

On the Existentialism Themes of *The English Patient*

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Abstract: Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* is an outstanding masterpiece. Since its publication in 1992, it has been awarded many prizes including the Governor General's Award, the Trillium Award and the internationally respected Booker Prize. These awards obtain its author's worldwide attention. The world under Ondaatje's pen is a chaotic and irrational world. The characters he pictures discard traditional values and faith and live a nihilistic and miserable life. The story narrates that in the summer of 1945 when the Second World War was about to end, four people from different countries gathered in an Italian villa, taking with them their own etchings gained from the war. This paper, based on the theory of existentialism, studied the existentialism themes as absurdity and nihilism of the world and people.

Keywords: *The English Patient*; absurdity; existentialism; nihilism

1. Introduction

1.1 Michael Ondaatje and *The English Patient*

Michael Ondaatje, poet, novelist, filmmaker, and editor, Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan-born Canadian novelist and poet of Colombo Chetty and Burgher origin. He is perhaps best known for his Booker Prize-winning novel, *The English Patient*, as adapted into an Academy-Award-winning film. Michael Ondaatje's work often blends or counterpoises the factual and the imaginary, poetry and prose. His longer narrative works, often based on the unorthodox lives of real people, may contain documentary as well as fictional accounts (Barbour, 1993: 45). His work is also notable for its cinematic qualities in its frequent use of montage techniques and dramatic dialogue.

The story copes with the gradually revealed histories of a critically burned English accented Hungarian man, his Canadian nurse, a Canadian-Italian thief, and an Indian sapper in the British Army as they live out the end of World War II in an Italian villa. The narrative is non-linear and the main characters are examined in depth and detail chronologically, the fragmentary narrative and the shifting between the present and the past have obscured the boundary of time. By his narration, he fulfills their creative intentions, and reinforces the performance of existential themes.

1.2 Existentialism of the Novel

The English Patient is recognized as one of the most successful post-modern novels, which wins the Booker Prize, and at the same time, the world reputation for Ondaatje. Since its publication in 1992, it has received extensive concern from the critics, some of which concentrates on its characterized style, and some are devoted to the humanistic consciousness it shows for the third world people (Bush: 1998:45).

Existentialism is one of the most popular and influential philosophies in the twentieth century. The existentialists' opinions are that the world is absurd and human life is nihilistic. Nihilism is the basic state of human existence. On the basis of nihilism, existentialists emphasize individual freedom of choice and action. These opinions are displayed in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Ondaatje vividly depicts a world of war. This world is chaotic and irrational, full of blood, gunpowder and corpse. In this world, the whole truth of man's essential conditions is suffering, pain, disillusionment and death. The world is the absurd world in existentialists' eyes. The war is a calamity for civilization because it destroys traditional values and moral systems. People involved in it are so shocked that they lose religious faith and life ideal, and degenerate into a profound disillusionment. They are miserable and purposeless. They live a nihilistic life. Ondaatje successfully conveys existential themes: the absurdity of the world and the nihilism of life in times of war in *The English Patient*.

The world under Michael Ondaatje's pen is a chaotic and irrational world. The characters he describes discard traditional values and faith and live a nihilistic and miserable life. These opinions are in accordance with the existentialist philosophy which is rising in the twentieth century. Existentialism mainly explores human existence, the absurdity of the world and the meaninglessness and purposelessness of life.

2. The Absurdity of the World in *The English Patient*

To understand the Existentialism in literature, first we must understand what the Existentialism is. Existentialism is a body of somewhat loosely associated philosophical doctrines which was inaugurated by Kierkegaard in a violent reaction against the all-encompassing absolute idealism of Hegel. It found modern expression in the work of such writers as Sartre, Heidegger, Camus and Jaspers. It became an important set of themes in world literature, especially during the 20th century (Barnes, 1999). Several of the major underlying themes can be singled out as characteristic. (1) The external world man finds himself in is chaotic and absurd, and the only sure future he can see for himself is death. (2) Human beings are alienated from one another because their personal experiences are fragmented in a modern world marked by disintegration and disorder. (3) Each individual must create his own being in his specific environment by making a series of choices free from society. He cannot escape the responsibility for his character by shifting it onto fate or other external forces (Sartre, 1971). The positive side of existentialism is that it produced interpretive concepts which have greatly extended the area of man's moral self-knowledge and self-awareness. Its limitation has to do with the narrowness of vision caused by existentialists confined scope of personal experiences as petty-bourgeois intellectuals. From here we can see the existentialism reflected in novel as the absurdity of life in times of anarchy; the nihility of life in the war; the uncertainty of the world. Since the universe is indifferent, man experiences the world as absurd, which is a prime theme of existentialism.

