

Tracing Heteroglossia in A Decentered Community: A Dialogic Insight of *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje

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ABSTRACT

Language being a social phenomenon allows the multiplicity of social voices with their discrete expressions. A free and permissive language of a literary work celebrates the co-existence of variant value systems with anticipation of the contingency of multi-accentuality. Hence the present paper intends to accentuate heteroglossia in the novel *The English Patient* from a dialogic insight. I argue that shared meanings and harmonious co-existence is possible even in a situation of homelessness, decentered nationalism, and discrete international political affiliations. The objective of this research encompasses locating heteroglossia among the people who are disillusioned by the metanarratives of identity, nationalism, religion, and other belongings. The study of heteroglossia in the people belonging to different socio-political backgrounds can help to find dialogism and benefits of multi-voiced co-existence. The research uses the theoretical framework of dialogism, specifically heteroglossia. It would be helpful for the future researchers to identify shared meanings in multi-cultural societies. This study finds a multi-voiced, dialogical zone amongst the confused and scarred souls who strive to exist after World War II. Also, it traces Heteroglossia in a decentered community showed in *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje.

Keywords: Heteroglossia, *the English Patient*, metanarrative, nationalism, multi-voiced

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INTRODUCTION

World War II imprinted new maps on the face of world with new hostilities and confused orientations. This political upheaval created anarchy and uncertainty with a metaphor of lost generation that diffused itself not only in the war inflicted part of the world but in the collective veins and skeleton of the humanity. During World War II, when the political discrepancy was at its climax, from the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a vision, a desire for 'an alternative world in the midst of war, the private claiming its own space away from the public' (Iyer14) took birth. This desire to locate a shared zone, by parodying the metanarratives of history, race, nationalism and other divisive forces is articulated by the novelist Michael Ondaatje in the novel *The English Patient*. The above-mentioned vision also questioned the validity of identity on the base of nation, race or

ethnicity in a post war era (Imran et al. 2020a; Mondal 2020; Raees and Akhtar 2019).

The objectives of this research are to observe the importance of dialogue in the overall scenario of confusion, anarchy and power lust; to espouse the importance and need of heteroglossia among war inflicted people who belong to different nations, with reference to the novel *The English patient*, and to locate the significance of dialogism as compared to metanarratives of nationalism, religion, identity or race. The postmodern tendency to eschew the metanarratives implied in itself the prospect of dialogue instead of argument of right and wrong which usually ends at individual's conflict at micro level and of war at macro level (Imran et al. 2020b). The significance of this study lies in its exposure of the shared zone of the people belong to discrete political affiliations, fed up by the power games of the political oriented world, striving for the harmony and the co-existence with the help of

fundamental principles of humanity (Imran et al. 2019).

The primary work selected for this research is the novel *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje. The novel tells the stories of four lives; Hana, a nurse with haunting experiences of war and death; Caravaggio, a thief now an Allied-Agent; Kip, an Indian sapper; and an English Patient, who ironically was not English at all, damaged and traumatized by war, gathered by chance in the villa of San Girolamo during World War II. It was like an oasis in the deserted, for a war-stricken world, where every character was trying to heal the wounds, either psychological or physical, by helping each other. The English Patient posits this idea of a new way of living by saying, 'we were Germans, English, Hungarian, African... Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations... erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert' (Ondaatje 122). Further, Pico Iyer suggests that, 'it is a place where individuals create their own world, with their own maps and laws and scriptures' (Iyer7). As Iyer sets the novel as, 'A lost oasis in midst of war' (ibid).

The English patient is said to be a postmodern fiction. In its essence it's a historic novel or faction, covering historical moments through fiction. Linda Hutcheon posits postmodernism as: It is a phenomenon that is contradictory in itself, one that at once induct and unsettle, use as well as abuse. (Hutcheon 3).

The English patient, whose identity is never disclosed throughout the novel. Epitomizes postmodern concerns with identity. This identity crisis is louder when the protagonist announced that, 'Kips and I are international Bastard' (Ondaatje 98). Ondaatje states in an interview, 'There are a lot of international bastards roaming around the world today... Those migrants don't belong here but want to belong here and find a new home' (Wachtel 257).

Bolland points out the ex-centric subject in Ondaatje. The term Ex-centric is used by Canadian critics Linda Hutcheon and Ajay Hebel to expound the concept of subjectivity in Ondaatje, whose position is outside from the simple binaries of self-other, native-alien which usually becomes a source of nationalist language. This position of ex-centric subject can be identified both in the characters of Almasy and Kip. Bolland comments on this state that *The English Patient*, the protagonist of the novel; the obliteration of his identity was obvious from his appearance. His participation in the Western project to sketch, name and to have an alien desert has brought his erasure of himself, the chart of his identity (32).

