

A Thematic Analysis of Michael Ondaatje's the English Patient

Riyaj Hussain, Research Scholar, Department of English, Rajiv Gandhi University

Article Received: 03/05/2022, Article Accepted: 23/05/2022, Published online: 27/05/2022

DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.2.36

Abstract

There are several fascinating novels in the oeuvre of Michelle Ondaatje. The English Patient is one among them. Published in 1992, it has multifarious themes in its construction. The paper attempts to explore all such themes embedded in the novel, to give a new insight into its interpretation. The novel The English Patient explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual devastation wrought by war. Through the memories as well as experiences of a wide variety of characters, the novel depicts graphically the unimaginable horror of war. Set in a small villa named San Giroloma in post-war Italy, the novel encompasses themes such as love, war, and healing, themes which may be related to all peoples of the world.

Keywords: The English Patient, devastation, love, war, memories, healing.

Introduction

In common parlance, a theme refers to the main topic of a text. For instance, the mechanization of human beings is the predominant theme of Charles Dicken's Hard Times; resistance, greed for power, and fame are the themes of Megha Mazumdar's A Burning. The theme usually reflects large existential concepts.

Themes are usually defined as the wide range of ideas and beliefs that the writers express in their texts including poetry, novels, and dramas. Ondaatje's novel The English Patient contains such unique themes, but they remain discomfoting due to its depiction of graphic violence. Some of the principal themes of the novel are analyzed below-
Childhood

Childhood is one of the major themes of the novel, The English Patient. The novel throws light on the dark aspects of war and the impact that it has had on the people, especially on children. Hana was introduced in the novel is a twenty-year-old nurse. She is not yet an adult in the true sense. Ondaatje writes:

Hana and the English patient were protected by the simple fact that the Villa seemed a

ruin. But she felt safe here, half adult and half child (Ondaatje, 14).

We have seen that this theme of Childhood and the effects that the war has on children is especially seen in Hana. We see her playing hide-and-seek inside the house. We know that it is a game that is usually associated with children. Besides, there are many instances in the novel where it shows that in her heart she is still an innocent child. It is the war that has forced her to grow up. Hana is an example of how the war forced adult responsibilities on her.

War

Another vital subject matter of the novel is war. War is an awful event. In war, we see human beings wounded, we see human beings winning, we see human beings in agony, and we see human beings being dismembered. So the novel isn't just about the portrayal of the bodily aspects of war but the greater deeper emotional impact that the war has on people. All the major characters in the novel are victims of war who both physically and psychologically suffered to a greater extent. War has devastated their lives in all possible ways. Caravaggio bears physical and psychological scars from his painful experiences of war. The writer also desires to portray the very grim realities of war that it has a lifelong impact on human beings. And through this novel, he's in opposition to the war. Rashmi Gaur comments on the utter and severe devastation due to war in the novel in the following words:

The spirit of war broods over the novel and images of death and devastation

permeates its world. The desolation is clearly present in the surroundings of the villa. We have images of death, diseases and senseless devastation: typhus epidemic breaking out, people bombed inside tunnels and ships freshly mined underwater. (Gaur, 4)

Love

Love is an important theme of this novel. We will come across two love affairs as we go through the novel: Hana and Kip, and Katherine and Almásy. When we look at Hana and Kip's relationship, we see that it is primarily based on circumstance. Because they are the only people in the building who know each other. There are no people to interact with. As a result, it is primarily brought about by circumstance. They leave when the conflict is over. Nothing could have parted them if it had been love in its purest form or the deep affection they had for each other. However, after the war, they go their respective ways.

On the other side, we see a very volatile kind of love affair between Katherine and Almásy. Their love affair is very crucial because it has an impact not just on the two of them. But all the people around them. It arouses jealousy. Knowing that his wife (Catherine) favors another man (Almásy), the husband (Geoffrey) becomes hostile and jealous. So it arouses all those kinds of negative feelings in the husband and it has a profound impact on him to the extent that he attempted to kill himself and his wife. So it has a very negative repercussion on the people around them.

