

# Triple Ecological Imbalance in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

Qiong Pei

Suqian University, Suqian, Jiangsu, 223800, China

**Abstract:** *The English Patient* is a masterpiece by Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje. The book won the Booker Prize, the highest award in English fiction when it was published. Since the publication of *The English Patient*, scholars have interpreted and discussed the novel from different perspectives. This article employs Lu Shuyuan's ecological trichotomy to explain the imbalance in Natural Ecology, Social Ecology, and Spiritual Ecology in *The English Patient*, revealing Michael Ondaatje's concerns over human destiny in wars.

**Keywords:** Michael Ondaatje; *The English Patient*; Spiritual ecology; Social ecology

## 1. Introduction

Michael Ondaatje is a well-known Canadian author with a stellar reputation. He was born and raised in Sri Lanka, studied in London, and eventually moved to Canada. Ondaatje appears to have had a more varied life experience than the majority of us. He is also a representative of colonialism's legacy and a testimony to multiculturalism. It was *The English Patient* that put Ondaatje among the internationally acclaimed writers.

### 1.1 Michael Ondaatje and *The English Patient*

Michael Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka in 1943. He is of English, Sri Lankan, and Dutch ancestry. When he was two years old, his parents divorced. He was transferred to Britain to study when he was 11 years old, where he began to obtain a Western education. He emigrated to Canada after eight years of education in England and received Canadian citizenship in 1962, and now a literature professor at York University.

He began his literary career as a poet at the age of 24, but he demonstrated his abilities not only in poetry but also in book writing. *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) was his first novel, and *The English Patient* established his literary fame. He was even given the highest accolade by the former president of Sri Lanka in 2005 for his academic performance in literature, making him the first person to get this honor.

### 1.2 Literature review

Over the years, a large number of studies have been carried out on *The English Patient* from various angles, and there are abundant materials for reference. Most interpretations are from the perspectives of post-colonialism, image analysis, thematic studies, etc. Christopher Mcveigh's *The Present Past: Michael Ondaatje and Historic Ontology*, taking *The English Patient* as an example, discusses the relationship between the body, history, and the state. The article argues that *The English Patient* provides dramatic answers to questions of national belonging and national community, while also expressing a desire to escape or transcend nationality and history. In China, there is a thesis on *Image Analysis in Michael Ondaatje's Novel The English Patient*. This thesis analyzes the meanings of different images in the works from the three directions of a natural image, spatial image, and characteristic image, and believes that Ondaatje's answers to questions such as war and the conflict between Eastern and Western cultures are hidden in the images. Wu Baolian's thesis *A Study of Cultural Identity in The English Patient from the Perspective of Homi Bhabha's Post-Colonial Theory* uses the postcolonial theory of Homi Bhabha to analyze the hybrid and contradictory state of Almasy and Kip's cultural identities<sup>[10]</sup>. In addition, there are some other researches, such as analyzing *The English Patient* from the perspectives of post-nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Specifically, Yu Jia's

dissertation *A Post-national Study of Possession in Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient*<sup>[11]</sup>; Xu Jingyao's dissertation *A Study of Michael Ondaatje's Cosmopolitanism in The English Patient*<sup>[12]</sup>.

It can be seen that research on *The English Patient* is flourishing, but research theses from the perspective of Ecocriticism are rarely seen. Among the small number of theses examining the ecological value of *The English Patient*, Huang Junnan's mastery thesis *A Study of The English Patient from the Perspective of Eco-criticism*, which studies the relationship between man and nature before the war, people's identities were distorted after the collapse of their homes during the war, and people's efforts to reconstruct their identities after the war. It excavates the ecological factors contained in *The English Patient* but ignores the ecological relationship between people<sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, this article will extend the social ecology and spiritual ecology of *The English Patient*.

## 2. Imbalance in Natural Ecology

### 2.1 The ruined villa

In *The English Patient*, the author sets the main scenes of the story in deserts and villas. From pre-war time to post-war time, from the peaceful desert to the abandoned villa where the Germans left landmines, the natural ecology has changed from the harmony between man and nature into a destroyed after-war world.

Although the desert is a barren place in individuals' ordinary understanding, the ecological deterioration is particularly serious, but the desert before the war was an open space where people of different ethnic groups and cultures realized their ideals. "We knew each other's intimacies, each other's skills and weaknesses."<sup>[8]</sup> Human beings lived in harmony with nature. The desert was peaceful and human beings were peaceful. Almásy liked the feeling that there was no identity and nationality in the desert because everyone was committed to understanding and embracing nature without destroying the tranquility. During the inspection period, the members of the group were closely related and knew each other. They were like a community and an oasis society where everyone contributed to the group. The desert before the war was a space shared by many ethnic groups. The expedition team members from different countries coexisted peacefully with nature and achieved extraordinary results in desert exploration.

