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Women in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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INTRODUCTION

Post-colonial literature has dominated a big part of modern literature in many countries around the world. One of the most interesting post-colonial novels is Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. The goal of this thesis is to discuss the characters of the women illustrated in this book: Hana, a Canadian nurse, and Katharine Clifton, an English woman from upper class.

As Michael Ondaatje is one of the Canadian post-colonial writers, this thesis begins with a historical background of post-colonialism with a special consideration of Canadian post-colonial literature and the image of Michael Ondaatje as a writer.

In the second chapter of this thesis the Canadian nurse, Hana, will be described as a postcolonial woman who left her home and went to Italy to take care of wounded patients during the Second World War. Her state of mind and physical exhaustion after the war and the way she cured herself from them will be discussed here. Also the way she treated men will be presented and the kinds of relationships Hana had with them in the Villa San Girolamo.

In the third chapter a slightly different type of woman will be described in the person of Katharine Clifton. Her relations with her husband, Geoffrey Clifton, and her lover, Almásy, will be analysed. Moreover, the consequences of her extramarital affair will be talked over as the reasons for her and her husband's death. Finally, her death in the Cave of Swimmers will be discussed.

CHAPTER I

POST-COLONIAL CANADIAN WRITING

1.1. Post-colonial literatures

Post-colonialism is based on the impact of colonialization on cultures and societies. The term ‘post-colonial’ was originally used by historians to describe the period after colonisation. In literary criticism it has been used since the late 1970s to discuss the various cultural, political, and linguistic effects of colonization. At the beginning, this term referred to “cultural interactions within colonial societies in literary circles” (Ashcroft 1998: 186).

According to Ashcroft the term ‘post-colonial’ is used to cover “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft 1989: 2). It concerns the period of European imperial domination and the effects of it on contemporary literature and culture.

Over half of the contemporary world was affected by imperialism¹ and colonialism². There are many countries, such as African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka, whose literatures are called post-colonial. However, these literatures have their special regional characteristics, though they also have many common features, which

emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial

(Ashcroft 1989: 2).

¹ The present work understands imperialism as “the practice of forming a large group of countries all under the direct political control of a single state or ruler; and the gaining of political and trade advantages over poorer nations by a powerful country which rules them or controls them indirectly” (Summers 2002: 662).

² In this work colonialism is shown as “the principle or practise of having colonies abroad” (Summers 2002: 247).

During the imperial period, writing was produced by a literate elite whose primary identification was with the colonizing power. Such texts cannot form the basis for national culture and integrate with the culture of the invaded countries. Ashcroft draws attention to the other kind of literature which was “produced ‘under imperial licence’ by ‘natives’ or ‘outcasts’, for instance, by the English educated Indian upper class, or African ‘missionary literature’” (Ashcroft 1989: 5). They wrote about problems such as the brutality of the convict system, the historical power of the substituted and slandered native cultures, or the subsistence of a rich cultural inheritance older and broader than European culture. Writers could not go deeply in their anti-imperial potential. The imperial ruling class controlled literature in the colonies. It is the reason why the development of independent literatures is the most fundamental feature in modern post-colonial literatures.

Artistic and literary decolonisation is a process which “has involved a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses” (Tiffin 1987: 95). Post-colonial cultures tried to create or recreate independent local identity. Post-colonial theories and literatures have developed “to accommodate the differences within the various cultural traditions as well as the desire to describe in a comparative way the features shared across those traditions” (Ashcroft 1989: 11).

A major theme of post-colonial literature is the aspect of place and displacement. It is always a feature of post-colonial societies, which have been created by both a process of settlement and of intervention. Here appears the special post-colonial crisis of identity and develops an effective identifying relationship between self and place. This feature is called the defining model of post-coloniality. According to Ashcroft “a valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or ‘voluntary’ removal for indentured labour” (Ashcroft 1989: 9).

The alienation of vision and the crisis in self-image, which this displacement produces, is often found in the accounts of residents of many colonies. This social and linguistic alienation can be explained as resulting only from public unjust forms of colonization such as slavery or conquest. Ashcroft indicates that many usual “categories of social alienation such as master/slave; free/bonded; ruler/ruled” are very important and

widespread in post-colonial cultures (Ashcroft 1989: 9). They sometimes show clear signs of alienation even inside the first generation of settlement, and point to a tendency to find an alternative, differentiated identity. The construction of 'place' is the most popular discursive practise, in which this alienation can be identified. It arose in an empty space between the experience of place and language available to describe it. According to Ashcroft, this gap forms a classic and all pervasive feature of post-colonial texts. This shortage is present for those people whose language sounds not good enough to describe a new place, whose language is gradually damaged by enslavement, and whose language "has been rendered unprivileged by the imposition of the language of a colonizing power" (Ashcroft 1989: 10). Some components of these models can describe the situation of all post-colonial societies. In all these situations, a condition of alienation cannot be avoided until the colonizing language has been replaced or appropriated as english³. It appeared the difference between the 'standard' British English received from the empire and the english which had formed in post-colonial countries. The distinction between English and english, presents the statement of a powerful 'centre' and a multitude of intersecting usages designated as 'peripheries'. The results of the energies uncovered by the political tension between the idea of a normative code and a variety of regional usages are the most exciting and innovative literatures of the modern period.