The English patient has been discussed as a historiographic metafiction that 'both install and blur the line between fiction and history' (Hutcheon113). The central role of history is shown by Herodotus through which the novel posits a basic postmodern question of the reliability of history. All characters who gathered at the villa are the exiles and decentered and looking for their new identities and lost belongings. Traumatized, wounded and disillusioned by the metanarratives of history and identity, celebrated that shared zone, even in a deserted and a wreckage villa, were suspicious about the history. The point which was elaborated by Hutcheon is that, history cannot be accepted now as, 'how things actually happened'...

but as a construction, as having been made by the historians through a process of selecting, ordering and narrating' (33).

This research will explore the interaction of characters in the villa, in that specific time and space, when they were free from all ordinary restrains, including their names, bodies, race, nation, religion and even history by employing the theoretical framework of heteroglossia, a term, propounded by Mikhail Bakhtin, that entertains an open-ended dialogism and refuses closures. This openness welcomes the co-existence and rejects

isolation by emphasizing that phenomena cannot be seen as single entities, rather should be theorized, composited and understood. He posits that the existence of the things in isolation is impossible, whereas they can be better explained in relation to each other. This relational connectivity marks the idiosyncrasy as well as generality of oneself with the world around. Each one is distinctive and this distinctiveness is being realized by everyone throughout life. As Robinson states: ‘A person cannot be fully revealed to or known in the world, because of constant change and unfinalisability’(Robinson). Bakhtin emphasizes the continuity of dialogue between not only the individual and the other people, rather he whole world around. The dialogue sustains and fusion continually takes place of one’s discourse and perspective with the others. He considers monologic language as a corruption to dialogism.

This process of dialogism does not persist that at the end, one of the participants, engaged in dialogue must be proved wrong, rather it stresses on the co-existence of controversies through dialogue. From dialogism, heteroglossia takes its origin, that is the existence of many dialects within the same social environment. A social hierarchy is marked by these dialects. Through literature these dialects diffused in literary texts and become the voices of various social groups. For Bakhtin, ‘novel is the only genre that allows many voices within it. The plurality of voices is the seedbed of dialogism’(ibid).

Analysis

The novel *the English Patient* narrates the story of exiles from their homelands who were by chance gathered at an Italian villa, entails the prospect of the co-existence of heterogeneous. The English patient declares ‘kip and I are international bastards. This cultural hybridity, which is represented by Kip and The English Patient is dialogic in its essence. Kips’ affirmation and acceptance of his national identity as well as his

engagement with his national politics at the end of the novel, itself is an evolution, since kip had experienced co-existence in the villa and consequently internalized how to accept contesting meanings of the world around. The poles apart loyalties and belongings harmonized with the underlying power of dialogism, which is coded in the essence of humanity and demonstrates its healing capacity to the wounded characters who were disillusioned by the destruction of nationhood and identity, rooted in the dirty politics, resulted in World War II with its associated demolitions. As in ‘heteroglossia’, Bakhtin opines, ‘synchronized varieties can be displayed within a single linguistic code’ (117). So, an inclusion of intimacy occurs in the zone of the hegemony of politics when Henna’s father announces for Caravaggio by overcoming his political affiliation; ‘I don’t believe the language of politics, but I’ll protect the friends I have’ (Ondaatje122). Patrick Lewis, Henna’s step father, no doubt belongs to a dominant race and culture, felt alienation, as Ondaatje himself feels like a foreigner and a native at the same time. He finds new meanings of belongings and compatibility when he worked as a construction worker. There he established friendship with a thief, an Italian-Canadian man, Carravaggio.

The time and place when they were together in the villa created multiple strands of shared meanings, as they passed through each other’ conscious and explored the heterogeneities by entering in the collaborative meanings. Hanna, while living in the villa, was experiencing intimacy with Kip, wrote in her dairy: ‘He says Lahore is an ancient city. London is a recent town compared with Lahore. I sat, well, I come from an even a new country. He says they have always known about gunpowder. As far back as the seventeenth century, court paintings recorded fireworks display... he says Lahore has thirteen gates...named for saints and emperors or where they lead to. The word bungalow comes from Bengali’ (Ondaatje 181)

Henna and Kip experiencing heteroglossia in discourse, while learning and accepting words and concepts from each other's specific culture and experience. As Robinson puts forward that dialogic world is open to listen and to give response anyways. It is an example of a consciousness dwelling on the boundary of other's consciousness. (Robinson).

