IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature (IMPACT: IJRHAL)
ISSN (P): 2347-4564; ISSN (E): 2321-8878
Vol. 6, Issue 1, Jan 2017, 119-124

IN THE LAP OF NATURE: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

Remya K

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph's College, Affiliated to the University of Calicut, India

Received: 30 Dec 2017 **Accepted:** 04 Jan 2018 **Published:** 18 Jan 2018

ABSTRACT

Thoroughly backed by the insights from philosophy and other cultural movements initiated by Feminism and Marxism, Ecocriticism, as a literary theory, makes serious interventions in a culture's attitude towards Nature and, in Praxis, aims at creating awareness through the interpretations of cultural artifacts, thus acquiring a political dimension. As stated in The Ecocriticism Reader (1996), Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. In the present day context, set against the bio-social backdrop of exploitation of Nature under the facade of progress and development as a result of science, technology and capitalism, an analysis of the way in which the textual rhetoric codes the practices of ecocide is imperative. Following the premise that literary texts do have embedded in their narratives an ecological vision, the paper titled, "In Love with the Wilderness: An Ecocritical Reading of The English Patient" attempts to explicate the manner in which Michael Ondaatje's novel constitutes, from an ecocritical perspective, a response to the most brutal of all human cultural constructs, war, and its devastating effects on the natural world.

KEYWORDS: *Ecocriticism, Colonialism, Capitalism, Nature/Culture, Othering*

INTRODUCTION

Set against the backdrop of the closing years of the Second World War, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* contests the anthropocentric worldview spurred by colonialism and capitalism at the expense of Nature and the non-human. The text, through its narrative, also poses questions pertaining to issues of nationalism and identity and thus is as intriguing and engaging as any other postcolonial fiction. With its political interventions, the novel demands critical attention, as it serves, not least from an ecocritical perspective, as a critique of the practices of ecocide on the part of the supposedly 'rational' humans who, in their solipsist outlook, invariably fail to notice that "out there is a different world, older and greater and deeper by far than ours" (Abbey 37). Falling in line with the basic premise of ecocriticism that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty xix), the work embodies an ecological vision of the essential interconnectedness between the natural world and that of the humans. Reading the text entails an awareness as regards the violence of humankind and its repercussions as witnessed by the entire ecosphere.

The plot, opting for an unusual narrative strategy in which the past and the present are continually intertwined, unravels two poignant love relationships – of Hana, a Canadian nurse and Kip, an Indian Sikh who is a sapper, and of the Hungarian desert explorer Almasy and Katherine who is the wife of Geoffrey Clifton, Almasy's teammate, at the time of the Second World War. At the outset, Hana, quite unlike her companions who opt for a safer place, chooses to stay behind at the Villa San Girolamo in Italy from where the German troops have retreated, with a patient who is burned beyond

recognition in a plane crash. Soon David Caravaggio, a thief, whose skills are legitimized by the war, and friend of Hana's father, joins the two at the Villa, which becomes, later on, the abode for four with the arrival of Kirpal Singh, the Indian sapper. Caravaggio realises that the patient suffering from burns, who Hana assumes to be English by his manners and speech, is in real the Hungarian desert explorer, Almasy. Caravaggio has been in search of Almasy as he is responsible for the ill-treatment Caravaggio experiences at the hands of the Germans, for the Hungarian has worked as a spy for them and has helped in transporting the spies to Cairo.

Almasy narrates his story under the influence of morphine administered to him by Caravaggio who does it in order to get the missing links in Almasy's life. The fatal accident took place when Almasy tried to transport the dead body of his lover, Katherine Clifton in a plane from the Cave of Swimmers where he had left her three years ago, in a severely injured state as a result of the suicidal plane crash attempted by Geoffrey Clifton after having come to know of the affair between his wife and Almasy. Later, while seeking help for Katherine, Almasy was caught by the British and was held a prisoner for three years. Juxtaposed with the passionate but tragic love affair that bloomed and ended in the desert is the intense relationship in the present, between Hana and Kip, in the Villa. At the end, when the atom bombs are dropped in Japan, Kip, who shares an intimate bond with Hana, Almasy and Caravaggio, becoming conscious of his place and identity, gets frustrated with whiteness and leaves the foreign land forever, and, is much later, seen as a doctor in a distant place, immersed in thoughts of Hana.