1.2. Post-colonial Canadian writing

It was mentioned that one of post-colonial countries was Canada. As Brendan indicates, Canadian writers have looked at the effects of colonialism on the original native population. It was probable that the culture of the originating peoples and the oral tradition used could come to an end, as the imposed language of the colonizer became the accepted norm. The indigenous people were forced to use "a language which was for the most part alien, employing words which had meaning for a metropolitan audience but have little

³ The orthography of this variant of English was used to suggest the lower case of language in post-colonial countries. And according to Ashcroft, it is "a sign of the subversion of the claims to status and privilege to which English usage clings" (Ashcroft 1989: 10).

relevance within a Canadian context” (Brendan 1998: www.postcolonialweb.org). Many authors had to take this “foreign” language and make it their own.

With regard to finding a voice for itself, post-colonial Canada presents interesting challenges. Litvack draws attention that “Canadian literary theory and practice are concerned with place and displacement, and with the development of an effective identifying relationship between self and environs” (Litvack 1996: 119). Post-colonial Canadian writing focuses on its problem of space and identity. Post-colonial, in literature, refers to Commonwealth literary studies. A literary theorist, Hutcheon, has made the conclusion that

the experience of colonialism and therefore of post-colonialism is simply not the same in Canada, as it is in the West Indies or in Africa or in India, so Canada is placed among Australia, New Zealand, and white South Africa, to form a ‘Second World’

(Hutcheon qt. in Burke 2002: 58).

Writers from these countries are sometimes called mediators between colonizers and colonised. It would be impossible not to notice that these writers use voice, space, and hegemonic concept of the nation.

The particular problem in Canada is identity itself, which is connected with Canada’s position as a post-colonial country. Some theorists looked for a cultural unity to provide identity. Burke quoted Northrop Frye, who said that “Canadian identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective and rooted in political feeling” (Burke 2002: 58). He maintains later that there has been a consistent tension between unity and identity that defines what it means to be Canadian. Coral Ann Howells said that “The Canadian problem of identity may not be the problem of having no identity, but rather of having multiply identities so that any single nation self-image is reductive” (qt. in: Burke 2002: 58). The question of identity remains a dominant discourse within Canadian native and national fiction.

Another very important problem is the sense of displacement in those who came to the colonies – displacement in a new space. Writers must name the space and search for

myths and identities in a space which was not their own from the beginning. Post-colonial Canadian writers of the Second World have to find words for spacelessness (Burke 2002: 59).

One of the major post-colonial Canadian writers is Michael Ondaatje. He was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), on September 12, 1943. He comes from “a prominent family in Ceylon’s colonial society” (Maiorani 2003: 395). His family has multicultural roots and he was raised in a multicultural society. The family line is Dutch, Sinhalese, and Tamil, so some critics indicate that “the family was solidly British colonial in outlook” (Wong 2000: 289). Ondaatje began his education in Ceylon, and then in 1954 he moved to England with his mother and continued his education in London. In 1962, he emigrated to Canada where he received the Bachelor of Arts Degree from the University of Toronto (1965) and the Master of Arts Degree from Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario (1967). Between 1967 and 1971, he taught at the University of Western Ontario in London, Canada, and in 1971 he became a member of the Department of English at Glendon College of York University in Toronto (Solecki 1983: 620). Michael Ondaatje is a poet, editor, and author of several novels, screenplays and critical works, his literary career is “studded with numerous awards, such as the Ralph Gustafson Award, the Epstein Award, and the President’s Medal of the University of Ontario” (Maiorani 2003: 395). He received also “the Giller Prize and the Prix Medicis in 2000 and the Order of Canada in 1988” (Siemerling 2002: 846).

In his writings, Michael Ondaatje still refers to his homeland of Sri Lanka as Ceylon, bringing about the colonialism connected with the place. His best-known book *The English Patient* (1992)⁴ won the Booker Prize in 1992 and made him an international writer. Wong says that “critics focus on the way he blurs generic distinctions between poetry and prose, factual verisimilitude and fictional reconstruction” (Wong 2000: 289). Ondaatje’s imagery and presentation are preoccupied with

⁴ In November 1996, a director Anthony Minghella made the novel into film which was very successful and won many awards: “*The English Patient* was transposed into a highly successful motion picture (...) that dominated the 1997 Academy Awards with nine Oscars” (Siemerling 2002: 845). Michael Ondaatje co-operated on the film script with Anthony Minghella.

romantic exoticism and multiculturalism; its gravitation towards the bizarre, the exaggerated, and the unlikely; its fascination with the secret codes of violence in both personal and political life; and with its continued delving into the world of movies, jazz and friendship

(Thesen 2005: <www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com, 12.01.2005>).

