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**Across boundaries: A journey from the West to the East in *The English Patient* by
Michael Ondaatje**

**Transgraniczność: Podróż z Zachodu na Wschód w powieści „Angielski pacjent”
autorstwa Michaela Ondaatje**

Abstract. *The English Patient* is a novel written by Michael Ondaatje in 1992. He won the Booker Prize for Fiction due to this novel. Furthermore, *The English Patient* was made into a film which won nine Academy Awards in 1996. The story covers topics such as people's own roots and loss of national identity. As Ondaatje himself clarifies, *The English Patient* is about “All people born in one place who live in another place [and who] have lost their source”¹. The novel is set at the end of the Second World War and, therefore, there is a common feeling of confusion, of being lost shared by the majority of characters. In this essay, I shall attempt to identify and explain certain postcolonial issues specifically found in the novel. For instance, the loss of national identity since the World War II left a vast number of people repudiating their own country due to the atrocities committed by the “Whites”. As far as methodology is concerned, I will use Elleke Boehmer's book: *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (2005) as the primary source to my arguments. Besides, secondary bibliography as academic articles will be employed as well. Finally, I will include quotes from the book to illustrate postcolonial topics that could be found in the novel.

When I turned back... I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intention, had thought that all maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lines; I had to remind myself that they were not to be blamed for believing that there was something admirable in moving violence to the borders and dealing with it through science and factories, for that was the pattern of

¹ J. Procter, *British Council Global*, “Michael Ondaatje” 2008, <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/michael-ondaatje> (access: 18 April 2016).

the world. They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines².

Keywords: *The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje, national identity, postcolonial issues.

Abstrakt. „Angielski pacjent” to powieść napisana przez Michaela Ondaatje w 1992 roku i wyróżniona prestiżową Nagrodą Bookera. Na podstawie książki zrealizowano film, który zdobył dziewięć nagród Akademii Filmowej w 1996 roku. Przedstawiona w powieści historia podejmuje takie tematy jak ludzkie korzenie czy utrata tożsamości narodowej. Sam autor wyjaśnia, iż „Angielski pacjent” jest o „Wszystkich ludziach urodzonych w jednym miejscu, którzy żyli w innym miejscu [i którzy] stracili swoje źródło.” Akcja powieści rozgrywa się pod koniec II wojny światowej, co wiąże się z wszechobecnym uczuciem dezorientacji i zagubienia odczuwanym przez większość bohaterów. W tym artykule podejmę próbę zidentyfikowania i wyjaśnienia określonych kwestii postkolonialnych, które książka porusza. Odnośnie do metodologii, jako główne źródło mojej argumentacji będzie mi służyć książka Elleke Boehmer pt. „Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors” z 2005 roku. Postkolonialne wątki, które są poruszane w powieści, będą zilustrowane odpowiednimi cytatami.

Słowa kluczowe: „Angielski pacjent”, Michael Ondaatje, tożsamość narodowa, wątki postkolonialne

1. Loss of personal identity and national feeling

In *The English Patient* one of the main postcolonial issues is that of loss of personal identity. This topic is reflected on the burnt faceless unrecognisable Englishman in a literal manner. The man does not know who he is, his name or his profession. The rest of the characters do not know any personal information about him either. They only have a certainty about the unknown figure. They are quite convinced that he must be English due to his accent.

On the other hand, there is a metaphorical meaning of having lost your own identity. This vision is reflected on the rest of the characters, their faces, names and

² A. Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, London 1988, p. 257.

origins. Nevertheless, none of them feel like being at home in any place. This loss of personal identity and that of having lost their own roots is central to the story. Identity is depicted from the point of view of the margins, and it is constantly fighting for reaching a central position, although in both senses are „ex-centric”³. Ondaatje makes a particular use of history for his own benefit paying attention to “multi-voiced narratives spoken from unusual locations”⁴. Readers get the impression that all characters are, in a manner, united by their common hatred against war. None of them are comfortable in this guerrilla warfare. According to Pico Iyer, „Ondaatje in this book would be charting a map for a new kind of world; seeing how to disarm the instruments of war and national opposition; describing how broken individuals could be tended to and begin to heal; and offering a vision of deft appropriation”⁵.