In Howarth's words, "the dogma that culture will always master nature has long directed Western progress, inspiring the wars, invasions, and other forms of conquest that have crowded the earth and strained its carrying capacity" (77). Pitted against one of the great destroyers, war, how Nature emerges as the greatest healer in soothing the wounds of the traumatized in the war-related experiences, is of paramount significance in the novel. The natural world, conveniently disavowed in an anthropocentric point of view, comes across as too powerful a presence to be ignored in the metaphor of the Villa San Girolamo where the characters come and reside together. While living in harmony with nature, all wounds are duly, even if momentarily, erased/forgotten as individuals slowly and steadily resurrect their lives amidst the lurking danger as "the Germans retreated burying and installing mines as they went" (*The English Patient* 31). Nevertheless, in the healing process, landscape plays a major role and it is overtly symptomatic of human kinship with Nature.

The text vividly picturizes the Villa San Girolamo where Hana decides to stay back with the English patient, to whom she reads passages from books, which

... had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night.

The villa that she and the Englishman inhabited now was much like that. Some rooms could not be entered because of rubble. One bomb crater allowed moon and rain into the library downstairs – where there was in one corner a permanently soaked armchair. (7 – 8)

Such a powerful natural imagery used as an analogy focuses on the villa, which, with its ambience including a "bombed-out orchard" where Hana does gardening, comes across as a powerful signifier of human interference. Simultaneously, with the wounds like large holes caused by mortar-shell attack, it acts as a metaphor for a return to nature, reconnecting the man-made structure, the doors of which opened into the landscape, with "the habits of weather, evening stars [and] the sound of birds" (14, 12).

The inhabitants of the villa come under the influence of their physical environment, for "there seemed little demarcation between house and landscape" (45). Hana, who has been restless after the cold months of war during which she witnesses gruesome sights as a nurse, prefers to be nomadic in the house and lives like a vagrant, working in the garden and orchard, longing for air that smelled nothing of human. Meanwhile, the English patient, despite the severity of his burns, reposes like a king in the Villa and both strike a chord with each other sharing an emotional bond. Caravaggio, too, whose thumbs are chopped off by the Germans, is no different from others in his attitude towards nature. On his arrival after a long journey, completely devastated after the prolonged stay in a Roman hospital, he pushes open all the windows in the room in the villa in order to listen to the noises of the night and simply lets himself bask in its glory as "the moon is on him like skin, a sheaf of water" (33). In no less time, Caravaggio feels rejuvenated and is in his elements.

A villa romance blooms with the arrival of the Indian Sikh sapper, Kirpal Singh aka Kip who comes to the villa on hearing the piano music played by Hana as there runs always the risk of the Germans hiding bombs inside the musical instruments at the time of their retreat. He soon sets up a tent in the garden, collects rainwater and soon is in harmony with the premises that he chooses the parapets that overlook the valley, to sleep at night, crawling into his tent only if it rains. However, it is in the presence of the sapper and his activities as a bomb defuser that the villa landscape acquires terrifying dimensions as the foregrounding of the scarred trees in the half-bombed gardens of the villa takes place, serving as an effective reminder of the remnants of war.

The landscape around him is just a temporary thing, there is no permanence to it. He simply acknowledges the possibility of rain, a certain odour from a shrub. As if his mind, even when unused, is radar, his eyes locating the choreography of inanimate objects for the quarter-mile around him, which is the killing radius of small arms. He studies the two onions he has pulled out of the earth with care, aware that gardens too have been mined by retreating armies. (93)

Even amidst his hectic and tiring schedule of spotting the hidden mines and bombs, Kip, quite unusual for sappers like him who kept to themselves for the most part, becomes content with the small group in the villa, as the period "is like a holiday for him after the war of mud and rivers and bridges" (79). During Kip's sojourn at the villa he becomes friends with the English patient, strikes a romantic relationship with Hana and even influences Caravaggio as he ends up saving the latter's life by dismantling a bomb.