The post-war villa was a closed space, isolated from the world, and looked like a ruin from the outside. It used to be a stage of guilt and despair, and it was destroyed. From time to time there was lightning, thunder, and rain in the villa. There were also landmines left by the German army, which threatened life at any time. Four physically and mentally damaged people gather in this broken natural ecology that has experienced war due to different circumstances:

"Some rooms could not be entered because of rubble. One bomb crater allowed moon and rain into the library downstairs--where there was in one corner a permanently soaked armchair."<sup>[8]</sup>

The villa they lived in was ruined, and the presence of rubble and the ever-soaked armchairs proved that it was a ruin. Moreover, their residence was not only uninhabitable but also had security risks. "In the library, Hana takes The Last of the Mohicans off a shelf and walks backward out of the room, stepping into her footprints<sup>[8]</sup>." Hana had to follow her footsteps back so she didn't trip over an unknown bomb off the path. This reflects the level of insecurity in the villa. Ondaatje questions the idea of basing one's prosperity on exploiting one's fellow beings and the natural world<sup>[4]</sup>. In the novel, the ruined appearance of the villa and the degree of insecurity reflect the importance of natural ecology to human beings. Human beings should not destroy their homes, because human beings and the environment are interdependent. When human beings destroy other parts other than human beings, it is equivalent to destroying themselves. When human beings have nothing to depend on, and their environment is like the scene in *The English Patient*, then human beings are not far from illness and spiritual ecological imbalance. All living things in nature are interconnected and interrelated with no clear boundaries. So, The Declaration of Interdependence published in 1976 states pointed out: "The earth is a part of our 'body' and we must learn to respect it as ourselves; just as we love ourselves, we must also love all life on this planet."<sup>[3]</sup>

### 2.2 The plight of animals and plants

Lu shuyuan suggests that the task of ecocriticism is not only to advocate a reconnection of human beings to nature but to instill a concept, a sense of the "environmental" of human existence so that

everyone will realize that "he is only part of the earth's biosphere in which he inhabits"<sup>[6]</sup>. "Ecology teaches us that humans are not the center of life on this planet. Ecology tells us that the entire planet is a part of our 'body' and that we must learn to respect it as much as ourselves. Feel all life forms as we feel ourselves--whales, seals, forests, oceans."<sup>[2]</sup> But readers can see the condition of green plants in the novel: "bombed-out orchard"<sup>[8]</sup>, "ancient meadow scarred by phosphorus bombs and explosions"<sup>[8]</sup>. Almost all of the green plants that surround the villa were damaged during the conflict. but Ondaatje further questioned the years of human violence against plants, writing: "The rock outcrops are surrounded by stretchers, butchered vineyards, where, if you dug deep under the tank rut, you will find blood axes and spears"<sup>[8]</sup>. Dilapidated vineyards, where axes and spears can be found under tank ruts, are representative of the green plants that have always suffered from war. The result is not only harm to the plant itself; on a higher level, it also harms ancient laws of nature. "Bombs were drilled into fruit trees so an apple falling onto a lower branch would detonate the tree"<sup>[8]</sup>; this behavior can be seen as interrupting the fruit's growth process, leading to the extinction of the tree. In presenting the tragic images of these plants, Ondaatje does not forget to remind readers that there was lush green life before the war, as he writes of "the dead plants that used to grow in warm rooms"<sup>[8]</sup>.

Similar to the damage to green plants, the novel also mentions the suffering caused by humans to non-human animals. Although some people think that human beings are a higher-order existence, Lu Shuyuan believes that human beings are a link in the ecosystem. Humans and the blue sky, white clouds, mountains, rivers, birds, and beasts are equal and closely related in the sense of existence. Human beings should assume the role of a maintainer and should not destroy the ecosystem on which human beings depend. It has been proposed that we "give them rights equivalent to our own" <sup>[1]</sup> in the case of animals; regrettably, the animals in the story are represented as being mistreated by humans. A dog broke into the villa, causing Caravaggio to exclaim "I haven't seen a dog in years. In the whole war, I haven't seen a dog"<sup>[8]</sup>. His lament reveals the absence of dogs during the war, urging readers to imagine our interference with animal habits and how many other animals apart from dogs have disappeared. In addition to the disappearance of animals in the war, the violence of humans against animals in the novel is also quite cruel. Caravaggio was informed by a nurse that the situation in Tuscany was "still horrific," with dead cows and "horses shot and partly devoured"<sup>[8]</sup>. Some horses were not shot, but as Kip dashed away from the villa, passing through Urbino, where "the Germans have burned all the enemy's wild horses," they met a sad end<sup>[8]</sup>. Innocent animals are subjected to human hatred; instead of being friends with people, they become victims of human hatred, which has a huge impact on the biological whole.