The English patient engages itself in dialogue with the stern concepts of identity and nationhood, which are monologic, pushed the world at the edge of chaos by indulging nations in war. As Bolland comments; 'neither kip nor the patient represent, homogeneous self' (32). Caravaggio's inconclusive identification of the patient, first as English, then as Hungarian shakes the metanarratives of identity. 'A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identifications consumed in fire' (Ondaatje 48). The English Patient finds his affiliations confusing; 'During this time with these (Bedouin) people, he could not remember where he was from. He could have been, for all he knew, the enemy he had been fighting from the air' (Ondaatje 6).

The story of *The English Patient* is fragmented and reconstructed either from the dairies or from the interrogation of Caravaggio, making it far from an original tale. So, the way of combination it gets from the speaker's own utterance with the collaboration of outside resources is new. "the originality is in the combination, not the elements" (Robinson). As Bakhtin maintains that nothing in the world is original. People add and unconsciously use the source from other's utterances in their parole. This engagement of more than two speakers, with a free expression of their perspectives, knit to form a tapestry of tales is representing heteroglossia in *the English Patient*.

The English patient relies on Herodotus. As Hutcheon states; 'historiographic metafiction both install and blur the line between fiction and history (113). This infusion of history into fiction again

undermines and discourages the sole authoritative role of author on the one hand and of linear progressive history on the other. To rely only on history to know the past is one of the dissatisfactions of postmodern writers, '...histories differ from novels in that they insist on a homology between the sequence of their own telling' (Bakhtin 317).

This questioning of the authenticity of history as a sole source to know the past is challenged through intertextuality. That is another way to celebrate heteroglossia; to lessen the chances of constituting authority of any single element of the fiction, either author, character or narration. Bolland asserts that intertextuality combat the supposition that the author is the single source of the text he produced, it lessens his authority by mapping out other sources of the text and its meanings from the discourses of the past. It discourages monologues and allows double voice, multiple perspective and dialogue. In the villa the characters were being harmonized and cherished by each other's stories. Each lived in other's conscious. The English Patient, when telling them the story of his adulterous love with Katharine, wife of Geoffrey Clifton, narrates it by giving a parallel account from Herodotus. The moment of present when he fell in love with Katherine was artistically weaved in past, a page from Herodotus' history book. He continues 'there are several things one can say. Knowing that eventually I will become her lover, just as Gyges will be the queen's lover and murderer of Candaules (Ondaatje 202). After narrating this to the characters around him, the English patient retired to the moment of past when in the pages of Herodotus, Almasay and Katharine found themselves fixed in love relation. 'I believe indeed that she is of all women the fairest and I entreat you not to ask of me that which it is not lawful for me to do' but the king answered him thus: 'be of good courage, Gyges, and have no fear, either of me, that I am saying these words to you,

or of my wife, lest any harm may happen to you from her' (ibid).

The English patient is rich with allusions and intertextuality, giving more space to multiple voices and enhancing the capacities of dialogism, for instance, Kipling's *Kim*, the Gyges-Candaules episode in Herodotus, Anna Karenina, The Grail legend, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and *The Tempest*. It is reflecting the capacity of what Ronald Barthes says 'the infinite text'... 'I am a person who... pulls down a volume and inhales it. So, history enters us' (Ondaatje 18). This entrance of history in one's conscious later becomes a source of producing fiction which is loud in its dialogic articulation, and allows assimilation. It has a capability of making new patterns of understanding by blending other's perspective with one's own.

The very concept of 'Ex-centric', presented by Hutcheon, echoed heteroglossia, as describing that sort of subjectivity which has been discovered in Ondaatje, a total negation of simple and straight forward binaries as; native/foreigner, self/other. This ex-centric subjectivity of the author is found in the character of Almasay, who never dwelled inside the boundary of the metanarratives of nation and identity. Ondaatje, himself admits to have a 'migrant's double perspective' which lies somewhere between the native/foreigner binary. At this position one can better assimilate both sides by muting, if necessary, one's own self-assured voice.

To sum up, this yearning for dialogism arises from a multi-cultured city by an ex-centric individual who possesses a consciousness of foreigner and native at once. This inculcation of the historic realities of second world war, in the tapestry of the genre of novel, is very much representative of heteroglossia, where all the characters in the book displayed their anxiety towards an omnipotent power which tried to create air-tight containers of identity and restrict the beauty of dialogism in the boundaries of monologic might. They were looking for those hidden points of civilizations, an

oasis where a cohabit could be permeable. It expresses a strong desire on the parts of all characters to assimilate the heterogeneities and differences to co-exist and look for that reconciled patch in the world of differences which transcends every mark of dispute including, gender, race, ethnicity, nationalism or religion.

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