In his previous works, Michael Ondaatje used to present mainly masculine protagonists and women were not very important. Ellis pointed out that, in his earlier novels, the positions of women were presented only in their contacts with men: “the women in the novels exist only in their relationships to the men and the primary homosocial relationships of the men to each other” (Ellis 1996: 31-32). Just in *The English Patient*, he developed some female characters, what Susan Ellis noted “Unlike earlier works, Ondaatje’s attention now includes female protagonists” (Ellis 1996: 30). She also analyses the role of women in this novel, especially when it comes to Hana, as the female protagonists were as interesting and complicated as male ones: “Ondaatje’s treatment of gender has become more complex and problematic (...) as he turns his attention to the survivors of a social destruction that is beyond their control, such as (...) Hana, Almásy, Kip, and Caravaggio in *The English Patient*” (Ellis 1996: 30).

CHAPTER II

HANA – A POST-COLONIAL NURSE

2.1. War experience

In central Italy in 1944 the Second World War was over. It had moved north, leaving a landscape “of destroyed chapels, burned libraries, drowned art, booby-trapped gardens, and literature that is a weapon of war” (Ellis, 1996: 22). In an isolated Villa San Girolamo, which was earlier an army hospital, a young Canadian nurse Hana gave aid to her patient, a burned pilot, wanderer and map maker, Almásy, whose plane had crashed in the Libyan desert. He was her last patient during the wartime.

Hana was the adopted daughter of Patrick⁵. She had been trained at the Women’s College Hospital in Canada and in 1943 she had been sent to Europe during the Sicilian invasion. She was forced to grow up quickly. She was a nurse in one of the field hospitals, which were at the back of the First Canadian Infantry Division. She was devoted to her nursing duties. After the battle of Arezzo, Hana

was surrounded day and night by their wounds. After three full days without rest, she finally lay down on the floor beside a mattress where someone lay dead, and slept for twelve hours, closing her eyes against the world around her (EP, 53)⁶.

Having taken a rest, she woke up and immediately “picked up a pair of scissors (...) and began to cut her hair (...) away – the irritation of its presence during the previous days still in her mind – when she had bent forward and her hair had touched blood in a wound”(EP, 53). Cutting her hair was a symbol of rejecting the war. She did not want anything to link her to death. She cut off her hair because she wanted to turn away from all the deaths and

⁵ Patrick, likewise Hana and Caravaggio (Siemerling, 2002: 847), was one of major characters in Michael Ondaatje’s previous book *In the Skin of a Lion*. He did not appear in *The English Patient*, it was only mentioned about his death.

⁶ Michael Ondaatje. 2002. *The English Patient*. London: Picador. All the subsequent quotations are from this edition. They are marked in the text as EP and followed by an appropriate page number.

the blood she had seen close up while at war. From that day, Hana never looked in a mirror again. Her appearance also reflected her shell-shocked state of mind, as well as her physical exhaustion.

She became harsh with the patients and herself. She took care of the patients as much as she could, she stopped bleeding, removed blood from their faces or pieces of shrapnel of their bodies. She saw soldiers “with just bits of their bodies, falling in love with me for an hour and then dying” (EP, 89). After the death of one of her patients, she opened his pack, and against the rules, took his pair of tennis shoes and put them on. Although they were too big, she felt comfortable wearing them. This gesture was very symbolical, because by walking in the dead soldier’s shoes she was trying to experience what he had experienced. But the fact that his shoes were too big for her symbolized that Hana was not up to it, his war experience was too heavy for her. Moreover, she took his tennis shoes, not combat boots, thus she did not want to remember the soldier’s experiences from the war, but the man himself as a human being, not a soldier. In this context the tennis shoes reminded her of life before the war and were a kind of escape from it. On the other hand, these shoes constantly reminded her of all the dead soldiers whom she had been taking care of during the war and also of the whole period when she was a nurse.

According to Ellis, because of having to watch many dead soldiers, whom she had nursed earlier, Hana was in “her shell-shocked state” (Ellis 1996: 28). She was almost destroyed by the war intellectually and physically. During the war, Hana became thinner and her face was tougher and leaner. It was the result of tiredness and hunger. She was angry, when a patient did not want to eat or waited for the soup to cool, which she desired to eat fast.

She was always hungry and found it a furious exhaustion to feed a patient who couldn’t eat or didn’t want to, watching the bread crumble away, the soup cool, which she desired to swallow fast. She wanted nothing exotic, just bread, meat (EP, 54).

She had changed, had almost been destroyed by the war (Barbour 1993: 208). She fell in love with a man who died some time later during the war. He was the father of her

unborn baby. Hana was talking in her head to the child all the time, while she was nursing patients and resting. She was crazy about the child. After the battles at Moro Bridge and Urbino she suddenly became too busy even to think about her unborn baby. She saw many soldiers who came, felt in love with her and then, in an hour, they died. She made a decision to have an abortion. "I courted one man and he died and the child died. I mean, the child didn't just die, I was the one who destroyed it" (EP, 91). According to Kopaliński, a woman giving birth to a child represents the beginning of everything (Kopaliński 2001: 144). Hana, in her decision to kill her unborn child, stands for the unwanted ends of many lives. Her decision to have an abortion is closely connected with the death of the man who was the child's father: "I was almost going to have a baby a year ago (...) I lost the child. I mean, I had to lose it. The father was already dead. There was a war" (EP, 87).

