

Intertextual Inscription of Diasporic Identity in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

Qasim Shafiq

Mazhar Hayat

Ali Usman Saleem

PhD Scholar, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: qasimmirzaa@gmail.com
Professor, Department of English, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

Abstract

Through Julia Kristeva's intertextuality, this study explores the diasporic version of identity in Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient – the text that is based on Ondaatje's inspiration from other literary and non-literary texts: Rudyard Kipling's Kim, Herodotus' The History, James Fenimore Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans and the story of Gyges and the Queen. This theoretical inscription locates the source of the expression of the meaning of the text: either the author or the text per se. It argues the intertextual narration of Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan living in Canada, about the fragmented identities of the diasporas in the post-World War II milieu. This intertextual approach highlights the politics working behind the location of the characters, their (dis)placement from/to their origin and their identity in the post-WWII time. The framing of these intertextual discourses helps understand the contexts of diaspora characters as well as diaspora writers.

Key Words:

Diaspora, Identity,
Intertextuality,
Ondaatje, WWII

Introduction

Every text has two axes: “a horizontal axis connecting the author and reader of a text, and a vertical axis, which connects the text to other texts” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 69) - “every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it” (Culler, 1981, p. 105). It seizes the author, in the process of textualization, “within the totality of previous or synchronic texts of which it was a ‘transformation’” (Coward & Ellis, 1977, p. 52) but simultaneously enlightens the interpretive frame of the texts the author has read: the narratives of the texts may set in the anticipations of explicit and/or implicit references the author is inspired by. The recall (texts) of organized fragmentation collected in the author's mind should not be analyzed in isolation from one another, and the text per se as this organization (text) is grounded in the integrity between author, work, reader, society, and history (Morris, 1994). Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is “a permutation of texts ... in the space of a given text [wherein] several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 36): the ideas of identity, religion, relationships, history in the diasporic novel are explicit concerning the other texts such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, Herodotus' *The History*, James Fenimore Cooper's *the Last of the Mohicans* and the story of Gyges and the Queen. These intertextual citations and allusions provide the readers Ondaatje's background and help decode his meaning in the context of World War II (WWII) and its effects.

Literature Review

Barthes affirms that “it is a language which speaks, not the author; to write is... to reach the point where the only language acts, “performs”, and not “me”” (Barthes, 1977, p. 143). To find out the meaning, according to Wimsatt & Beardsley (1954) concerning its “authorial intention is the so-called intentional fallacy”. Sturrock (1986) explains that the writer writes a text under the influence or inspiration of some particular context; so, the power of language exceeds the object determination and develops his subjectivity as a “deep-rooted bias in literary and aesthetic thought which emphasized the uniqueness of both texts and authors” (p. 87). Chandler (1995) believes that writing “did not involve an instrumental process of recording pre-recording pre formed thoughts and feelings (working from signified to signifier) but was a matter of working with the signifiers and letting the signifieds take care of themselves” (p. 60). Claude Lévi-Strauss observes: “I don't have the feeling that I write my books, I have the feeling that my books get written through me... I never had, and still do not have, the perception of feeling my personal identity” (Wiseman & Groves, 2000, p.173). Goldschmidt (1943)

states that “[b]efore 1500 or thereabouts people did not attach the same importance to ascertaining the precise identity of the author of a book they were reading or quoting as we do now” (p. 88). In 1968, Barthes (1977) proclaimed *The Death of the Author* and ‘the birth of the reader’, affirming that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but its destination” (p. 148). When a text is produced in a frame of another text, it simultaneously affects the writers and readers of the text. Fredric Jameson claimed that “texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through the sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if the text is brand-new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions” (Rodowick, 1994, p. 286). The fame of a particular text is hidden in its account of interpretations: “All literary works ... are ‘rewritten’, if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 12). Nobody now – even at the first step – can read an eminent poem or novel, look at a celebrated landscape, portrayal, or sculpture, listen to a prominent slice of melody, or watch a renowned film or play without being responsive to the contexts wherein the text had been (re)emerged. Such contexts constitute a primary frame that cannot be avoided by the reader while interpreting the text. Foucault (1974) argues: “The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences” (p. 23). So, the context has the same importance as the text itself because a particular context may be created by a text and vice versa. Ernst Gombrich (1982) debates that the art, “is a manipulation of vocabulary’ rather than a reflection of the world” (pp. 70, 78, 100).