Boehmer in her book makes references to this particular topic of identity and national feeling. Thus, identity is defined as being „based on a distinction of the self from what is believed to be not self. It is endemic to cultures to negotiate with what is not known, or between peoples or subjectivities unfamiliar to one another, on the basis of convention”⁶.

Basically, what Boehmer states is that the term identity is an artificial product made by human beings, it is conventional. The national feeling goes hand in hand with that idea of identity. As Benedict Anderson refers to ‘imagining the nation’, the nation implies artificiality, „a symbolic formation rather than a natural essence”⁷. Therefore, a nation is also artificial. People need to delimit space and countries. In order for a country to be united and powerful, its citizens need to share a common feeling of unity and love for the territory they live in.

In *The English Patient* characters suffer a sort of internal transformation. In the first stages of this transformation, they are completely lost. They are living in a place which is not their own home, not even their own country. They are in one side of a war which is not their own war. Hana, the Canadian army nurse, talks about the situation

³ H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London & NY 1994, p. 177.

⁴ B. Leckie, *Profiles in Canadian Literature*, “Michael Ondaatje” 1991, p. 28.

⁵ P. Iyer, *The English Patient*, “Introduction to *The English Patient: A Lost Oasis in the Midst of War.*” New Year, London & Toronto 2011, p. ix.

⁶ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2nd edition, Oxford & New York 2005, p. 76.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 176.

making reference to the Sikh, Kip: “Kip and I are both international bastards – born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere”⁸.

Nevertheless, all characters are together, as a unity in a universal space which is the villa San Girolamo. In this shared space, there are no longer either different nations or cultures. The villa is now the dwelling place where a group of people from different countries, cultures and even religions share habits, customs and are able to coexist. Ondaatje retells history but focusing on the individuality of each person and their relationships, „the margin and the centre, the personal and the public to solve the problems related to defining identity”⁹. In fact, it is through the story of the faceless man that the rest of the characters reflect upon their own loss of identity and origins¹⁰.

In most of the chapters, there is a shared feeling of hatred for nations. Characters perceive nations as divisions among territories which means tensions among citizens. Civilization in general is sick due to this obsession about dividing territories and producing clashes among the people who live in them. This is what characters are suggesting chapter after chapter, „Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states”¹¹. Divisions in territories provoke divisions in the minds of those people who inhabit them. Wars are caused due to the defence of these territories and to show supremacy over others. That is why „people betray each other for the sake of nations”¹².

An interesting point about the rewriting or revision of Ondaatje is that we encounter a different vision or perspective from European people. In this novel, the Europeans are against the war and they are concerned about what the Second World War is producing, the total devastation of the less favoured regions. Not only are these ‘White’ people conscious of what their own countries are destroying, but they also feel ashamed of being part of them. They utterly repudiate their own national identity; they

⁸ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, New Year, London & Toronto 2011, p. 155.

⁹ P. Kaur and J. P. K. Bhangu, *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL)*, “Negotiating Identity and History: Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*” 2013, nr 3.4, p. 17.

¹⁰ F. Birbalsingh, *Novels and the Nation: Essays in Canadian Literature*. Toronto & Oxford 1995, pp. 169-170.

¹¹ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient...*, p. 122.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 104.

do not want to belong to these countries anymore, „All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries”¹³.

In *The English Patient*, there is a movement called ‘colonial bastardy’ coined by Michael Ondaatje. This term is also illustrated by Boehmer who emphasises that modernism was viewed as the beginning of a process of global transculturation in literature. The colonial place is seen „as province to the Western city”¹⁴. The colonised place is doomed to be considered as a bastard of the Western city. The colonial place is deemed to have less status or rank than the coloniser or the empire. In fact, this is how Boehmer defines imperialism „[...] the authority assumed by a state over another territory – authority expressed in pageantry and symbolism, as well as in military and economic power”¹⁵.

Furthermore, in this postmodern literary period, the novel played an important role in the construction of the label ‘postcolonial’. Boehmer points out that the novel was used to „project autonomous identity, to re-create traditional, communal relationships within new national formations, or otherwise to promote socialist or collectivist forms of social bonding”¹⁶. In *The English Patient*, the reinterpretation of Ondaatje serves as a fictional example within a historical background. The novel is an aid to compare alternative realities to those history used to show us. Recapping historical trajectories which were silenced and lost roots are now found. In other words, postcolonial literature „critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship”. These sorts of writings are responses and resistances to the colonialist perspectives¹⁷.