Her decision to stay at the Villa San Girolamo was not clearly expressed. One day, during the celebrations of some local victory, Hana decided to stay with the burned English patient because he "should never be moved because of the fragility of his limbs" (EP, 55). She said she would take care of him, bring him morphine and wash his wounds. She was warned of dangers in the villa, where a lot of mines and flares could be hidden; nevertheless, Hana "still refused to leave, got out of her nurse's uniform, unbundled the brown print frock she had carried for months, and wore that with her tennis shoes" (EP, 55). However, at the end of the novel Hana disclosed a second, deeper, reason for her decision to stay behind with Almásy when she wrote to her stepmother Clara after the death of her father, Patrick. "He was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. (...) I could have saved him or at least been with him till the end" (EP, 318). Hana saw in the burnt patient a substitute for her burnt father whom she could not help.

During the war Hana's appearance reflected her shell-shocked state of mind, her exhaustion and the need to get away from the war. Changing from her nurse's uniform to the brown print frock, cutting her hair, wearing the dead soldier's shoes, and removing all mirrors were symbolical for her experiences from war and her need to get away from the war.

2.2. Hana at Villa San Girolamo

In the Villa San Girolamo “a quartet of balanced and strongly interrelated characters” (Ellis 1996: 25) were trying to get away from the war. They found a safe refuge there “It’s a kind of bombed-out Garden of Eden for the quartet of characters who find refuge there” (Wachtel 1992: 251). They all could try to regain their mental equilibrium after having known all the cruelty of the war. It was a place of safety for them. However, this hilltop villa was very much destroyed, as Siemerling describes: “a half-destroyed villa that (with its library, undefused bombs, and open walls) becomes a setting for reading, hazardous deciphering and imagination” (Siemerling 2002: 848). Hence, terrible devastation of the Villa exemplified destruction of these four people who stayed there in order to find a safe place after the war.

As Fledderus suggested, they all had war wounds “all the characters have war wounds (...) and are on personal quest for healing” (Fledderus 1997: 42). They even did not realise the fact that they were all healing each other. Michael Ondaatje said in an interview that “everyone thinks they’re healing everybody else, in some way, but they’re all wounded. Caravaggio wants to coax Hana out of a mental state she can’t get out of, and doesn’t want to get out of” (Wachtel 1992: 253). For Hana, healing meant returning to her childhood because the war was the reason she had to grow up very early. She decided to stay in the bombed-out Tuscany villa with the burnt patient because it would be for her a place where she would not have to be an adult, she sometimes even played hopscotch, danced or played the piano.

At the Villa San Girolamo she was extremely occupied with her patient and books. Reading books was for her the way to forget about the cruelty of the war. “This was the time in her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became half her world” (EP, 7). Even if Almásy wanted to encourage her to talk, he asked her to read for him. He told Caravaggio “She was distant from everybody. The only way I could get her to communicate was to ask her to read to me...” (EP, 270-271). Hana used books not only for reading, but also for repairing the Villa:

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 the floor and then onto each other, in this way
rebuilding the two lowest steps (EP, 14).

Hana also developed an interest in music. Once she said to Caravaggio, that one of the reasons why she came to Italy was Giuseppe Verdi (EP, 35). She used to play the piano in the Villa. Barbour even calls her “girl with piano” (Barbour 1993: 209). She did not realise that the piano could be mined until the moment “two men slipped through the French doors and placed their guns on the end of the piano and stood in front of her” (EP, 68). They explained to her that it was a very popular place for Germans to hide mines. According to Wachtel, this was a crucial moment in the novel: “There’s a pivotal scene in the book in which Hana is at her lowest – almost suicidal, though it is just hinted at. She starts playing the piano in the villa, and at that point two soldiers walk into the room” (Wachtel 1992: 253). Although the purpose of their entrance to the Villa was to check the piano whether there were some hidden bombs or not, but, unexpectedly, they stayed there much longer. It was the beginning of Hana’s relationship with the young Sikh, Kirpal (Kip) Singh, “the Indian sapper, or bomb-disposal expert” (Kamiya 1996). Kirpal Singh was a Sikh soldier educated in Britain and became a military engineer. His purpose was to detect and disarm bombs hidden by the Germans. In his interview, Michael Ondaatje describes Kirpal as “a Sikh soldier with the Royal Engineers who’s been travelling through Italy defusing the bombs left by the Germans” (Wachtel 1992: 253).

Hana’s character was dominated by her shell-shocked state of mind, it was her wound inflicted by the war. Staying at the Villa San Girolamo was for Hana her duty as a nurse, but also a kind of healing for herself. She was able to live in the ruined Villa with an anonymous patient, play the piano, grow some flowers and recover from her exhaustion.