Every text has many codes that can be decoded with the help of its particular contexts: social and textual. When the “language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 8). This can be judged by using “several key transformations: addition, deletion, substitution and transposition” (Nöth, 1990, p. 341). In this regard, Gerard Genette (1997) regards the idea of “transtextuality as a more inclusive term than intertextuality” (p. 7). Thus, all the literary writing is always a new version of previous thought, and that previous thought must be inspired by some more previous. Thus, intertextuality traces the various notions of the context within a particular text. Moreover, it is also believed that when a reader reads a text, his understanding concerning his location in a specific culture also develops his interest in critical inter-texts. Thus, in a way, intertextuality is “a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships, and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world” (Pynchon, 1966, p. 10).

Theoretical Framework

Theorists of intertextuality claim that the author is not the only source of specific writing as he must be inspired by some other sources or texts that have already been written. Text is a production of multidimensional excerpts. The author of the text can only mimic a sign that is never original. He only mixes writings “to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them” (Barthes, 1977, p. 146). Bits of rhythmic models, formulae, codes, pieces of communal languages, etc., pass through the text and are restructured in it because the language is there before and around the text. “Intertextuality, the condition of any text whatsoever, cannot, of course, be reduced to a problem of sources or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks” (Barthes, 1981, p. 39).

In her essay *Word, Dialogue, and Novel*, Julia Kristeva (1980) rejected all those conventions which favour the dominance of the author’s impacts on his particular text. She challenged the pre-existing idea that all signifying proceedings of structures, from context to text, are established in such a particular way by which they restore former signifying structures. So, no product of fiction can be called the creation of a writer’s mind, but its inspiration from other literary works and of the language structures. “[A]ny text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva, 1980, p.66). Intertextuality, hence, is a method to judge the influence of other literary works in a particular text. It also challenged all those fashioned theories which argued the independent and autonomous text and insisted on the factual influence of other texts.

Although Bakhtin’s subject is a product of a particular language (text) that is a product of a particular society (context), Kristeva’s subject is an invention more abstract as compared to Bakhtin’s. But, in the works of both of these theorists, the texts cannot be explained isolated from their context, cultural or social. They proclaimed that every text is coded in philosophical structures and decoded through social discourse. Kristeva (1980) believes that as this discourse already exists, a specific text is fabricated through it. Authors are not so important to create a text as the pre-existent context is.

Intertextuality in *The English Patient*

Text cannot be judged in isolation as it is allied to the previous and upcoming happenings. A person who reads a

text may recall the other texts to understand the given text. In the meantime, the text is embedded in the quotations, references and allusions that refer to another text, crafting an inter-textual web. This inter-textual web is well-knitted through re-contextualization that is the procedure where something is hauled out from the resourceful context and injected into a new context. Once this textual stuff passes in a new context, new connotations are signified. One must, therefore, go into the prior text and the new surroundings to comprehend the significant new meanings and the old meanings that remain underneath the surface.

The English Patient demonstrates a sense of meaning through the use of other texts. The novel, explaining various inter-textual allusions, makes the meanings explicit. To escape from their war sufferings, the characters in the novel are trying to engage themselves in different activities to consume time, the only thing they have left to consume. Hana, the nurse, Caravaggio, the thief, Kip, the sapper, and Almsy (the English patient), the spy, find out the texts accessible to them in post-WWII time. These "books as the only door out of [their] cell ... became half [their] world" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 7) and provided them hope to escape from their existing suffering through imagination. Caravaggio and Hana both spend more time in the Villa San Girolamo's library, in faiths of disremembering provisionally the war that caused the huge crack in the roof of the library: "Caravaggio enters the library. He has been spending most afternoons there. As always, books are mystical creatures to him" (p. 81). The world of the books is a symbol of a protected, 'warless world' to the custodian of library Hana but the pressures of reality at all times drags her back in the time of suffering. Kip, her lover, attempts to stamp out the threat in the villa-library by defusing the projected bomb(s) inside the library: "Bombs were attached to taps, to the spines of books" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 75).