### 3. Imbalance in Social Ecology

"Lu Shuyuan believes that people are social beings and social ecology is reflected in the relationship between people"<sup>[6]</sup>. "A balanced social ecology is important for the well-being of human beings. In the novel, people's ability to communicate has been lost, and the unease of the post-war social environment has penetrated the emotional realm of individuals with its great power, all these things cause the imbalance of social ecology and the alienation of social relations. As a result of these, the happiness of human beings is at stake.

Family ties were alienated in the after-war world, Hana has a very good relationship with her father. Her father is the man who patiently taught her to recognize dog paws, accompanied her to friends' birthday parties, encouraged her to sing loudly, and told her one story that dwarfs only drink on the piano. But it was a major blow to Hana that such a warm person died alone in the war. Because her father was burnt, which was similar to Almasy, Hana regarded Almasy as her own father's replacement and cared for Almasy like taking care of her father. Hana seeks redemption in Almasy, "and she seems to have locked herself up with the dying man upstairs"<sup>[8]</sup>, "she binds into a rigid relationship with Almasy.

Meanwhile, Caravaggio develops strange feelings for Hana, whom he considers his daughter. Caravaggio called Hana "dear worm"<sup>[8]</sup>, which was what Hana's father called her. The alienation of social relations makes people get along strangely. When Caravaggio calls Hana "dear worm"<sup>[8]</sup>, "Hana "looked at Caravaggio strangely"<sup>[8]</sup>.

Furthermore, something harder for Hana is that she killed her unborn baby by herself. "I mean, the child didn't just die, I was the one who destroyed it"<sup>[8]</sup>. Such merciless murder of her child just happened to a caring nurse. The distortion of motherhood was also an embodiment of an imbalanced social ecology.

The relationship between Caravaggio and Almasy was tense, because Caravaggio suspected that Almasy was the spy who indirectly framed him. Caravaggio lost his thumb due to a leaked map. Losing his thumb was a huge blow to him, hurting him physically and mentally. In normal social ecology, there should be no conflict between people getting along with each other. Humans are social animals, and the social ecology in which they live has undergone changes, which will inevitably affect the interaction between people and cause the alienation of social relations.

Similarly, the relationship between Hana and Kip is also full of vigilance. In normal society, the relationship between people is warm, harmonious, relaxed, and happy. But the relationship between Hana and Kip is cold, tense, and uncomfortable. Hana finally opens herself after so much suffering and life's fragility, She has a crush on Kip, but Kip seems indifferent to her love and even hides himself from her. "Hana thinks, the rest of us to him are just periphery<sup>[8]</sup>." For example, he pitched a tent in the yard and never approached Hana unless Hana came to him. Such a state of indifference shows the insecurity of the social ecology at that time.

When coming to romantic relationship, we can see Katharine's extramarital affair with Almasy destroyed the ecological relationship and brought difficulties to the people around her. "Only Madox who was an aristocrat with a past of regimental associations, knew about such discreet convolutions. Only Madox, with considerable tact, warned me about such a world<sup>[8]</sup>." The British power behind Clifton is huge, the bodyguards in this force will besiege their infidelity. Abnormal social relations will be cast aside and cleaned up. It is necessary to maintain a normal social order. A leading Ecofeminist critic, Vandana Shiva, insists that "underdevelopment is a new project of Western patriarchy, leading to the death of female principles", asserting that "the modern model of development imposed by the West is inherently patriarchal because it is fragmentation, anti-life, oppositional diversity, dominance and the joy of progress"<sup>[9]</sup> If human beings all live in chaotic social relations, a harmonious social ecology is impossible, and human beings will not be able to touch happiness.