2.3. Hana’s relationships with men

The main aim of Hana’s presence at the villa was to take care of the English patient, bring him morphine and wash his wounds; he would have died without her help. Her healing of the patient also effected herself, she became more quiet and feminine. In this way, reading books, which was a kind of conversation between Hana and her patient,

was also the way to heal them both. Michael Ondaatje indicates this fact by saying: “And she also thinks she’s taking care of the Patient, and the Patient later says, ‘Well I got her to read to me because she wouldn’t talk.’ Everyone’s the little hero in their own minds” (Wachtel 1992: 253). Fledderus calls her “a nun-like nurse” (Fledderus 1997: 34) because of her attributes of healer⁷. Hana healed Almásy also in a psychological way, her attendance reminded him of his lover, Katharine. In that way she played also the role of the beloved goddess:

The love and pity that Hana evokes from the patient seem to heal him in a psychological way, and perhaps in this action her role is analogous to that of the beloved goddess. In the patient’s eyes, she seems at times a stand-in for Katharine (Fledderus 1997: 35).

Hana saw her English patient as a saint. This religious image influenced her thoughts and her actions. In her conversation with Caravaggio about Almásy, Hana told the most significant sentence “He is a saint. I think. A despairing saint. Are there such things? Our desire is to protect them” (EP, 48). Moreover, Caravaggio called her attention to Almásy ‘love’ or even ‘adoration’. He talked with Hana about her feeling to the patient: “‘Why do you adore him so much?’ ‘I love him.’ ‘You don’t love him, you adore him’” (EP, 48). There was also love for Almásy as a man, rather than as a father. In her confession, Hana said to Caravaggio “It has been a long time, David, since I thought of anything to do with a man” (EP, 91). This man was Almásy.

Hana’s love for the patient was the result of her attitude to Patrick, her adoptive father. She thought about him as her father because of “that kind of support and affection which has very much to do with family, but nothing to do with blood” (Wachtel 1992: 259). She was destroyed by the news of her father’s death and the impossibility for her to nurse him at the end of his life. Hana saw her father in Almásy; she considered taking care of the unknown burnt patient as if he were her father, who died of burns, too.

The post-colonial aspect of the novel is Hana’s love affair with Kirpal Singh “Kip’s affair with Hana, for instance - a non-white man of third world origin, and a white

⁷ Hana’s nurturing role was emphasised in Minghella’s 1996 film version.

Canadian woman – has a stronger impact, because of its colonial and colour implications” (Birbalsingh 1995: 171). British colonialism affected their national identity and sense of individuality. Hana explained to Almásy

Kip and I are both international bastards – born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or to get away from our homelands, all our lives. Though Kip doesn’t recognize that yet. That’s why we get on so well together (EP, 191).

According to Birbalsingh, their homelessness was also increased by the effect of European enterprise and European scientific culture (Birbalsingh 1995: 172). They wanted to find a new home and not return to where they were from.

Hana and the young Sikh⁸ entered a love affair. Her love for Kirpal was growing. She sometimes thought of him as a saint warrior “He speaks of warrior saints and she now feels he is one, stern and visionary” (EP, 232). Hana and Kip seemed to make love without touching one another. In a church, Hana swung from wall to wall on a rope counterbalanced by Kip and looked at the frescoes. This scene was very sexual and stood in for a love scene the same as candlelight or a naked conversation in his bed. Their pleasure of sleeping beside each other was temporary. Their relationship was a kind of “an erotic love triangle in which the English patient is a father figure to Hana” (Ellis 1996: 34). This was clearly visible when Kip cut the wire of the patient’s hearing aid and wanted to separate Hana from Almásy. An interesting contrast between Hana and Kip was made by their hair. Kip’s long hair was a sign of his vigour, his energy, and his religion; on the contrary, Hana’s short cut hair was a symbol of rejecting all connections with war. Fledderus pays attention to this difference: “In the novel a contrast is made between Hana’s cut hair and Kip’s long hair, a sign of his vitality and his religion, and the novel concludes mentioning Hana’s restored long hair” (Fledderus 1997: 33). Her restored new long hair was a symbol of the beginning of her new life.

⁸ In his article, Fledderus explained that Sikhism, founded in XVIIth century, was the culture of the Indian subcontinent, which has become “prominent in Canadian cities in recent decades” (Fledderus 1997: 22). It is a religion between Islam and Hinduism.

Although, Kip was a soldier and he had gotten used to mortal danger while defusing bombs, he felt great shock after hearing about the happenings in Japan and as Birbalsingh writes he “loses his mental equilibrium when the first atomic bombs are unleashed in 1945 on Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (Birbalsingh 1995: 171). He left Hana and Italy and went back home. But it was Hana who healed him at the Villa San Girolamo from his war wounds by spending time with him, crawling into his tent when nobody saw her, sleeping beside him and “rediscovering the comfort and pleasure of being scratched” (Ellis 1996: 34). Despite the fact that Kip broke their relationship and never answered Hana’s letter, her appearance in his life was very important. Thanks to Hana, he could have his own family later in India. His daughter, Hana, reminded him about the nurse of his soul. Fledderus even explains that their relationship had a good influence on Kip’s family and children: “Kip’s children, perhaps the indirect products of their brief healing relationship (a sexual one, and thus relevant to fertility concerns)” (Fledderus 1997: 33).

The last male person, important to Hana, was David Caravaggio, her father’s friend, a thief who has been tortured and injured during wartime. He was interested in her very much, but as his niece. Since Caravaggio knew Hana from her childhood, he had taught her many things, “She realizes everything she knew about the real world she learned on her own or from Caravaggio” (EP, 98). They had both changed because of war. As he wanted to get her out of her state of exhaustion, they led very long conversations, more often about her childhood or war. Caravaggio was the only connection with Canada. Hana thought that she was taking care also of him as his thumbs were cut off, but he stayed at the Villa only to find out who the English patient was.