With the fundamental theme of embracing existence, existentialism tends to focus on the individual's subjective awareness of his style of existence, his intimate interaction with himself, and his environment, which is illustrated by Ondaatje in *The English Patient*. Ondaatje created an absurd world in which he expressed his special comprehension of life. In their different ways, all the individuals in the villa have endured physical and psychological wounds, and as Ondaatje suggests, "it is a book about very tentative healing among a group of people. I think it is that most of all." During the war and this was where the healing began" (Balliett, 1992:162). In *The English Patient*, the characters have to face the cold external world. Living in such a world, the characters are always in adverse circumstances and are confronted with numerous difficulties. They feel depressed, lonely, scared and even despaired. They are all victims of the violence of a war, the uncertainty world. The novel presents the theme of the absurdity of the world; nihility of life in times of war.

Many existentialists think that the world is absurd. Kierkegaard, the representative of the theistic existentialists, in his formation of his definition of truth, says that "the highest truth attainable for an existing individual is an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation—process of the most passionate inwardness" (Kierkegaard, 1956:251). By this "objective uncertainty" he means that the world is conflicts absurd, and seemingly chaotic. Existentialists believe the world is absurd. The society is chaotic and irrational full of conflicts, crimes and deaths while people living in it, facing incomprehensible disasters and misfortunes, are always miserable, existentialists naturally come to a conclusion that the world is absurd, and usually the absurdity of the world is presented through all kinds of things like chaos of the world, irrationality of people, cruelty of the world and so on. This world is the alien world or the absurd world called by existentialists.

2.1 The Chaos in the War

The novel starts with the description of many chaotic scenes in the war. The first is the scene "The space inside seemed safe except for a large hole at portrait level in the far wall, caused by mortar-shell attack on the villa two months earlier. The rest of the room had adapted itself to this" (Ondaatje, 1993: 22). The attack on the villa implicates the chaos in the war. It is really a chaotic scene. Then, by describing autumn rains, bare branches, mist, muddy roads, cholera and dirty soldiers with wet cloaks, the author not only presents the chaos in the war with expression, but also profoundly expresses the meaning of frustration and death.

This novel regard the war as background, but most of the scenes are outside the battlefield. Only the third chapter directly demonstrates the flames and gunpowder smoke on the battlefield. This chapter is

relevant to Kip and his peers implementing their task on Italian front. They suffering the unprecedented chaos in the battle. Besides the fighting scenes, we can see the descriptions of the scenes after the battle in some chapters. Hana's life with the English patient in Villa, Kip experiences the chaos in the war. From the depiction of the children and the old in the war, we can seem as feel the chaos in the world of the novel. In the town many houses are destructed, with plaster and rubble in their gardens and sometimes in the street. There are only the stumps and broken trunks left in the place where the green trees grow well and the ground is torn up.

All of these depictions show that the world is in a chaotic state. Even in Villa which keep away from the battlefield, we can see some things in disorder as well. In Milan's races, many things are not dealt with according to rules. It seems that nothing is in order.

2.2 The Chaos of People Life

The world in the war is chaotic and people can not have a normal life, they always haunted by depression, fear and misery. Therefore, their lives are often chaotic and disorderly.

Factually most of the characters in the novel live in a chaotic and disorderly state because the world of war is chaotic and disorderly. This world is called by existentialists the alien world or the absurd world. So the world under Ondaatje's pen and the world in existentialists' eyes have much in common.

2.3 The Irrationality of the World

The writer thinks absurdity exists in every aspect of human society. In *The English Patient*, he fully shows the irrationality and absurdity of the world. The outside world is full of war, violence, and death. Living in this world, people are threatened by kinds of dangers and they are spiritually nervous, so they are irrational. Caravaggio is a thief before the war, but he became the legitimate spy for the state. The war can make the irrationality legitimate. Almsy becomes a spy for German, he is an expert before. The lives of the sappers in the war are irrational. There are several absurd events in the war. During the war, many soldiers have forgotten their nationalities. They came to another country, and they do not know why there is a fight and what the war is for. Soldiers who are unaware of their identities and no purpose fight in the war. These are very ridiculous things. But this is an uncertain world, everything is absurd and confusing.