The Villa San Girolamo presents in itself a site where the temporal and spatial constraints are no longer valid, and which transcends the barriers of race, class, nation and gender. The textual rhetoric does succeed in assigning the landscape a uniqueness as "the land retains an identity of its own, still deeper and more subtle than we know" (Lopez 204). Through the foregrounding of landscapes as characters in themselves invested with the power of agency, the text contests the dichotomy of nature versus culture – the binary that subsumed the difference/diversity of nature and its power through the cultural constructs of humanity. It constitutes an ethical response to the ecological imperialism that unnecessarily endows humans with a vantage position in the entire ecosphere. As Christopher Manes has succinctly put it,

... we require a viable environmental ethics to confront the silence of nature... for it is within this vast, eerie silence that surrounds our garrulous human subjectivity that an ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished, producing the ecological crisis that now requires the search for an environmental counterethics. (16)

The natural world in the text creates a definitive impact on the traumatised psyche of the war victims, "the four of them... flung ironically against this war" (296), and helps them in reconstituting themselves.

In Almasy's narrative, the desert and Cave of Swimmers emerge as potential sites for ecocritical (re)negotiations, embodying a prophetic ecological vision that is in line with a holistic approach towards the ecosphere of which humans form a part. It is the wilderness of the desert that catches one's attention – wilderness, which "holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth" (Garrard 59) and which has been reduced to "one of the theatres of war" (143). The Libyan Desert landscape, for Almasy, turns out to be an ideal getaway, far from the world of civilization. What Cronon says in connection with wilderness becomes true in Almasy's case: "Wilderness... is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves, we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives" (80). During the period of desert expedition, Almasy learns to defy the concept of nation. In his words, "there were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I've met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African – all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states". Desert, in the end, becomes the place of faith that cannot be "claimed or owned" (147). The narrative thus foregrounds the vain human attempts to reduce landscape to a material entity of immense use to humanity alone.

Desert expedition, with its mapping and exploring, is an instance of the imperialist practice of environmental dominance, against which Almasy's narrative constitutes a polemical attack. Culture versus nature dichotomy that underpins colonial dualistic thinking comes forth in the geographic practice of altering, converting spaces into places, using the strategy of naming those after the explorers - Almasy counters this attitude that reflects Western hegemony:

The places water came to and touched...Ain, Bir, Wadi, Fogara, Khottara, Shaduf. I didn't want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert.

Still, some wanted their mark there.... Fene-lon-Barnes wanted the fossil trees he discovered to bear his name.... But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time the war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation. (148)

From a postcolonial perspective, Almasy inhabits the most powerful liminal site of resistance, the transnational space that defies and transcends humanly constructed borders and barriers. Almasy epitomises those who believe in cartography marked by nature, whose desire solely consists in "walking upon such an earth that had no maps" (277).

A beautiful natural imagery combining history and textuality that throws light on Almasy's desire and longing for belonging in Nature, sums up the text's anticolonial as well as ecocritical stance:

My great desire was to remain there, among those acacias. I was not walking in a place where no one had walked before, but in a place where there were sudden, brief populations over the centuries – a fourteenth century army, a Tebu caravan, the Senussi raiders of 1915. And in between these times – nothing was there. When no rain fell the acacias withered, the wadis dried out... until water suddenly reappeared....

The ends of earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against.... (150)

Incidentally, into Almasy's dried out life, enters Katherine, kindling his passion. Such images, which connect humanity and Nature, make the text fall in line with the basic premise of deep ecology that upholds a monastic ideal.

The Cave of Swimmers, with its rock paintings – giraffe, cattle and humans – highly suggestive of the holiness of Nature that the text hints at throughout the narrative, reinforces the supposition. Exemplifying human communion with the natural world, the Cave becomes yet another textual site where nature intersects culture. Katherine breathes her last inside

the cave and her serene death in the privacy of the cave, where Almasy would have preferred to die, is in sharp contrast with the death of Madox, Almasy's companion, who shoots himself in the precincts of a church, upon hearing an impassioned, jingoistic sermon in support of the war: "It is important to die in holy places. That was one of the secrets of the desert. So Madox walked into a church in Somerset, a place he felt had lost its holiness, and he committed what he believed was a holy act" (276-77). The text juxtaposes church, a human cultural construct, to which norms and values ascribe sanctity and sacredness, with the Cave that embodies the spirit of the natural world in its essence, and leaves the readers to judge for them which is truly holy.