Hana is a dynamic character and the novel shows the story of her change into being an adult. She was seen as a psychological victim of the war. Her experience in Italy made her more expressive and realistic. By staying at the Villa and taking care of Almásy she recovered from her emotional war wounds. Hana saw the reality in her situation after Kip’s leaving and she intended to return to Canada to Clara, her stepmother, and her home. There was a chance to begin a new life for Hana.

CHAPTER III

KATHARINE CLIFTON – AN UNFORTUNATE WIFE AND LOVER

3.1. The marriage of Geoffrey and Katharine Clifton

In *The English Patient* there is another very interesting female character - Katharine Clifton⁹, a well-born and Oxford-educated English woman. She was the wife of Geoffrey Clifton, a desert explorer and one of Almásy's friends. Katharine married him quite young and travelled with him to Northern Africa¹⁰. They came to Cairo during their honeymoon and then joined the expeditionary group of Count Ladislaus de Almásy on the desert.

Geoffrey was very enchanted with his young wife, he “celebrated the beauty of her arms, the thin lines of her ankles. He described witnessing her swim” (EP, 246). He was also very enthusiastic in his love for her, sang songs about her beauty and “shared his adoration of her constantly” (EP, 245). In the meantime, when they were not on the desert, the Cliftons lived in Cairo where Geoffrey had his extra work for his uncle, who worked in a government office. They led a very exciting social life there and “were a popular young couple with honour between them (...) They lived well. A ceremonial life (...) dinners, garden parties” (EP, 251).

After eighteen months of marriage, Katharine betrayed her husband and began her love affair with Almásy. As far as Geoffrey is concerned, he did not realise the truth for a long time as the English people tried to hide the truth about his wife. His family, which lived in Cairo, knew about Katharine's and Almásy's infidelity and adultery. This is clear

⁹ In the novel, Katharine Clifton appeared mostly in Almásy's memoirs by talking about her and their relationship in 1930-1939.

¹⁰ According to Tötösy de Zepetnek, the Cliftons and Almásy had their historical figures: László Almásy Count of Szombathely, Hungarian; Sir Robert Clayton East Clayton, a British aristocrat, and Lady Clayton East Clayton born Dorothy Mary Durrant. The Cliftons got married on 29 February 1932 and they immediately went with Count Almásy “to explore the unknown area of the Libyan Desert north of the Gilf Kebir, and to find the legendary lost oasis called Zerzura” (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1994: 146), unfortunately, they did not find it. It was Almásy and his expeditionary group who discovered this oasis in 1933. Lady Clayton had scientific interests and knowledge, an interest in aviation; she was “a very experienced pilot and a talented sculptor” (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1994: 146). She attended in many desert expeditions with her husband and even after his death she continued his work. On 15 September 1933 she died “during a short flight at Brooklands. Inexplicably, Lady Clayton appeared to have climbed out of the cockpit and fallen to her death (...) The accident has never been explained, though an official inquest was held” (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1994: 147). The fact is that when she was on her last expedition, at the same time Almásy organised a parallel expedition. Although Ondaatje was unaware of the history of these characters and he did not create Katharine Clifton based on Lady Clayton, her uncommon character and identity are present in Katharine's personality.

when Almásy said to Caravaggio that Geoffrey's family "knew every move she and I made from the first day of the awkward touch in the porte cochère of the Semiramis Hotel" (EP, 253). The family tried to protect him from finding out the truth. Having found out about Katharine and Almásy's love affair, Geoffrey planned to kill them both and himself:

Clifton flew up on Uweinat to collect him [Almásy] on the appointed day, buzzing the lost oasis so low the acacia shrubs dismantled their leaves in the wake of the plane, the Moth slipping into the depressions and cuts (...). Then the plane pivoted down and came straight towards him, then crashed into the earth fifty yards away (EP, 186).

Although Geoffrey and Katharine Cliftons had a fortunate marriage, they did not have a chance to feel happy and fulfilled together. While he was a devoted and loving husband, Katharine never seemed to be regretful about her extramarital affair. She was only afraid of the moment when Geoffrey would get to know about her passionate relationship with his colleague. Even though Geoffrey learnt about his wife's marital infidelity when the affair was over, he went mad and wanted to kill the lovers and himself:

A husband gone mad. Killing all of them. Killing himself and his wife – and him by the fact there was now no way out of the desert. Only she was not dead. He [Almásy] pulled the body free, carrying it of the plane's crumpled grip, this grip of her husband (EP, 186-187).

His attempt to kill them all failed, except for killing himself and wounding his wife, who died some time later as a result of the accident. It was a very unexpected end to the Cliftons' marriage.