Almsy and Hana use the textbooks as an escape from the past and the present simultaneously. Almsy, for instance, strives to bring back the room in the villa's account when Hana asks him to "take [her] somewhere" (p. 57). Almsy goes on to read from his usual text and visualize that "this must be Poliziano's room. This must have been the villa we are in ... It is a famous room. They all met here" (p. 56). Disregarding Hana's rational substantiation that the Villa San Girolamo was a military hospital after it was a convent, Almsy gives the record of influential men of the 15th century, for instance, "Pico and Lorenzo and Poliziano and the young Michelangelo [that] held in each hand the new world and the old world" (p. 57) in the same room of Villa San Girolamo where he sojourns. Almsy, with his imaginings, measures himself to Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, affirming that "Pico was his pet name as a child [and as] Poliziano stood on the grass hills smelling the future [... Pico was] down there somewhere as well, in his grey cell, watching everything with the third eye of salvation" (p. 58). Swiftly, Almsy breaks away from the present, and his thoughts turn to the manifestation of his past. Almsy proclaims himself Pico, a man who was put into prison for his love affair with the wife of an influential man and was almost murdered, just as Almsy was almost murdered for his love affair with Katherine. So, his usual text lets him temper his agony.

The intertext-story of Gyges and the Queen also recalls the story of Almsy, the English patient, and Katherine. This account tells the love-obsession of Candules, who felt prestigious among mankind, having the most beautiful wife. "To Gyges, the son of Daskylus [...] he used to describe the beauty of his wife, praising it above all measures" (p. 232). The story meanwhile explains the love affair between Almsy and Katherine, the wife of Clifton, who often bragged among the acquaintances about the beauty of her wife. *The English Patient* intertextuality the love affair of Gyges and Queen that clues the love affair of Almsy and Katherine and its similar consequences. Clifton is Candules who was conscious of the beauty of his wife, whereas the English patient (Almsy) is Gyges, who seduced the wife of Clifton (Candules). The descriptions of the Candules, Gyges and the Queen are the same as those of the English patient, Katharine and Clifton. In this sense, the use of such inter-texts refers to the accounts of particular characters in the novel.

Another well-known example, in this regard, is *The History* of Herodotus. Almsy always keeps this book with him. It deals with the conflict between East and West and explains the diametrically opposed "... wonderful deeds manifested by both Greeks and barbarians...together with the reason why they fought one another" (p. 240, emphasis added). However, Almsy's personal notes, adding his expressions or remnants of his life, written or pasted over Herodotus's book, make his book a changed version of *The History* of Herodotus:

This fictional volume seems to replicate and extend the wandering and separate nature of Herodotus's own *Histories* and to figure the authority of a history which comprises the personal with the public and the evidentially consequential with the merely contingent in discontinuous writing in differing modes. (p. 59)

However, (re)fashioning identity and reconsidering Almsy's available history on Herodotus, a guide for historians, does not close down the insecure effect of fictional, indigenous, national, or subjective accounts. For instance, when Katherine wishes to read Almsy's replica of Herodotus before they fall in love, he proclaims that it is secretive and comprises chosen annotations, cuttings and maps. Almsy's replica of *The Histories* signifies not only a part of Herodotus but also a part of himself. It includes the identity of Herodotus, the author, with the modifications of Almsy, the reader:

No more books. Just give me the Herodotus' ... I have seen editions of The Histories with a sculpted portrait on the cover. Some statue found in a French museum. But I never imagine Herodotus this way. I see him more as one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage. This history of mine ... has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument. (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 118-9)
Hence, history has become refashioned by Almasy; it is "mine."

