

## **Contemporary Literature**

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Good morning, we continue with the reading of the English patient, the 1992 Booker prize winning novel by Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan Canadian novelist. So, the keywords in today's lectures would be exile, the constructs of memory and nostalgia, loss and death, identity or the loss of identity or what makes for an identity, nation and what is a nation, what are the boundaries that define or redefine us and of course, the body. Bodies are an integral feature of the English patient as we were seeing last time, it is about a man who lost his body where and he is in a place where there are people representing all kinds of nations, all kinds of identities and all of them have their bodies. So, we have Kip's dark body, we have Hannah's slender body and the English patient's burnt body. So, the construct of memory as we were talking about, so Count Almásy or the English patient, his memory transports him back to the pre-war Sahara desert. Here he is burnt and he fell off a burning aircraft, a damaged aircraft while he was trying to escape with his, not exactly escape, but when he was in the plane along with his married lover Catherine and her jealous husband Geoffrey Clifton and we are told that Geoffrey Clifton because of his jealous rages, he caused the plane to meet with an accident and he wants to crash the plane and wants to kill all three of them and when Almásy when after the crash, Geoffrey Clifton dies instantly, Catherine will see what happens to her and Almásy is badly burnt.

So, now he finds himself in the secluded villa in Italy in Tuscany, Villa San Girolamo and now his memory transports him back to the pre-war Sahara desert where he was working on a map making expedition in North Africa. So, Ondaatje does employ maps, geography, cartography as metaphors for people. Map making is all about representing or defining territories on the basis of their boundaries, but here we find that how people are defined, how people can be read as we read a map or as a territory and whether those territories are genuine or not genuine. So, the maps given in the novel, they also help us to explore and comprehend or to map the complex, the complexities of people we love, the relationships we have.

As he lays there in a very nostalgic mode, in a very reminiscing frame of mind, he starts

narrating his story to Hannah, the French Canadian nurse and Almasi reveals how his life was disrupted when an English couple, Geoffrey and Catherine, they arrive from England and join the expedition. You see, Geoffrey comes from an extremely aristocratic family. He owns a plane and he just got married a week before. He learns something about from his circle of friends that an expedition is happening in the Gilf Kabir and there is a group of cartographers who are doing some sort of expedition in search of a place called the Zarzura and he is intrigued. Geoffrey Clifton himself is a seasoned geologist and he wants to know what is happening and he comes there and he is joined with his wife.

So, through a series of events and primarily while reading from ancient classics, Almasi and Catherine fall in love and this is an emotion that happens very secretly. I mean that unfolds very gradually and everything is kept secret from Geoffrey, her husband. So, I will read you the passage when they first discover each other through books. I am on page 44. In that desert, she dragged her university days into her midst to describe the stars, the way Adam tenderly taught a woman with gracious metaphors and she reads him a poem and this is what Almasi says.

That night, I fell in love with her voice, only a voice. I wanted to hear nothing more. I got up and walked away. She was a willow. So, again look at the way Catherine's body is described.

So, as we were talking about the English patient is also exploration of territories, mapping out boundaries and also understanding bodies. So, Catherine's body becomes is compared to a willow. What would she be like in winter at my age? I see her still always with the eye of Adam, the first man falling in love with the first woman. She had been these awkward limbs climbing out of a plane, bending down in our midst to prod at fire, her elbow up and pointed towards me as she drank from a canteen. A few months later, she waltz with me as we danced as a group in Cairo.

Though slightly drunk, she wore an unconquerable face. Even now, the face I believe that most revealed her was the one she had that time when we were both half drunk, not lovers. So, this love affair which happens very secretly in Cairo in 1938, it causes an irreparable damage to their own lives and to also to the lives of others around them. So, years later, when he recalls how he fell in love with Catherine, it is with a sense of exhilaration and also with a sense of regret. So, love also is tinged with some bitter emotions.

The romance blooms when Catherine narrates the story of the ancient story of Candelus and Giges from Herodotus histories. And Herodotus history is sort of forms a late motive throughout the novel. Everything is an important symbol, an important motive and

Herodotus history is connects the novel, the major themes of the novel. So, I will take you to page 16 where we are told that the only thing that the English patient could save or salvage from the plane crash was his copy, his worn out old copy of histories by Herodotus. And this is what he Hannah says, I mean, Hannah looks at the book.