Nature imagery that abounds in the novel is distinctly evocative of the human kinship with nature. Caravaggio's eyes are referred to as "faultless, clear as any river, unimpeachable as a landscape" (41). Hana, as time passes by in the villa, comes to know of every shrub and bush in her path, and becomes more content and comfortable that she begins to feel displaced out of Canada, her native place. Whenever alone, Hana sits, "aware of her ankle, damp from the long grasses of the orchard" and "tries to imagine who might come along the old road under the green hood of the eighteen cypress trees" (47). To Hana, Kip "was the brownness of a rock, the brownness of a muddy storm-fed river" while "he sees a fragment of her lean cheek in relation to the landscape behind it" (111, 230). Interestingly, the Englishman reminds Kip "of a fir tree... it's the one sick branch, too weighted down with age, held up by a crutch made out of another tree" (231). Some images are too poignant to be overlooked as those convey the damaging change war begets on the natural habitat. For instance, Lord Suffolk, Kip's tutor, mentions on one occasion about the migration of robins from the war zones of Europe. Moreover, the metaphor of thunder and lightning at the Villa forebodes a massive destruction to come in the near future in the form of the atom bomb that serves as a powerful reminder of continuing human interference in Nature, quite ironically in the name of civilization and progress.

On hearing the news of atomic bombs being dropped on Japan by the US, Kip goes berserk and confronts the English patient, who Kip takes as a representative of the Western powers. Overwhelmed by love and care – feelings consequent upon his living in sync with the natural world, unable to do any harm to Almasy, Kip leaves the place. During the bike journey that Kip undertakes, leaving behind all his weapons/instruments, Kip, braving sun and rain, crosses several cities, towns and villages – all made similar by war. Eventually, he plunges into a river, which triggers his release from whatever was machined and mortal, and as "[his] bare head comes out of the water... he gasps in all the air above the river," giving him a fresh lease of life. Back in the villa, Caravaggio and Hana feel and experience the rain in its freshness and soak it up, while the English patient silently awaits his doom in the darkness of the room, for to him "now the world is without sound, and even light seems an unneeded thing" (315, 316). At the end of the novel, the garden image resurfaces as it is the garden his wife has nurtured far away in an Indian city that kindles in Kip the fond memories of the days he shared with Hana, Caravaggio and the English patient in the north of Florence in the Villa San Girolamo – a time which made him and others realise their intimate bond with Nature.

The text thus contests the age-old binary of nature versus culture that strengthened in the wake of two major movements – colonialism and capitalism - with which human civilization constructed an anthropocentric worldview at the expense of Nature and the non- human. In the wake of the enormity of the ecocidal practices that the world witnesses today, one cannot but vouch for what Sueellen Campbell has advocated in "The Land and Language of Desire": " [as] even the smallest human interference can cause massive destruction, then the only way to keep something important is to preserve it" (131). Though with the advent of post structuralism, the rooted binaries are being deconstructed textually,

exposing their linguistically constructed nature, when it comes to Nature and the non-human, linguistic reductionism proves to be rather ineffective as Ecocriticism as a discourse has proved time and again through its call for praxis, for only in the conservation of the natural world lies the key to survival.

REFERENCES

1. *Abbey, Edward. Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness. New York: McGraw Hill, 1968. Print.*
2. *Campbell, Sueellen. "The Land and Language of Desire : Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism Meet ". The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996. 124-136. Print*
3. *Cronon, W, ed. Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature. London: Norton, 1996. Print.*
4. *Garrard, Greg. Ecocriticism. London: Routledge, 2004. Print. the New Critical Idiom.*
5. *Sandeep Kaur, Resisting Internal Colonialism: A Critical Study of Maria Campbell's Halfbreed, International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL), Volume 5, Issue 4, July-August 2015, pp. 55-64*
6. *Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm, eds. The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996. Print.*
7. *Howarth, William. "Some Principles of Ecocriticism". The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996. 69 – 91. Print.*
8. *Lopez, Barry. Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape. New York: Bantem, 1987. Print.*
9. *Manes, Christopher. "Nature and Silence". The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996. 15 – 29. Print.*
10. *Ondaatje, Michael. The English Patient. London: Bloomsbury, 1992. Print.*