This particular topic is tackled in the film by Anthony Minghella. The communal space of the villa is quite well depicted regarding the original source, the novel. All of the characters are very similar or almost identical to those who appear in the novel. The director presents well-constructed personalities from a psychological point of view, and the screenplay is almost a tracing of the original text. However, it is true that some parts of the novel remained subversive, while others less important from a postcolonial perspective are prominently detailed. We cannot forget that we are dealing with a Hollywood film, and, in this case we need an alluring hook. For instance, a romantic

¹³ Ibidem, p. 122.

¹⁴ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, p. 124.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 2.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 176.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 3.

love story with a tragic ending. Apart from that, the weight of different stories and points of view make the narration in the film quite complicated. As the director himself declared: „the novel’s oblique mosaic-like prose doesn’t automatically offer a narrative route. It has got a lot of stories, decentralised characters, and no obvious point of view”¹⁸.

2. Maps and territorial divisions as a human invention

Boehmer points out that the term colonialism is „metaphoric and cartographic”¹⁹. This means that colonisers were concerned with the importance of delimiting the colonised territories²⁰. As Boehmer clearly specifies [...] the „diffusionist’ interpretation of early twentieth-century cultural movements: a cartography of Europe as still the maker of the world’s meanings, and the native as the passive recipient of its interpretations”²¹. In fact, this statement is exemplified in other postcolonial work by Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In an essay dealing with the loss of national identity in this work, it can be read: „The essential subjectivity of Nigerian national identity is constrained by colonial Eurocentrism”²².

In *The English Patient* there are many allusions to the separation of territories in countries, lands and pieces of soil. Basically, countries were „‘mapped’ or spatially conceived using figures which harked back to home ground”²³. The symbolism of maps is a recurrent medium to analyse the artificiality of our nations. The world is compressed in a twofold sheet of paper in which the powerful nations are dominating or controlling the weakest ones. The debate in the novel is to what extent humans have the right to decide the limits to our world. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari claim that maps are experimental in terms of orientation; this orientation depends on which side draws the map: „The map is open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be

¹⁸ S. Jaireth, *UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, “Anthony Minghella’s *The English Patient*: Monoscopic Seeing of Novelistic Heteroglossia.” 1998, nr 4.2, p. 66.

¹⁹ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, p. 17.

²⁰ G. Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, “Decolonizing the Map”, London & NY 1995, p. 408.

²¹ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, p. 118.

²² A. Nimer A. Abu Jweid, *Pertanika J. Soc. Sci. & Hum.*, “The Fall of National Identity in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.” 2016, nr 24.1, p. 530.

²³ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, p. 17.

drawn on the wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation”²⁴.

Traditionally, the power of the empire was reflected upon how many territories were colonised, „They marked out a new region, where a new life could begin to unfold”²⁵. Therefore, colonisers were the “fathers” of the new population. Hence, the empire was supposed to have the supreme right to conquer the land and impose its beliefs, rules and customs. In the novel by Ondaatje, there is a lot of criticism about this issue, „The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence”²⁶. Furthermore, in the film there is a clear connection between the rejection of the character of the English patient to be owned by his lover, Katharine Clifton and the rejection to colonialism and drawing boundaries on maps:

It is the ownership on whose refutation the whole film hinges; for the anti-colonialist ethos of the film means challenging the will to ‘own’ and control the rest of the world by drawing boundaries (the symbolism of ‘maps’), by making a binary division between “us” and “them” and attributing superiority, and the right to command, to one side of this polarizing line and inferiority, and the obligation to obey and serve, to the other side²⁷.

The author reverses the established conception of territorial division. He wagers on a global perspective of the story. The term globalisation is depicted in the novel through characters’ behaviour by means of a common understanding among them.