She picks up the notebook that lies on the small table beside his bed. 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 writing in his own observations. So, they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus. So, you see Herodotus' text or histories is not just Herodotus, it belongs to everyone, to everybody. So, it is not just the text that was actually written by Herodotus, but it is also the cutting and gluing and all the pasting that that almsy has done.

So, he has given a totally new form to the histories. He has added his personal histories. —the idea what is history. you have Herodotus' history and you have the English patient's history running side by side, running parallel to each other. he has added to, he has cut and glued in pages from other books or writing in his own observations.

histories is not, no longer the histories, the way it was intended to be. It is reshaped, remodeled and redefined book which exists in Hannah's or in almsy's hands. So, the reference to Candelos and Zeges from histories is that King Candelos who is a very powerful king, he plots his wife's beauty and desirability to his favorite spearmen Zeges and he pursuits her to him, sorry, to look at his wife's naked body. So, at night when she is in bed, Zeges creeps in and watches her as she sleeps unaware of his presence in the room. Later when she discovers and realizes that she has been washed in this state, the queen is furious and she asks Zeges to kill her husband and assume the throne as well as her.

So, this is the story that runs parallel to the story of the Clifton's and almsy's. So, the love triangle, so it, their love triangle, their love story sort of recaptures the fears and bitter emotions of jealousy and revenge and betrayal and as well as the tragic passions. So, in the story of almsy and Catherine, we find the retelling of this story of Candelos and Zeges and the queen. enraged by jealousy now, Clifton now plans revenge, a triple suicide, a triple murder comes suicide and he asks them to come and aboard a plane and while they are flying, he attempts to or he actually crashes the plane. The idea is to kill everyone that is on the plane.

His suicide and the murder of these two people who have betrayed him. Now, reading occurs throughout the novel in various forms and capacities. Hannah reads to almsy to connect with him and to try to make him interested in the present life. We are told at the beginning that they are reading except from the last of the Mohicans and several times

there are certain pages missing. The last of the Mohicans is also about exploration and conquest of the frontier and it is also a love story.

It is also a thrilling adventurous tale written by James Fennimore Cooper, one of the first major American novels. So, Hannah reads to Almasy from the last of the Mohicans. She reads voraciously to learn all she can about Cairo and the desert and Almasy consistently reads from Herodotus' histories. Now, in each of these instances of readings, the characters use books to inform their own lives and to connect to another place or time. As we have seen in the section on King Candles and Vigees, every story is connected to the lives of the characters.

There is some kind of a metaphor. ; reading thus becomes a metaphor for reading beyond oneself to connect with other people. ; coming back to the plot, Clifton dies in the crash leaving a severely wounded Catherine and Almasy behind and they reunite after three years in the cave of swimmers. ; a lot of time has passed between the accident and when the incident takes place in the cave of swimmers. ; when Almasy tries to fly out with Catherine in an old buried plane, the plane meets with an accident and that is the accident that brings him now back to this place that brings him to Villa San Girolamo.

; the plane is soon on fire. Catherine dies and Almasy is left severely damaged and burnt. Now, what we feel is that when he falls in the desert, he is found by a group of tribals, the Bedouins in the desert and they mask his face with oasis reeds and smother his body with ointments to reduce his pain. A healer burns the bones, the grounded bones of peacock. It is believed that is the best kind of healing treatment for any skin damage.

So, into his charred skin, the grounded bones of peacock are applied. So, people take care of him and he is carried from one place to another. For example, they leave him at a British base at the edge of the Libyan deserts and then he travels across the land and finally, ends up in this particular Villa with Hannah. So, now we find some kind of an affectionate bond, a very tender love story that develops between the emotionally ravaged Hannah and the physically beaten, damaged English patient and this is also because both of them are left alone in a world that has gone completely crazy, completely alright. They have no one else to turn to.