#### **4. Imbalance in Spiritual Ecology**

##### **4.1 The identity confusion of Almasy**

"Human happiness is not only material and physical but also spiritual and psychological. In modern society, the confusion and predicament of human beings on the issue of happiness are related to spirit and psychology<sup>[6]</sup>." In this novel, many characters are caught in a dilemma due to mental crises such as identity confusion and mental trauma. In this way, Michael Ondaatje emphasizes the importance of the ecological balance of the human spirit.

Almasy, an English patient, suffers from the loss of his identity and his spiritual ecology has been damaged. First, his loss of identity is manifested through his unidentified appearance. At the beginning of the story, the novel shows the reader a scene where a patient is badly burned, lying in bed all day with scorched skin. In *The English Patient*, Almasy is devastated by the bodily damage from the crash—he becomes "a faceless man, a black mass of human flesh. All his identities are destroyed in the fire. Tannin was sprayed on his charred body and face, hardening to form a protective shell on the surface of his rough skin. A thick coating of gentian violet was applied around his eyes. Nowhere is certain.<sup>[8]</sup>" The physical devastation caused by the plane crash eliminated Almasy's identifiable physical features, which masked his true identity.

Many of his belongings survived in the plane crash, but his heart is so strong that he doesn't know who he is "All that's missing is his name<sup>[8]</sup>." His nationality is also a mystery: he was called a "British" patient, and even when he told others he was British, they believed his answer; otherwise, who would claim to be British when he was in a coma and nearly died? He had to be a true English man with a deeply ingrained sense of identity. But ironically, it turned out that he was a Hungarian, his own identity confusing not only others but himself. Some argued that he voluntarily relinquished his identity, which was correct, and eventually, the truth emerged that he was not British, but Hungarian, much to everyone's surprise.

He studies British culture and behaves like a real Englishman. Aside from his looks, he's completely British. Still, he was unable to integrate into British society. So, he abandoned it and fled to the desert. He was ignored by British society and deeply influenced by British culture, which led to his loss of cultural belonging and confusion of cultural identity. Almasy initially tried his best to integrate into British society but failed. In England, he was only a marginal man, a lonely "other". Then he went to Africa to explore the desert and stayed there for many years. There, unlike ordinary people who live

in a city in a certain country and have a clear understanding of their nation, in those years, Almasi was surrounded by an endless desert, and its wild beauty shocked him and greatly inspired his vanity. He temporarily forgot about his country and his disparity with British society. He is free. His consciousness and primitive humanity as a Hungarian were unleashed in the desert. He considered the desert to be the most beautiful and sacred place on earth. It cannot be conquered, claimed, or possessed. It is like a cloth that has been blown by the wind and has never been pressed by a stone. The stunning scenery is not the real reason for his obsession with deserts. Instead, he longed to be like a desert, belonging to no one or any country, where everyone or anyone is equal.

Therefore, Almasi has been working hard to erase the traces of his appearance and to be a person without any national shackles. But burying his true roots and erasing his history could be extremely harsh and rude to him. Not only does he have to carry a burden of unease about the past, but also uncertainty about the future. He has only desert, but no one to vent his confusion and pain. As a result, Almasi's mental ecology was out of balance due to his identity.

#### ***4.2 The Identity Crisis of Kip***

Kip is another important character in the book. Almasi once talked about a painting "The Head of David and Goliath", in which the young warrior David, his face is the portrait of the young painter, he holds the head of Goliath, and Goliath's face is a portrait of an older person. He said Kip was his David. Such conclusions hint at the inner connection of their identities.

In Kip's heart, he had always believed in his Indian identity. However, the ridicule of the people around him and his yearning for British culture attracted him to British culture. Because he had a wonderful fantasy about this different world. He trusted the Westerners here and loved England, even though his brother criticized harshly that the Indians believed the Westerners were stupid and absurd, and believed that sooner or later Kip would open his eyes to see all the truth. Kip still joined Sikhism, despite his brother's accusations and warnings, and was shipped off to England in hopes of changing his Indian identity. Kip's fantasies and desires are like a snowball, and over time his cravings for it will grow. To integrate into the unfamiliar new environment, Kip made a lot of effort and even had to withstand the ridicule of Westerners.

His nickname is "Kip" and his real name "Kirpal Singh" is rarely used in novels. In Kip's story, his nickname is "strangely attached to him," but in reality, it was a British officer who gave him the name jokingly, translating the young Sikh to "a salty British fish"<sup>[8]</sup>.

For him, imitating the British was another way to ease the mental anguish brought on by the Anglo-Indian cultural conflict. So, to balance his spiritual ecology, he became an imitator of British culture. To integrate into British society and be accepted by the British, Kip had to imitate the habits and behaviors of the British. Even when the war was coming to an end, he drank English tea and coffee, listened to Western songs, and wore a British uniform.