However, their relationship is very profound. They love each other heart and soul. It is described as transcending time. Their love relationship knows no place and no nationalism. Because they are the people belonging from different nations. In the novel, their love affair is important because it is connected with the idea of identity that their love goes beyond the boundary of nationalities. Both the love affairs don't have a happy ending. Their love affair proves to be destructive in the end. Yet they are important because the writer has used the love affairs, especially those of Almasy and Katherine as emblems of the human condition that human life is inevitably marred by catastrophes.

Healing

Healing or renewal is another important theme of the novel *The English Patient*. To forget about the brutal realities of war, Hana begins to read voraciously. The books became half of her world. In one way or the other, the four characters try to rejuvenate themselves. They try to find some solace through all these activities such as reading, playing, etc. Hana reconnects with the world through reading.

The Villa itself is a symbol of rebirth. It is a symbol of renewal and healing this is because the villa has survived the war. The villa, despite its dilapidated conditions, has still managed to exist. It provides a haven for the four characters. It also allows them to rejuvenate themselves within the villa. That is why the villa itself is a symbol of healing or rebirth.

Nikki Singh offers the following description of the Villa:

[t]his Italian building, once a convent is exposed and enclosed –many of its shelled walls and doors from the war open into the landscape. Our four charred victims (psychologically, and even physically as in the case of the English patient), find shelter in the Villa. The fragmented architecture of the Villa expresses their selves, and its open-cum-closeness, the secrets they begin to share with each other. The war breaks their walls too and just as the rooms of the Villa open up to the sky and gardens, their secrets and emotions reach out to one another. As their days pass, their wounds begin to heal. (Nikki, 13)

When we first see all the four characters, they are all emotionally charged and bereft. They arrive at the villa with emotions and memories on their back All of them are physically and emotionally wounded: Hana lost her father in an accident, Caravaggio lost his thumbs, Kip lost his mother and surrogate father, and finally the English patient lost both the love of his life and his body. But gradually as they began to get accustomed to their surroundings, we see that by and by they try to shed off their past. And that is how the villa becomes a symbol of rebirth for them. Healing begins, when they began to forgive themselves. When we look at Hana, we understand that she is a young woman going around with the guilt of people dying at her hands. Because she is a nurse. And many times we see how all these are reflected in her imagination. When they

contemplate the past, we see that they are loaded up with guilt. As the novel progress, we see that they do learn to forgive themselves. And it is only when they learn to forgive the healing process begins. That is the case with Hana. Even the English Patient knows that what he has done with Catherine is not right. He doesn't control the fact that he fell in love with Katherine. But he is guilty of the fact that it leads to the death of her husband. He was also harboring this sense of guilt. If we look at Caravaggio, he is a thief. This means that he has deprived people of their rights. He has been stealing material things. And so for sure being a thief, he must always fill with a sense of guilt. All the major characters have this sense of guilt. They began to heal only then when they learn to forgive themselves.

Memory

Memory is another overarching theme of the novel. Memory is an important stylistic technique that the writer uses in the novel. The memory of the past runs parallel to various other themes in the novel. Memory, or "rememory," is an integral part of *The English Patient*. Ondaatje uses the characters' memories and fragmented remembrances of the past to compose his story. The result is a novel that frequently jumps back and forth across space and time. Memory is a very important part of our life. In other words, we can say that life is an amalgamation of both good and bitter memories. It depends on the individual whether to wipe out the memory or learn from it. The novel is primarily associated with bad memories of the characters. Because it has to do with the war and the

negative side of life. About happy memories nothing much to talk about. But when it comes to bad memories we see that if something bad has happened to an individual, some people try to repress it. They try to keep it at the back of their mind. They don't want to bring back the memories from their past because their memories were so painful for them to reminisce. And that has a more enduring impact on them. Because they don't talk about it and those kinds of repression will have a very bad influence.

Here the writer tries to show the power of human memory. Because the major part of the novel is to do with the memory power. We see that the story unfolds only through the course of their memory. The entire novel is interpreted by some critics as a memory novel. When we talk about the memory the image of dark and light is very crucial. Darkness symbolizes all the negative feelings, all the negative things that happen in the novel. And the light which is sometimes mostly associated with Hana. It is because through the light we mostly associated with children and innocence. So it is symbolic that it is always Hana who draws the curtain to let the light come in. She also switches on the light in the room.