So, both damaged people, both these emotionally burnt and physically worn out people define solace in each other's company and therefore, Hannah's decision to take care of only one patient throughout her life and that is going to be the English patient. ~~So~~, therefore, her decision to stay back as the rest of the military troop, as rest of the hospital personnel, they decide to leave the place and go to a safer place, but she chooses to stay back and take care of just one patient. We are told about Hannah that as a nurse in a

hospital during the Second World War, she has learnt to repress her needs as well as her sorrows. See, she has been through enough. She has seen death all around her, the death of soldiers.

She has also come through the death of her own father and the death of her own unborn child. She is an unwed mother. There has been someone and her fiancé died in the war as well and the child also died. So, she wants to connect the external with the internal. She is striving to minimize her worldly possessions.

So, all she possesses is a pair of tennis shoes. That is all she cares about because that gives her the freedom to walk about and also interesting, something interesting is that she uses the same name buddy to refer to everyone. So, she is not interested in names so much like the English patient who refuses to tell people his actual name. So, she Hannah also uses the word buddy for everyone. In the villa, she refuses to move out with the rest of the hospital staff and spends her time in nursing him, nursing the English patient.

It is at the villa that we encounter two more characters, one Kip, the Indian Sikh, the army man and Caravaggio, the spy who has a history of knowing of who has some knowledge of Hannah. He knows about Hannah. So, while Caravaggio is in hospital, he is also a damaged person. He is also recovering for something and what is it we will soon see. So, when he hears about Hannah, he decides to join her in the villa and Kip's story is that following the atomic bomb disaster of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he tries to abandon the villa and reenter Indian culture and life, but that is what is going to happen to him later, but this is not what he is right now.

Right now, we find all a big mix of characters, a model of different characters from different nations and different identities. They are all living together. In last class, we were talking about the concept of names, how important names are in the English patient. I will take you to page 20 where the English patient, when he is being cared for by the Bedouins, the tribes in the desert, people realize that he has a distinctive skill. He knows every nook and cranny of the desert, everything that relates to war.

He is an expert map maker. So, the tribals try to make use of this skill. this is what they do to him. He leans towards and touches something with a purpose. His arm is still held, his palm facing down and open. He touches the stand barrel and the hand lets go of him.

A pause among the voices, he was there to translate the guns. ~~So~~, now what is his job? He has to touch guns and to identify the make of the guns and this is what he says. 12 millimeters Breda machine gun from Italy. So, he knows the name, he knows the nationality.

This is the gun. He pulled back the bolt, inserted his finger to find no bullet, pushed it back and pulled the trigger. Famous gun, he muttered. He was moved forward again. So, the tribes are, the tribals are impressed. They want him to identify or name another gun.

French 7.5 millimeter shutter law, light machine gun 1924. So, this is also, this is correct. Now, German 7.9 millimeter MG 15 air service. So, this is the way he becomes of great use to the tribals.

He was brought to each of the guns. The weapons seem to be from different time periods and from many countries, a museum in the desert. He brushed the contours of the stock and magazine or finger the sight. He spoke out the guns name and was carried to another gun. Eight weapons formally handed to him. He called the names out loud, speaking in French and then the tribes own language, but what did that matter to them? Perhaps they needed not the name, but to know that he knew what the gun was.

He was held by the wrist again and his hand sunk into a box of cartridges and this is what he feels that he was, the tribes wanted to know the names as well as whether he knew the names. So, that is important. Information is important. There are villages he will travel into with them where there are no women. His knowledge is passed like a counter of usefulness from tribe to tribe.

Tribes representing 8000 individuals. He enters specific customs and specific music, mostly blindfolded. He hears the water drawing songs of the Mezzina tribe with their exultations. Dahiya dances, pipe flutes which are used for carrying messages in times of emergency. The macaroon double pipe, one pipe constantly sounding a drone then into the territory of five string lairs, a village or oasis of preludes and interludes, hand clapping, antiphonal dance. So, this is a world which has its customs, its cultures, its very distinctive rituals and he knows them all.

Now, what does it call him? A fully named world. Now, with his face blindfolded in a mask of grass fibers, remember he is being treated and there is this mask of reeds applied on his face. He picked up a shell and moved with his carriers guiding them towards the gun, inserted a bullet, bolted it and holding it up in the air, fired. The noise cracking crazily down the canyon walls for echo is the soul of the voice exciting itself in hollow places. So, a fully named world.