But in an interview as a soldier, the coding results were written in yellow chalk on their skin, "..., after a brief interview, an Indian officer chalked more yellow on the slate around our necks. Our weight, age, district..."<sup>[8]</sup>. It was an insult, but Kip didn't think so. Paradoxically, Kip admired his brother, who got angry and washed the yellow chalk marks off. Kip saw his brother as a hero because his brother protested and refused to join the British army when Britain came to power, and he never compromised even when the British put him in jail. Deep down, he wanted to be his brother to express his dissatisfaction and anger directly rather than hide those feelings. Fortunately, he woke up at the end of the novel and discovered the hegemony of Western ideology.

The blurred identity of the characters is one of the most important factors that lead to the imbalance of their spiritual ecology and thus to the predicament of their lives.

#### ***4.3 The mental trauma of Hana***

Hana is a female character who is the representative of the general public in the book. Hana's experiences are enough to break anyone's spiritual ecology.

When she was 20 years old, the war between rulers made her deeply appreciate the plight and hardship of women. "I'm fed up with hunger. I'm fed up with lust. I'm fed up with Europe, fed up with being treated like gold just because I'm a woman"<sup>[8]</sup>. "The helplessness of gender and roles reveals Hana the pain of wandering the battlefield. Ecofeminists believe that patriarchal values in the realm of human

thought and social structure have an equal impact on the oppression of women and nature. The ecological crisis and the social status of women are products of the male cultural system. In a hyper-masculine society, women are always inferior; they must obey the rules of a man-centered system.

In the end, after the death of her most beloved father and child, she could not get rid of the grief of losing her relatives. Her boyfriend Verdi died and Hana developed a sweet relationship with him. Hana was pregnant and Verdi didn't know it until he died on the battlefield. Losing a lover was a terrible blow to Hana. In an unimaginably intense war, Hana found herself unable to carry the burden or raise her children alone, then killed her children. Is there anything crueler in the world than a mother killing her child? But Hana had to do it, she had no choice. The loss of her lover and child brought Hana unspeakable pain and unbearable pain; however, what was to come destroyed her last hope in life. Her father died in France due to the war. The man Hana deeply admired and loved was now dead; the man who patiently taught her to recognize dog paws accompanied her to a friend's birthday party, encouraged her to sing aloud, and told her stories like dwarfs only drink on the piano. Hana was so close to her father. With her father by her side, Hana had a happy childhood that now seems to be the only real joy in her life. But at present, her father's death takes away not only her most respected family but also Hana's spiritual dependence and fond memories of her early life. Her spiritual ecology was about to collapse, and she was mired in war fatigue and broken beliefs. She became a victim of the war and suffered the destruction and trauma of her spirit and belief, and her spiritual ecology was greatly damaged. The perils of war and the battlefield often invade Hana's memory and destroy Hana's spiritual Eco-home. With the sacrifice of her family, home is no longer a haven for her soul; the death of her lover and friends brings her spiritual ecology to the brink of collapse.

The impermanence of life and unbearable grief allow Hana to see through the despicable conspiracy behind the ruler's desire for power. However, in the hegemonic world of patriarchy, under the chaos of war, she cannot escape the fate of a woman who either goes to the battlefield or escapes the war.

Lu Shuyuan regarded spiritual ecology as an integral part of the ecosystem and emphasized the importance of a balanced spiritual ecology<sup>[7]</sup>. In this novel, Michael Ondaatje suggested that human beings should focus not only on material well-being but also on spiritual and psychological well-being. Humans need to get along with themselves. A person's mental health is inseparably linked to well-being and development.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the ruined villa and the plight of animals and plants, the readers can understand that humans are thinkers, coordinators, and creators of all things in nature, so their responsibilities are even greater. They should maintain the balance of nature. Through the analysis of the manifestations of socio-ecological imbalance--Katharine's death and the alienation of interpersonal relationships, Michael Ondaatje tells readers that human happiness depends on a good social ecology. Through the analysis of the three protagonists' mental issues, readers can find the importance of a balanced spiritual ecology. Health not only refers to physical health but also mental and spiritual health. All in all, Michael Ondaatje's ecological thought is in line with the unity of nature, society, and spirit emphasized by Lu Shuyuan. Only by understanding and transforming the world with the consciousness of the organic unity of nature, society and spirit can human beings achieve happiness and success.

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