Isolation

The sixth important theme of the novel is isolation. The novel is a chronicle of isolation and loss –a tale of four displaced individuals. All of the characters depicted in the novel are isolated individuals even though they do have a minute to have a conversation among themselves. They are not portrayed as

characters that are very happy. They are not satisfied with the incidents that are happening around them. The sole reason behind the grim situation where they are placed is war. And this sense of isolation is being brought about by war that war not only destroys a person but also destroys a family.

Home

Home is another prominent theme of the novel because war has snatched away the concept of home from all the major characters portrayed in the novel. All the major characters introduced in the novel are displaced individuals and they have an intense yearning to go home.

Nationality

Another important theme of the novel is that of nationality. The writer says that it is good to be nationalistic, it is good to have the spirit of nationalism. But he believes that the spirit of humanism is far better than the spirit of nationalism. Because it goes beyond one's nationality. The nationality of humankind is what Michelle Ondaatje promotes. Four of the major characters belong to different nationalities. When we talk about nationality, the most important figure is that of the English Patient. He is an Algerian but he is thought to be an English man. He is somebody that the writer uses as a symbol who goes beyond identity as well as nationality. He feels that he belongs to all the nations of the world which is far more important. He doesn't believe in the notion of either 'nation' or 'nationality'. He asserts: Gradually we became nation less. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-

states. Madox died because of nations. (Ondaatje, 138)

Here the writer is trying to say that in the name of nationality, people die. Two nations have war because they want to assert their supremacy over one another. So in the name of supremacy, in the name of nation people intakes war and it leads to the loss of life. That is why the writer believes that nations should stop promoting war. This novel is a critic of war but on a larger scale, it is a critic of nationalism which causes war.

Identity

Identity is a major theme in the novel. Almaty says that he has been a desert explorer for ten years. During those ten years, he has learned that all he has tried to forget is that he is representing England. He has erased his own identity. The writer has the main protagonist covered from head to toe throughout the novel. The fact that he has bandaged up throughout the novel. It means that his identity has been erased.

The English Patient is somebody who debunks national identity. He doesn't believe in national identity. He is somebody who is also used by the writer as a symbol to question European values.

When we talked about identity the image of the desert is important. The fact that Almaty is a dessert Explorer. He has been a dessert explorer for 10 years. The desert is a symbol of vastness or endlessness. He represents the desert. In the desert, nobody cares who is from which particular nation.

The writer tries to establish the fact that identity is based mostly on the

personality or individuality of the person concerned. It is based neither on race nor on religion. Michael Ondaatje tries to pronounce that identity is a social construct just like gender. It is the only human being who has the habit of trying over one another to proclaim their superiority. He says that the identity of humankind is far more important than the identity of nationalism.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is to be admitted that although the themes stretch across all aspects of human nature, it is the development of self that receives the most attention. The author with utmost meticulousness and scholarship endeavors to assimilate all these themes together in the narrative of the novel. Through dealing with the theme of war, Ondaatje condemns war. In this case, he is similar to the poet Pablo Neruda where Neruda condemns war in the following words-

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes

and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

- (Neruda, lines 15-20)

References

- Neruda, Pablo. "Keeping Quiet." BU, 2022. [https://www.bu.edu/quantum/zen/readings/keepingQuietNeruda.html] Accessed 15 May 2022.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Picador, 1992.
- Singh, Nikki. 2004. 'Twice Repressed: The Case of Ondaatje's Kip.' *Journal of Religion and Film* 8 (1).
- Bolland, John. *Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient: A Reader's Guide*. Continuum, 2000.
- Gaur, Rashmi. "Passion and Devastation beneath Ethnic and Polytropic Identities in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*". *Studies in Commonwealth Literature*. Edited by. Mohit K. Ray. Atlantic, pp. 141.

How to cite this article?

Riyaj Hussain, " A Thematic Analysis of Michael Ondaatje's the English Patient", *Research Journal Of English(RJOE)*7 (2), PP: 257-263,2022, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.2.36>