How important names are in this place. ; winds have names, tribes have names, every ritual has a name, guns have names and the English patient seems to know everything.

In the desert, you celebrate nothing but water. So, all they want in spite of his phenomenal knowledge is water because in the desert, water is the most precious commodity. Oasis is the part that is celebrated and all this he is recalling and he is telling to Hana. She stands over the sink gripping it, looking at the sticker wall.

She has removed all mirrors and has stacked them away in an empty room. She grips the sink and moves her head from side to side releasing a movement of shadow. He wets her hands and combs water into her hair till it is completely wet. This cools her and she likes it when she goes outside and the breezes hit her erasing the thunder.

; this is Hana. She has made her life minimal. She listens to the stories of the English patient who is so, we all know that he is going to die. He is established from the outset. A man this severely burnt, he has very few days to live. So, what Hana is trying to do is, she is in his condition, in his damaged condition, she sees a reflection of her own life and the only way to survive this world is to minimize one's requirements, one's material possessions and needs. Now, I will take you to the intricacies of the narrative in the English patient.

, the most fundamental element of narrative representation is one is a story plot and narrative. These are the terms that we normally use story plot and narrative. So, the analysis of these elements, they go back to the Russian formulas especially to the works of Victor Schluckowski who distinguishes between the terms, two terms, fabula and suge. Now, according to Schluckowski, fabula is the raw material of a story and suge the way a story is organized. So, raw material is fabula, suge is the way a narrator organizes a story.

It is important to acknowledge that these influential terms are usually translated in works by anglophone narratologist as a story and discourse. what we understand as a story and discourse are fabula and suge, although they are sometimes translated as a story and plot. So, this is what Gernot says. On the other hand, he relies, Gernot relies on the French term recie, that is narrative and discourse. this is to distinguish between the events of a narrative and how these events are arranged by the devices and figures of narrative.

it might be said that story comprises all the events that take place in a narrative. Plot comprises the underlying causality that binds these events together and demands that some events be narrated and not others. A narrative is how all these events with underlying causality are narrated. you see there is a difference between fabula, between story, plot, narrative and syuzhet while the fabula of the novel can be encapsulated in a few paragraphs, you see this is the story, the basic outline, this is the story.

The syuzhet or the way it is organized and told, *suzhe* is something that problematizes the story and hence enhances the pleasure of the story. So, two important terms, *fabula* and *suzhe*. *Fabula*, it can be encapsulated, this is the bare story, the outline story, the way the narrative is told. *Syuzhet* is the way a narrative unfolds or unravels itself. So, how can a narrative unfold itself? How is a *suzhe* constructed? So, the effect of a *syuzhet* is achieved through the unique use of the language.

It can challenge the traditional construction of plot construction. It can employ constant shifts in points of view. It can employ implosion of time and transcend special barriers. So, you see a lot happens when we look or when we detail the *suzhe* of a story. Story of the English patient is bare minimum. What happens during the Second World War? There was a man, Count Almásy, who would not easily give away his name.

He had an affair with a married woman and later the affair leads to certain disastrous consequences. At the same time, you have because the story said during the Second World War, you have a soldier, an Indian soldier, Kripal Singh or Kip as he likes to be referred to referred as and we have Caravaggio, a spy and we have Hannah. All these people, this disparate group of people, they come together and it is their story. So, that is all the story has, but how the story is unraveled? That is what we find in plot construction or in the construction of the narrative or better known as the *suzhe* of the novel.

So, *syuzhet* employs implosion of time. It involves transcendent in the special boundaries. So, the story of the English patient, although most of the stories focused on villas and *viralmó*, much of the plot also takes place outside the villa. So, you have, we have the deserts of Cairo, we have some references to England and Canada and also to India. So, it is not just one place that the narrative is focused on or is centered on.

Implosion of time, the narrative moves back and forth in time. There are lots of flashbacks and flash forwards and also multiple points of view. This is one of the most important characteristic of the English patient, the multiple points of view. The story is told through the points of view of different characters. It is not one single point of view as we saw recently in the remains of the day.