3.2. Katharine's love affair with Almásy

Katharine accompanied her husband and the group of desert explorers on an expedition to the desert two weeks after her wedding. During her presence there, Katharine changed, educated herself and tried to learn as much as she could about the environment she was in, especially after a short stay in Cairo. It was Almásy who noticed her change:

After that month in Cairo she was muted, read constantly, kept more to herself, as if something had occurred or she realized suddenly that wondrous thing about the human being, it can change. (...) She was discovering herself. It was painful to watch, because Clifton could not see it, her self-education. She read everything about the desert. (...) I was fifteen years older. But she was smarter. She was hungrier to change than I expected (EP, 246).

It is possible that she changed under the influence of Almásy. He realised he was in love with Katharine after hearing a passage she had read from his book of Herodotus, the story of a king of ancient Lydia Candaules and his wife. According to Ellis, Katharine chose this story in order to temper her husband's feeling of ownership "The story is read by Katharine to her husband Geoffrey in an effort to temper his boasting possession of her beauty" (Ellis 1996: 33). Almásy was impressed by her choice and the way she read. Hence he later described this situation to Hana and Caravaggio: "This is a story of how I fell in love with a woman, who read me a specific story from Herodotus" (EP, 249). She intended to evoke a certain reaction in Geoffrey, but, unexpectedly, her reading aroused Almásy's passion for her and began "an erotic triangle that feature the use of women as a commodity of exchange" (Ellis 1996: 30). Katharine and Almásy soon began a hot and tumultuous affair. They were obsessed with each other and spent every possible moment together.

In the novel, it is never clearly explained why Katharine started the extramarital affair with Almásy. The thing she hated most in her life were lies and she knew that her betrayal was a kind of lie. Even Almásy did not really understand why he had an affair with Katharine, he could not explain it precisely: "Was it desire for her youth, for her thin adept boyishness?" (EP, 253). In contrast to Geoffrey, Katharine changed in the desert. It could

be possible that she stopped loving him and wanted to be with someone who was smarter than her and from whom she could learn more about all these new things which she had learned about. It was a kind of a sexual game based on a sentence: “Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men” (Irigaray qt. in Ellis: 32). This way, Katharine was the locus between Geoffrey Clifton, her husband, and Almásy, her lover.

Although Katharine was a British upper class woman and she knew all rules of behaviour and ethics, she started to behave differently. This became clear when she hit Almásy, not just occasionally but many times:

The plate she walked across the room with, flinging its contents aside, and broke across his head, the blood rising up into the straw hair. The fork that entered the back of his shoulder, leaving its bite marks the doctor suspected were caused by a fox. He would step into an embrace with her, glancing first to see what moveable objects were around

(EP, 166).

Katharine’s behaviour was in contrast to the upper class rules, which she knew more about than Almásy. She treated her lover with physical violence. Hitting him could be the result of the fact that Almásy did not want to adapt her social rules and his dislike to change for her. It was an escape for her frustration. Despite Katharine’s aggression towards him, Almásy never responded or even did anything to try to defend himself in any way. After the plane accident, Katharine told him “you killed everything in me”(EP, 187), which meant everything she learned and everything that she grew up with. Almásy did not care at all about social kindness or the proper way to behave in public. She could not change him and hitting him was the way to show her emotions, as well as their sexual contacts when she sometimes wanted to look ravishing¹¹.

Katharine’s extramarital affair with Almásy had nothing to do with the morality of it but it was a lie, which she hated most in her life. Moreover, she was afraid that Geoffrey

¹¹ In the film version the role of Katharine Clifton was emphasised, and as Fledderus wrote in his article “Katharine’s job is to look ravishing, be ravished, and pay the awful price for her illicit desires. She’s like Helen of Troy. All she has to do is show up, and wreak devastation on ... the men’s [Egyptology] club” (Fledderus 1997: 50).

would go mad if he ever found out about their affair. On the other hand, he did not like ownership and he asked her one day to forget him after their affair will be over: “When you leave me, forget me” (EP, 164). She was also too proud to be Almásy’s lover in case he did not want to change for her. Some years after she broke off with him, Katharine explained to him that “Nothing changes you. (...) I left you because I knew I could never change you. You would stand in the room so still sometimes, so wordless sometimes, as if the greatest betrayal of yourself would be to reveal one more inch of your character.” (EP, 187). Since she changed herself for him in the desert and he could not do the same for her, they could not be united anymore, he never could give himself fully to her.

After Katharine’s determination to break up the affair, Almásy did not know how to deal with his continuing desire for her and he turned his feeling into hatred for her and created a distance between them: “During their months of separation he had grown bitter and self-sufficient. He avoided her company. (...) He did not trust her last endearments to him anymore. She was with him or against him. She was against him” (EP, 185). He even suspected she had another lover: “He suspected she had replaced him with another lover” (EP, 185). He knew that Katharine was not alone because she “had a group of intimates that excluded him and her husband. No one goes back to the husband. He knew that much about love and human nature” (EP, 186). In public, Almásy tried to be cruel to her and, in this way, wanted to punish her for hurting him.

Katharine was torn between her passion for Almásy and her duty as Clifton’s wife. It was shown in her postcard to Almásy: “*Half my days I cannot bear not to touch you. The rest of the time I feel it doesn’t matter if I ever see you again. It isn’t the morality, it is how much you can bear*” (EP, 166, italics original). How much of her affair with Almásy could she bear was being questioned. She broke off this relationship not only because of her husband and the fear of his reaction, but also because Almásy did not want to change himself and never fully opened up to her.