I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, sets forth my history, that time may not draw the colour from what Man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds manifested by both Greeks and Barbarians ... together with the reason, they fought one another. (p. 240)

The subject 'I' does not only express Herodotus but also Almasy. A general account that is reachable to readers is regarded absolutely through Almasy's eyes. The volume of *The History* has backed Almasy. It reflects his past and his present. Nevertheless, this replication does not retrieve a single, decisive identity but the persistence of overlapping descriptions of the identity. The individuals' growing aptitude to distinguish different phases makes them simpler. Through the 'Histories', one can see the English patient (Almasy) as a complicated and ambiguous sign comprising many accounts. "[T]his simultaneous invitation to emotional investment and complication of identity ultimately allows for the novel's primary motion of revaluation" (Westerman, 2005, p. 353).

Almasy's multifaceted identity is unified by discussing different references. He is not the only character who utilizes texts to find his identity. The other characters are also developing in the story through various texts. Hana, first, inscribes the portrayal of Caravaggio in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. Cooper's text is earlier spoken in the novel as Hana fascinating into a world with an "aquamarine sky and lake ... , the Indian in the foreground" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 12). By inscribing a portrayal of Caravaggio in the textbook, Hana turns into an element of it and hence through her thoughts, can escape into other places. Similarly, Hana also turns to some particular text to get escape from this miserable milieu: "This was the time in her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell" (p. 7). Significantly, in *The English Patient* (1992), Hana goes back to the classical text, *The Last of the Mohicans*, as she states that she is a "Mohican of Danforth Avenue" (p. 224). The main theme of *The Last of the Mohicans* is the systematic annihilation of an ethnic group. Its references in the delimited text, *The English Patient*, explain Caravaggio's identity and the impact of war on the people. This text also makes a bridge between the WWII-massacre in *The Last of the Mohicans* and its anarchy in *The English Patient*. Both the events criticize imperialistic beliefs and attitude towards the Red Indians and the Indians of the Subcontinent.

Subsequently, another text, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, is often read by Hana. The main story revolves around the theme of domination of imperialism and suppression of the people of the Subcontinent. The story is about an Irish boy, Kim, who is manipulated by the British. This character is a reflection of Kip, who is also manipulated by the British to defuse the bombs to save the white people. He says to Hana, "I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from your country" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 283). Kip's reflection about his native place is the same as Kim's.

He says the gun – the Zam-Zammah cannon – is still there outside the museum in Lahore. There were two guns, made up of metal cups and bowls taken from every Hindu household in the city – as Jizya, or tax. These were melted down and made into guns. They were used in many battles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against Sikhs. (p. 118)

Hana also tries to find her identity through the text of *Kim*, merges her thoughts and expressions relating to Kim. She is intrigued about India, and Kipling's *Kim* gives her a window through which she peeps into the whole imperial structure of India. She tries to explore Indian culture through the character of Kim.

He sat in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zam-Zammeh, on her old platform, opposite the old Ajaib Gher, the Wonder House, as the natives called the Lahore Museum. Who hold Zam-Zammah, that 'fire-breathing dragon', hold Punjab, for the great green-bronze piece is always the first of the conquerors' loot. (p. 93)

While reading, *Kim* Hana thinks of herself as an Indian. But, her position has altered through her thoughts, irritated by other texts. Her affiliation with the English patient (Almasy) and his illustration by a usual text (*Kim*) allows her to establish this imaginative relief. She reads for the English patient and sometimes writes what he tells. He has spoken to her about the historic city, Lahore, in a textbook. "*He says Lahore is an ancient city. Landon is a recent town compared with Lahore. I say, Well, I come from an even newer country. He says they have always known about gun-powder. As far back as the seventeenth century, court painting recorded fireworks displays*" (p. 209, emphases added)

While reading these texts, Hana has run away into numerous fictional worlds and places. She also makes notes about her fellows on some of these textbooks. Her three male friends are introduced into various accounts of these texts by her writings. For example, at the blank page of *The Last of the Mohicans*, she gives introductory notes about Caravaggio There is a man named Caravaggio, a friend of my father's. I have always loved him. He is older

than I am, about forty-five, I think. He is in a time of darkness, has no confidence. For some reason, I am cared for by this friend of my father. (p. 61)