The entire story is unfolded through the eyes of the butler Mr. Stevens, but not here. Every person has his own or her own story to tell and a way of looking at things. So, the manner in which Ondaatje recalls Almásy's attempts to obscure his identity, what would he do? He bought paled down cigarette papers and glued them into sections of the histories that recorded wars that were of no interest to him, glued into the book, giving

him only the voice of the watcher, the listener, the he. So, the way Al-Masih distances himself from himself, it is not that he is trying to achieve for a disconnect from others.

He is also aiming for a disconnect from his own self. I will take you to page 172 where this effect is achieved. He bought paled brown cigarette papers and glued them into sections of the histories. It is on page 172 that recorded wars that were of no interest to him. He wrote down all her arguments against him, glued into the book, giving himself only the voice of the watcher, the listener, the he.

So, he is no longer Almasy. He has separated himself from himself. During the last days before the war, he had gone for a last time to the Gilf Kabir to clear out the base camp. Her husband was supposed to pick her up. The husband they had both loved until they began to love each other. Another aspect of the future of the English patient is the way Michael Ondaatje deliberately creates gaps and indeterminacies.

There are several gaps. Even the villa San Girolamo is full of gaps. We are told at the very beginning that the villa has in certain rooms an entire wall is missing. In certain rooms, the ceiling is missing because of the frequent bombings. There are gaps in the construction of the, there are gaps in the body of the villa which parallel the gaps in the personality of the dramatist personae. Everyone has certain lapses which are these gaps are never filled and that all these things which are not told to us, not revealed to us, they add to the unlimited pleasure of reading of the English patient.

So, the narrative is full of gaps and indeterminacies. Even the idea that the English patient's name is not revealed to us for a long time, this is also a kind of gap. We are never told what happens to Almasy's between 1939 and 1942 and there are gaps that parallel Almasi's stories and the stories that Hannah reads to him and we look at those stories. So, on page 7, for example, I will just give you an instance the gaps that the stories have and the gaps in Almasy's own stories. So, the books for the Englishman as she listened intent as he listened intently or not had gaps of plots 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 and also look at the irony implicit the Englishman is not actually an Englishman.

Some rooms could not be entered because of the rubble. One bomb crater allowed moon and rain into the library downstairs where there was in one corner a permanently soaked armchair. She was not concerned about the Englishman as far as the gaps in plot were concerned. She gave no summary of the missing chapters. She simply brought out the book and said page 96 or page 111. So, while you are looking at reading as an

aesthetic in the English patient, this is a very good example.

She would just take him. She would take him on a journey of reading a book. She would read him aloud, but if there were it is an old villa and some of the books are damaged, badly damaged. There are several pages missing, but she never bothers to give him the details or the summaries of the things of the incidents missing. If a page is missing, so from page 96, she would take him to page 111. Whatever happened in between is not important and that is what Michael Ondaatje is also doing to us.

Whatever happens is not important and we need not be told. There are gaps and indeterminacies. What happened to Almasi after the plane crash and by the time he read the cave of swimmers, we never know what happened during all these three years. That was the only locator. She lifted both of his hands to her face and smelled them.

The odor of sickness is still in them. From here, I will introduce you to another character. We have been talking about Caravaggio for a long time. Now, Caravaggio is an old friend of Hannah and her family. He is a friend of Hannah's late father and when he hears about Hannah's existence in a remote villa, he is intrigued and he wants to join her. This chapter is called In Near Ruins chapter 2 and this is how it begins.

The man with bandaged hands. Now, look at the parallel between the way Caravaggio is introduced and between the way Hannah is introduced at the beginning of the novel. So, we were talking about how she is constantly referred to by using a pronoun she or her and there is a similar technique employed by Ondaatje here also while he introduces Caravaggio to us. So, he is the man with bandaged hands. So, again look at the broken body, the damaged body. Had been in the military hospital in Rome for more than 4 months when by accident he heard about the burned patient and the nurse heard her name.

So, we are not told the name of this. It is not like we are told that he heard Hannah's name. We are told her name, the French nurse. He turned from the doorway and walked back into the clutch of doctors. He had just passed to discover where she was. He had been recuperating there for a long time and they knew him as an evasive man.