3.3. Katharine's death in the Cave of Swimmers

Katharine does not really like the desert as she “had grown up within gardens, among moistness, with words like *trellis* and *hedgehog*. Her passion for the desert was temporary. (...) She was always happier in rain, in bathrooms steaming with liquid air, in sleepy wetness” (EP, 183). The desert made Katharine's love for greenness and water stronger, which were characteristic for her, but she could not live there for a long time, as Almásy did. The desert was, in a way, a rival for Katharine because Almásy left her in order to find Zerzura, which was his second desire.

After the plane crash when Geoffrey was killed and Katharine was seriously injured, she was left with no way to escape from the desert. It was Almásy who placed her in a nearby cave, covered her with a parachute, and promised to come back for her with help. Katharine's death in the Cave of Swimmers is understood as death in a holy place because a cave was a holy place to ancient people. Almásy would be happy if he died in such a holy place, but for her it was a failure. She died there anonymously, without her name: “She would have hated to die without a name. For her there was a line back to her ancestors that was tactile” (EP, 183). The importance of her last name became evident in the novel as her name connected her with the class she came from. In the Cave of Swimmers, Katharine asked Almásy to call her name in order to invoke their love: “Kiss me, will you. Stop defending yourself. Kiss me and call me by my name” (EP, 187). When finally, in Uweinat he called Katharine by her real name, which was the name of her husband, it was a failure for him because he was captured by the English soldiers and could not save her as he promised.

As Katharine was very much active physically during her life, in the Cave of Swimmers her wounded, and later dead body, was static. Michael Ondaatje told in his interview, that “it's a very beautiful, liquid-looking piece of stone (...) Katharine lying in the cave in the desert” (Wachtel 1992: 255). Katherine's body was a symbol of her sexuality. The glance of Almásy's eyes highlighted over some parts of her body, was very sexual. Burcar claims that

Only in death can Katherine, whose contingent body is tattooed with the inscriptions of the map-charter's gaze, extricate herself from this kind of

embodiment. In death the shell of her specularly constructed embodiment is cracked open to reveal a corpse whose stiffened features can no longer be construed along the lines of gender

(Burcar 2005: www.postcolonialweb.org).

Only by her death, Katharine's body is limited to the symbol of her gender sexuality and passion.

Katharine was a person who changed, educated herself and tried to learn as much about the desert and the people as she could. On the other hand, there was her husband, Geoffrey Clifton and Almásy, her lover, who both did not want to change themselves. Indeed, Katharine had an affair with Almásy, as the result of her passion and her need to grow up. Being with Almásy, she revealed new feelings, such as aggression, presented only when Almásy was around her. Her aggression manifested itself by hitting Almásy, which was a kind of physical contact between them. Her actions had very negative consequences for all three of them. She and her husband died because of her husband's anger and Almásy had to struggle mentally for many years with the fact that he did not return and save her as he had promised. Although her character depended on the social environment she was born in, Katharine did not care about morality and other people's feelings. She was a *femme fatale* who led to catastrophe in her marriage.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this work was to present the characters of the two women, Hana and Katharine Clifton, in Michael Ondaatje's book *The English Patient*.

In the first chapter it was explained that post-colonialism is based in many countries on the impact of colonialization on cultures, languages and societies. That is why the major theme of post-colonial literature is the aspect of place and displacement, which originated in a process of settlement and intervention. As Canada is one of the post-colonial countries, Canadian literature focuses on the problem of space and its own identity. Michael Ondaatje is one of the major post-colonial Canadian writers, not only in his writing, but also in his origin in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

The second chapter is devoted to Hana. Here was discussed her shell-shocked state of mind and her physical exhaustion after the war. Some symbolical events, such as the changing from her nurse's uniform to the brown print frock, cutting her hair, wearing the dead soldier's shoes, and removing all mirrors, presented Hana's attempts to get away from the war and forget about its disadvantages. For Hana, staying at the Villa San Girolamo not only was her duty as a nurse, but also a kind of rejection of the cruelty of war and healing herself. Hana saw the solution to her problem in returning to Canada to her stepmother and beginning her new life.

In the third chapter Katharine Clifton was analysed and her relations with her husband, Geoffrey Clifton, and her lover, Almásy. The starting point of changes in Katharine's lifestyle was the beginning of her extramarital affair with Almásy, a result of her passion. She revealed a new feeling, which was aggression. Finally, the consequences of their relationship were tragic for all three of them. Having known about her infidelity, Katharine's jealous husband tried to kill all of them, which resulted in the death of Katharine and himself and left Almásy living with a feeling of remorse. Also her death in the Cave of Swimmers was discussed in Chapter 3. This cave was discovered by her lover and situated in the desert.

Two different types of women were presented. The first one was a post-colonial young woman, who had very bad experiences during the war and was totally devoted to her nursing duties. Despite her war wounds, at the end of the novel there was a chance for her

to begin new life. The other one was a typical British educated woman, who wanted to try something new in her life. Unfortunately, her behaviour led to a catastrophe.

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