Such notes also give specific information about the characters which they do not express. Hana has built-in her exploration of her acquaintance and the expressions of different personas, thus moderate the boldness of the Mohicans and of Caravaggio, who endangered his life in World War II; the hybrid early life of Kip and Kim; and the uncertainty of an indiscriminate text of verse and of Almasy, whose past, and even name, is undisclosed in the major text of the delimited novel. Hana finds asylum in the texts that attach her to her former life or to the unfamiliar worlds:

She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams. (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 12)

Hana's reading to the texts to recall her past takes her in a childhood reminiscence of her father. Hence, texts help the (dis)placed individuals escape into their aboriginal places and into the unknown but desired worlds. Hana's intertextual escape into her belonging to Toronto, her childhood place where she felt free and secure during World War II, also recalls her father's teaching about hands and a dog's paws. Her father used to lean over his dog to smell its paws. This smell for him is the finest in the world as it tells the rumors of travel. However, Hana felt abhorrence:

[t]he smells of it never suggested dirt. It's a cathedral! Her father had said, so-and-so's garden, that field of grasses, a walk through cyclamen- a concentration of hint of all the paths the animal had taken during the day. A scurry in the ceiling like a mouse, and she looked up from the book again. (p. 8)

Like the smell of the dog's paws, the texts she read are a gateway for explorers to other places and times. Texts summon up nostalgias of different worlds away from the misfortunes of World War II. Hana's attachment with texts anticipates her escape into her past and into the illusory lives of different characters in other texts embedded in the delimited novel, for instance, those of Kim and the Mohicans, who do not represent the 'superior white culture' that she has up to that time experienced. However, she does not possess that white culture as she has been living among the men of unlike surroundings and considers herself another. This alienation makes her dislike even her own country, Canada, where she got education in nursing: "I wanted to go home, and there was no one at home" (p. 85). Although she has relatives in Canada and in Italy (in Villa San Girolamo), she fails to find comfort in any part of the world when she feels insecure in her home country.

Conclusion

Texts provide a flight from this sentiment of not belonging. "This feeling of being caught between cultures, or belonging to neither rather than to both ... is referred by Homi K. Bhabha and others as 'unhomeliness'" (Tyson, 1999, p. 368). Consequently, the diasporas are rephrasing their identities and in the center of 'unhomeliness', becoming something that used to be unknown to them. Their disturbance of cultural (dis)placement throughout World War II has made them lose their belonging to their home and their aboriginal identities. "To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres" (Bhabha, 1992, p. 141). Despite the fact that the diasporas do not have any desire to go back to their home countries until the bombarding on Japan, they do not fit in Italy (Europe) either. Their alienation from their surrounding world in World War II expresses their 'unhomeliness'. Their interests in the texts they have read frequently help them take hold of their new perceptions of their surrounding world wherein they have decided to live. Hence, the library and its texts/books undertake as an escape for the lost explorers. This escape room of texts lets them, mainly Hana and Almasy, review their recollections and establish their perceptions of their surrounding world. But, this escape through texts is provisional since every text has an end. *The English Patient* itself ends with the end of World War II, which ends at the dropping of the atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. This incident restrains the characters' longing for exploring the certainty of the war. The hope, which texts give to the (dis)placed characters to escape into the desired worlds, is shattered: "In the future, if and when the patient dies, Caravaggio and the girl will bury him. Let the dead bury the dead" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 286). Both Hana and Caravaggio think of leaving all that remind them of their stay in the war with Almasy/the English patient: "The body, the sheets, his clothes, the rifle" (p. 286). They have decided to bury all these things except the English patient's own volume of *The Histories*. The text, thus, will not allow them to forget the English patient. The characters' escape into the imaginary worlds through texts fails to convince them to reject the distress enforced on them during World War II regarding their bodies, names and places.

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