Now, again there are gaps, there are indeterminacies about this man. This man liked the English patient. He does not like talking about himself. He is another very reclusive and an elusive man. He does not like to be talked about, but now he spoke to them asking about the name and startle them. So, first time he makes an enquiry and what is that enquiry about the name of these people, but during all that time he had never spoken.

Communicating by signals and grimaces now and then a grin. He had revealed nothing, not even his name. The doctor had just wrote out his serial number which showed he was with the allies. His status had been double checked and confirmed in messages from London.

There was the cluster of known scars on him. So, the doctors had come back to him. So, look at the way his identity is formed. It is not just he does not give away his name, but he gives his number and that number tells the doctors that he is not a German. He is on the friendly side. His identity is double checked and the information that comes back is that he is a man whose body bears a cluster of scars and these scars are not just physical. There are also lot of psychological scars which no one can see, but for the sake of identification he has his number and he has his scars to be identified with and that is what you find here.

So, the doctors had come back to him, nodded at the bandages on him. A celebrity after all wanting silence, a war hero. So, he is a war hero, a celebrity, a famous person, a person who is admired by the people there and everyone is just proud to have him around. That was how he felt safest revealing nothing whether they came at him with tenderness or subterfuges or knives.

For more than four months, he had not said a word. So, an elusive man. This also adds to the charm or to the pleasure of reading the English patient. Why does not this man reveal anything about himself? After all, he is among a group of friends, but he does not talk about himself at all. He was a large animal in their presence in near ruins when he was brought in and given regular doses of morphine for the pain in his hands. So, look at the way his story parallels that of the English patients.

Both of them are given morphine to ease the pain and they although they belong to different size. So, the question that then arises is what makes for a boundary when both are equally wounded, both are equally elusive, both are hesitant to reveal their national identities as well as their names even. Both men are severely damaged and they are given a specific kind of morphine to ease the pain, but still they are very different by virtue of several things. He would sit in an armchair in the darkness watching the tide of movement among patients and nurses in and out of the wards and stock rooms. So, again gaps in the English patient defined by the namelessness of the characters, the lack of identities of specific identities of the characters and also in the and which is parallel to everything around them. This confusion about identities, the blurring of identities is the recurring motive, a recurring theme in the English patient which runs through the entire novel.

Look at the way again how the villa is described. She and the English patient, I am on page thirteen, she and the English man had insisted on remaining behind when the other nurses and patients moved to a safer location in the south. During this time, they were very cold without electricity. Some rooms faced on to the valley with no walls at all. She would open a door and see just a sudden bed huddled against a corner covered with leaves.

Doors opened into landscape. Some rooms had become an open aviary. The staircase had lost its lower steps during the fire that was set before the soldiers left. She had gone into the library, removed twenty books and nailed them to that floor and then on to each other in this way rebuilding the two lowest steps. Most of the chairs had been used for fires. The armchair in the library was left there because it was always wet, drenched by evening storms that came in through the mortar hole.

Whatever was wet escaped burning during that April of 1945. So, gaps all around, destruction all around and how these people, this group of people, they survive amidst all the destruction. That is what the English patient is all about. So, all these gaps and indeterminacies, they are used as a literary technique. They enhance the literary pleasure of the story.

They also lead to plenty of intertextualities and creation of pastiche in the novel. When you were doing the class on postmodernism, we looked at what is intertextuality and pastiches. These gaps and indeterminacies lead to that aspect of a postmodernist novel, story writing or storytelling as well. We have deliberate exclusions and interruptions as well as disruptions. We have the splits and the shifting points of view and everything serves to create a very polyphonic narrative and which in turn enhances the merit of the English patient. What on that is seems to be asking us, can there ever be a totalized meaning which is a very significant aspect of all postmodern fiction? Can there ever be a totalized meaning because everyone and everything around us has gaps and indeterminacies and certain loose ends.

So, the entire notion of a fixed stable meaning is interrogated here. So, the plot of the novel with all its gaps and holes and indeterminacies actually points to the fact that one can never achieve or aim for arriving at a totalized meaning, a completely stable meaning. So, the English patient as a novel addresses all these issues and although it attempts to fill gaps, at the same time it also recognizes that there are certain gaps which can never be filled and this leads to the excitement of reading a postmodern novel like the English Patient. So, we will continue. Thank you very much.