It is true that we need maps to organise the world, but this does not imply the powerful against the powerless. In this world, we need collaboration because, as a matter of fact, the world is not „a two-dimensional sheet of paper”²⁸. The globe is far more complex than it is depicted in maps and so it is people’s minds, customs, religions and behaviours. This idea is reiterated both in the novel and the film:

I believe in such cartography – to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories,

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 12.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 18.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 124.

²⁷ B. Niroumand & H. Pirnajmuddin, *Studies in Literature and Language*, “An Earth without Maps.” 2012, nr 4.1, p. 138.

²⁸ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient...*, p. 141.

communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps²⁹.

I know some day you will carry me out into the palace of winds. That's all I have wanted, to walk in such a place with you, with friends, an earth without maps³⁰.

The English Patient is considered to be one of the first representations of a globalised world. Hence, one of the first attempts in reconciling the West and the East. Nevertheless, as the next chapter exposes, there is no such reconciliation at the end of the novel. The best contribution of Ondaatje to the novel is the ability to make 'European readers' feel ashamed of what their predecessors did to the West side in the Second World War.

3. Failure in reconciling the West and the East

As was mentioned previously, in *The English Patient* there is an attempt to reconcile nations, cultures and ultimately, the west side of the world with the east. This is symbolically represented in the relationship between Hana, the Canadian army nurse and Kip, the Indian Sikh. The former is the representation of the West in opposition to the latter, the Sikh which is the symbolic East and the colonised world in general. Hana describes him as „the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world”³¹. Therefore, Kip is the representation of the other, someone who is not part of their own culture. The representation of encounters with 'otherness'³² is also represented in a book by J. M. Coetzee: *Disgrace* (1999). As it occurs in the book by Coetzee, Kip is the humanization of „the trope of a stranger in the midst of apparent familiarity”³³. However, the character of David although being white, represents darkness: „the unwanted visitor, the man whose name is darkness”³⁴. And Kip is the opposite; he is the 'blackish' outsider but wanted since due to his help the rest of the

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 224.

³⁰ A. Minghella, *The English Patient*, Matrix 1996, min. 152.

³¹ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient...*, p. 171.

³² A. Van Der Vlies, *J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace*, London & NY 2010, p. 12.

³³ Ibidem, p. 34.

³⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, London & NY 1999, p. 168.

characters are able to survive among the vast number of bombs. In this case, the ‘other’ do not pose a threat for the rest of characters but totally the reversed situation.

The couple has a relationship while living in the villa. However, the Sikh abandons her due to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. The Sikh is no longer able to love someone who belongs to the race responsible for „the death of a civilization”³⁵. At the end of the novel, he runs away from that villa and those ‘White’ people seek a better place far away from injustice. This is what Boehmer calls “postcoloniality” or that condition in which „colonized people seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical agents in an increasingly globalized world”³⁶.

Nonetheless, in the film, the episode of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs does not have the weight it should. Perhaps, the story is more tragic through the lens of the romantic love story of Almásy (The English Patient) and Katharine that the real tragedy which took place in the Eastern world. Bearing in mind that this essay is about postcolonial issues, I am not going to take into account the peripheral stories which make the film more appealing to the audience. I must say that in the novel, this love story also took place but it is not central and has no meaning to our postcolonial analysis of the novel. As Jaireth points out: „Perhaps Minghella wanted to tell the tragic story of a romantic adventure, and when it began to take shape within that framework, the crystal set and Hiroshima and Nagasaki fell by the wayside as unwanted distractions. The narrative economy of his story demanded this”³⁷. In my opinion, the film forgets some of the most important postcolonial aspects of the novel but as the director says: „any number of versions [of the film] were possible and I’m certain that the stories I chose to elaborate say as much about my own interests and reading as they do about the book”³⁸.

Hana’s perspective of Kip is opposite. She is constantly praising Kip’s polite behaviour in the fact that „he believes in a civilized world. He’s a civilized man”³⁹. Therefore, in the novel, the Western citizen is the ‘barbaric’ one, the non-civilised, the one

³⁵ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient...*, p. 245.

³⁶ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, p. 3.

³⁷ S. Jaireth, “Anthony Minghella’s *The English Patient...*”, p. 60.

³⁸ A. Minghella, *The English Patient: A Screenplay*, London 1997, p. XV.