3. Nihilism of Life in Times of War in The English Patient

What is nihilism? Nihilism is nothingness. The one of representatives of existentialism, Martin Heidegger, thinks nihilism is the negation of existence. Man is unexpectedly abandoned in this lonely world. The world itself is mysterious and incomprehensible, so he feels that the world and the environment he lives in are meaningless. They are nothing. Sartre holds that nihilism is not only the negation of existence, but also the negation of our concrete existence. Therefore, one can perceive nothingness not only through the extreme fear, pain or disgust of existence, but also through the frustration or emptiness of the trivialities of daily life. Sartre himself was a man who denied religion and abandoned traditional values. In his opinion, human beings are miserable in this absurd and cruel world. The world brought him endless boredom and disappointment, life is painful. In short, life is nihilistic, the collapse of the ideal of life and the consciousness of pain reveal the nihilism of life. In his works, Ondaatje expresses nihilistic ideas in his work such as complete negation of historical traditions and moral beliefs, and sentiments of pessimism and world-weariness (Totony, 1999:281). In his works, the world is cruel, absurd and incomprehensible. Living in this world, people feel alienated from the world and become an abandoned, lonely and meaningless existence. They can't find any meaning in existence. The war brought them lasting physical pain and mental trauma, so that they fell into the abyss of helplessness and confusion.

3.1 Collapse of Ideal Life and Misery

In *The English Patient*, all the leading figures in the villa have experienced physical and psychological trauma, Ondaatje said, "this is a book about a group of people trying to heal. I think this is the most important, it represents escape and spells the end of dead. During the war, this was the beginning of healing" (Roxborough:1999:121). Their life experience is the best example of a miserable life. They are victims of the violence of war and the uncertainty of the world. In the war, Hanna lost

three relatives and Caravaggio lost his finger. British patient were burned to the ground, and Kips risked his life for the colonists, far from home. Their stories relate to the themes of existentialism: the absurdity of the world, the nihilism of life, and the uncertainty of the victims.

In their different ways, all the individuals in the villa have endured physical and psychological wounds, Hanna suffered a great deal of pain, both physically and mentally, like ruins. During the war, she lost almost all her loves her father, her boyfriend and unborn children. As a nurse, she sees blood or death all the time. Her faith and hope were destroyed and ruined in the war. In a battle, she talked to her baby who was unborn, worked hard at the hospital but avoided anyone, and she even looked a little crazy.

From the above we can see clearly what Hanna went through during the war. So she decided to isolate herself from the pain of life and live in a villa with burned British patient She considered him a “desperate saint”, hoping to find redemption from him. It was clear, however, that Almsy could not save her, because his life was limited and Hanna could not rely on him. After that, Kip’s appearance seemed to give Hanna hope because he gave her sense of security. However, because of their completely different cultures and backgrounds, they were doomed not to be together. When Kip heard of the Hiroshima bomb, he left Hannah and the place firmly and decisively. Anyway, Hanna made a lot of choices and struggles to find hope for life, but in the end, she was looking for No one, not even God, could give her comfort and salvation. Her faith and spirit had been destroyed, and she felt exhausted, confused and confused. British patients and Kip are in the same state of life. Even though Hanna still has the right of choice in such an absurd and painful situation, she still shows pain and hopelessness in life.

4. Conclusion

The existentialists’ opinions are that the world is absurd and human life is nihilistic. Nihilism is the basic state of human existence. On the basis of nihilism, existentialists attach emphasis to individual freedom of choice and action. This world is chaotic and irrational, teeming with blood, gunpowder and corpse. In this world, the whole truth of man’s essential conditions is suffering, pain, disillusionment and death. The world is the absurd world in existentialists’ eyes. The war is a calamity for civilization because it destroys traditional values and moral systems. People involved in it are so shocked that they lose religious faith and life ideal, and degenerate into a profound disillusionment. They are miserable and purposeless. They live a nihilistic life. The life experience of things to express the pain of life, the absurdity of the world and the hopelessness of life. Even if people had the right to choose freely, they could not escape the fuss of fate. However, with the development of existentialism, an increasing number of scholars pay attention to looking for hope in despair.

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