“Like sand it shifts--- circling, rising, settling in the reconfiguring patterns. Identity according to postmodernism is not some solid, identifiable thing, rather, the self is mosaic of the different contexts, roles and experiences that the individual encounters.”

4.3 Intertextuality:

Intertextuality is linked with the idea of the boundary between history and fiction, and the challenge to history's claim to provide access to an objective truth. The crux of intertextuality is that it is in confrontation with the view that author is the sole source of the meanings of the text. All the texts have a particular relationship with the models, narrative structures and characters in part from previous texts. Hutcheon quotes Roland Barthes' definition of the inter-text as “*the impossibility of living outside the infinite text*” (1988: 128). Postmodernist fiction retains aesthetic autonomy of the text while exposing it to the ‘world’ in which these texts situate themselves as the world of discourse, the world of text and intertext. No text finally establishes anything about the world outside itself. Historiographic metafiction uses frequent allusions to artistic, historical and literary text to show that literary and historical works are both dependent on the history of discourse.

The English Patient is significant for the number and scope of its intertexts which have a wide range of the works that supply an overarching structure of the novel to those which provide a more local elucidation of theme: Kipling's *Kim*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, The Gyges-Candaules episode in Herodotus, *The Tempest*, *Anna Karenina*, The charterhouse of Parma, Caravaggio's painting of David, The Grail of legend etc. Almost all the characters of *The English Patient* are not the sole property of *The English Patient* but they are exposed to the world of other texts.

For example *The English Patient* lay in his bed like a [fisher] king. Kip corresponds to the figures Perceval in the Grail. Hana's attributes link her to the Fertility Queen of the Grail Romances. Hana and Caravaggio are also intertextual entities of Ondaatje's own novel *In the Skin of a Lion*. Intertextuality and parody are related to another feature of postmodernist fiction, the crossing of generic boundaries, Ondaatje's work has always been characterized by its mixing of different discourses, newspaper articles, popular songs and comic strips. Bolland quotes Ganapathy-Dore's views about *The English Patient* as “*The English Patient includes elements of the historical novel, the colonial novel, the autobiographical memoir, the epistolary novel, the detective thriller, magic realism*” (2002: 61).

Ondaatje himself suggested in an interview that much of his best poetry went into the writing of novel. His employment of poetic narration challenges an important formal convention of the novel genre. This implies that like the characters and text of *The English Patient* its genre becomes explicitly unstable.

4.4 Rapid Narrative Shifts

The elements of intertextuality, parody and heterogeneity of style in postmodernist writing

are linked to the end of traditional concept of the autonomous subject with a firm center to its identity. Such conceptions of subject have important implications for the narrative structure and form of fiction influenced by it. Through their disruption of continuous linear sequence, the plots of postmodernist fiction typically challenge the concept of the stable and unified subject. The narrative of the present is frequently interrupted by flashbacks giving each character its development. These vary from brief fragments to full scale biographies and they frequently do not follow in chronological sequence. In addition, there is a rapid cutting between the different characters' pasts. These strategies challenge the readers' construction of a stable model of character and his inability to grasp an individual identity.

We also see Almásy describing himself in the three different modes of persons as he sometimes uses first person, on other times the second and also the third person for the description of his past stories. In one of his flashbacks we see Almásy's description of his past stories in the first person using "I" as in the following "*I've spent weeks in the desert forgetting to look at the moon*" (Ondaatje 1992: 4). On another time he again uses first person "I" as he utters these lines "*There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I've ever met in my life*" (ibid: 147). The shift of point of view is very clear in the case of *The English Patient*'s description about his past as he shifts from first person to the third person in one of his flashbacks as in the following words "*They wrapped the mask of herbs from his face*" (ibid: 8). He uses the third person on another time as in the following lines "*he is without Katharine, his hunger wishes to burn down all social rules, all courtesy*" (ibid: 165). The English Patient's past is described by using not only the first and third person but the use of second person is also clear as in the following words, "*Death means you are in the third person*" (ibid: 263). Caravaggio observes the change of different point of views in *The English Patient* in the following words "*He is still amazed at the clarity of discipline in the man, who speaks sometimes in the first person and sometimes in the third person*" (ibid: 262).

These narrative shifts are rapid and abrupt in a manner that undermines the reader's sense of a stable sense of consciousness. It is particularly in relation to *The English Patient* that the concept of the unified self is questioned due to fragmented and disseminated text.

5. Conclusion

Text analysis shows that the fractured and fragmented identities of *The English Patient* are diffused and merged into all sorts of surrounding, fissured and schizoid narratives. Narrative complications of the multiple voices/point of view, shift of tenses and tones, free play of intertext and parody with fluid and nonstable literary generic boundaries lead to the plurality of the subjectivities "*that impose to a state of loss... that unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, and logical assumptions... and brings to a crisis his or her relation with language*" (Butler 2002: 68). The decentered notions regarding subjectivity and textuality show that the identity of different characters as well as text of the English are fragmented, non-stable and shifting and thus, convey no single truth and reality. As in the Terry Eagleton's words "*Not only my meaning indeed but me... since language is something I am made out of ... the whole idea that I am stable, unified entity must also be a fiction*" (ibid: 30). The text analysis finally

reveals that we have no genuine knowledge of our self and our identity, too, is prey to the indeterminacy of language.

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