³⁹ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient...*, p. 108.

who is murdering in order to impose their culture. In the film also, Minghella undermines „the clichés of the non-Europeans as stupid and incompetent”⁴⁰.

Hana reminds of Doris Lessing’s character, Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* (1950). „The colonial ruling power dictates that she as an individual has to behave according to the terms imposed by her imperial identity”. In fact, both of them are heroines in the novel since both “reverse[s] the social, racial and cultural orders of [her] society”⁴¹, in different manners; Mary Turner in an unconscious or passive manner and Hana consciously active. Regarding this, Hana changes considerably according to the novel or the film. In the novel, she is far more active, she is the listener to the English patient’s stories but she also writes a diary and letters. However, in the film she is more an „interlocutor and a listener, a lens as well as a viewer, a springboard from which the patient tries to reach the realms of his memories. As an interlocutor, however, she is passive. She is not required to talk”⁴².

On the other hand, the Eastern citizen is the righteous, the civilised, and the one who believes in a harmonious relationship among individuals, irrespective of their religion, culture, or origin. Historically speaking, in 1835, Macaulay, the British historian and Whig politician supported giving a European education to Indians due to the benefits of encouraging ‘civilized’ behaviour and hence profitable trade among former ‘savages’⁴³. What the romantic relationship between Hana and Kip suggests: a possible reconciliation between West and East is totally denied in Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (1950). In this novel, a relationship between Whites and Blacks is seen as:

[...] ‘white civilization’ which will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ B. Niroumand & H. Pirnajmuddin, “An Earth without Maps.”, p. 137.

⁴¹ S. Aghazadeh, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, “Sexual-Political Colonialism and Failure of Individuation in Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*.” 2011, nr 12.1, p. 120.

⁴² Jaireth, “Anthony Minghella’s *The English Patient*...”, p. 67.

⁴³ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, p. 35.

⁴⁴ D. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, London, New York, Sydney, Ontario, Johannesburg & Auckland 1980, p. 27.

As Boehmer points out, both settlers and native writers found themselves in conflicted collaboration with European cultural forms such as ‘the nation, identity and civilization’ in order to construct a ‘real’ or rooted identity⁴⁵.

The roles and the stereotypes associated to each part of the world are interchanged. As stated previously, one of the most prominent issues in this topic is how Hana admires Kip. She is constantly talking about the way „she learns all the varieties of his darkness”⁴⁶. She assumes that there is no difference between them since when they are alone they always are „equal in darkness”⁴⁷. Thus, Kip’s blackness or black skin⁴⁸ is not a matter of distinction but of admiration, of beauty. Contrary to what had been considered, „the dark associations to alterity [...] remained largely indescribable and horrific”⁴⁹.

Ondaatje portrays a sublime description of the East world as the civilised one in contrast to the West which is the cause of war, death and devastation. In fact, characters representing the West are in the other side; in the side of the colonised. The hatred and repulsion for war are the shared feelings expressed by all the characters. European people, or in more general terms, White people representative of the Empire are responsible for the Second World War, and in consequence for thousands of deaths; „American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman”⁵⁰. Due to the dominance of the British Empire in India, the rest of the European countries were rapidly put under the same umbrella.

In the novel, people from the West realise that the construction of nations has led to warfare and devastation. At the very end, they realise that the past cannot be changed but revisited to find a solution. As Joseph Pesch comments, „With the sense of historical progress and civilization at an end, the characters are shown returning to the past in an attempt to stabilize their lives”⁵¹.

⁴⁵ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, p. 110.

⁴⁶ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient...*, p. 111.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 194.

⁴⁸ F. Fanon, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, “The Fact of Blackness”, London & NY 1995, pp. 323-326.

⁴⁹ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, p. 90.

⁵⁰ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient...*, p. 245.

⁵¹ Qtd. in J. Bolland, *Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient: A Reader’s Guide*, “The Novel”, New York 2002, p. 67.

Another important issue is how the term mimicry is presented. The postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha in his *Location of Culture*⁵² has described how „the act of doubling the white man’s image in effect displaced the representations of authority”⁵³. The example of mimicry is represented through Kip, the Indian Sikh who is fighting for the British. He is criticised by their relatives and friends for not being faithful to his country, „Although he is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son”⁵⁴. He is conscious that he is defending a country which just imposes beliefs, customs and even a language to his own one. He is working for the same people who are forcing and conquering his people and country. Nevertheless, he has no choice. He is forced to be either on the British side, or he is against it. As the narrator critically remarks, „What he saw in England was a surfeit of parts that would keep the continent of India going for two hundred years”⁵⁵. When a place is colonised that place is no longer the same. It loses its origins, roots and the citizens lose their autochthonous national identity: „I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from your country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world”⁵⁶.

However, Kip breaks totally with his ‘European side’ when the atomic bombs were unleashed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 which meant the end of the Second World War⁵⁷. He left Hana since he could not stand being around European people. This is the end of a war, the end of the book and the end of any possibility of reconciliation between the West and the East: „If he could walk across the room and touch her he would be sane. But between them lay a treacherous and complex journey. It was a very wide world”⁵⁸.

On the other hand, as said previously in connection to Hana, ‘White’ characters in this book are not on the side of colonisers. They feel more identified with the East, the ‘others’ rather than their own countries and compatriots. This is reflected quite clearly through the pages, for instance in this statement, „Some of the English love

⁵² H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture...*, p. 75.

⁵³ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, pp. 163-164.

⁵⁴ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient...*, p. 187.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 243.

⁵⁷ F. Birbalsingh, *Novels and the Nation: Essays in Canadian Literature*. Toronto & Oxford 1995, p. 171.

⁵⁸ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient...*, p. 100.

Africa. A part of their brain reflects the desert precisely. So they're not foreigners there"⁵⁹.

The English Patient has been written based upon several fictional stories in a historical and real background. Ondaatje employs a postmodern vision, challenging the official version from the past, „all fragments of a communal book that challenge the frontiers between fact and fiction"⁶⁰.

4. Conclusion

The English Patient is the story of „a mind travelling east and west in the disguise of sandstorm"⁶¹. Empathy among characters is reflecting during the whole process of psychological healing across the pages. They have a strong necessity of each other in order to survive and later on, to heal the psychological injuries subsequent to World War II. In fact, this is not a story of divisions or clashes but of reassembling the little pieces of each of the characters. Nevertheless, some of them were so broken that there was no possible solution for them.

What Ondaatje has achieved with *The English Patient* has been what Boehmer calls 'subversion by imitation'. This term means „a mode constantly enacted in the bending and 'misshaping' of the English language by postcolonial writers around the world today"⁶².

Michael Ondaatje is considered to be a diasporic writer. He is part of the East, since he was born in Sri Lanka. However, he writes from the Western perspective and using the English language as a powerful weapon. He writes using the language of the colonisers to criticise what they have done while ruling other countries. Ashcroft et al. (1989)⁶³ have pointed out that postcolonial literatures are the result of geographical and psychological displacement. Hence, the originality of Ondaatje's work, as well as other postcolonial authors, resides in how he counterattacks the First World employing the language they used to impose to them. In other words, Ondaatje's use of English and not

⁵⁹ Ibidem, p. 34.

⁶⁰ L. Resma, *Postcolonial and Multicultural Canada, Histories Reclaimed and Borders Transgressed: The Narratives of Michael Ondaatje and Joy Kogawa*, UNED 2010, p. 173.

⁶¹ M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient...*, p. 214.

⁶² E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, p. 165.

⁶³ B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London 1989.

his vernacular language denotes a mastering of not only the language, but the global culture and literature. That is the reason why some postcolonial authors are called 'diasporic writers'. They moved from their original places to other countries of the First World to become well-known writers. This geographical displacement to which I have referred previously originates a psychological displacement as well. This process is the helper to the author while writing a postcolonial fiction. Only when they get immersed in the 'Western society' they are able to compare and understand what happened in their own countries and the process of Colonialism and the later Postcolonialism.

Thus, what Michael Ondaatje, as well as other writers such as Paul Gilroy or Stuart Hall have achieved, was the creation of a „connection, a commitment to uniting what colonialism put asunder, linking the Third World and the First, and, above all, emphasizing how the experience of the one has for so long been bound up in that of the other”⁶⁴.

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⁶⁴ E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature...*, p. 234.

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