



The Narrative Space-Time Continuum in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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Abstract

With the inception of the revolutionary theory of special relativity by Albert Einstein in 1905, concepts like space and time came to be perceived within a new framework, where fixedness and rigidity were replaced by fluidity and malleability. The independent existence of time and space was thought to be insufficient to capture the nature and essence of reality and human experiences. Since the equations of relativity proved that both the space and the time coordinates of any event must get mixed together in order to get an accuracy of understanding, the new mathematical entity called 'space-time' appeared to be a feasible concept (Odenwald). Space-time was conceived as a four-dimensional entity without any missing points or instants of space or time. Hence, they form a continuum. The idea of continuum offers multiple possibilities to read and interpret literature. However, the efforts towards such an end remain scarce over the years. This research paper is an attempt to analyse the spatio-temporal continuum within the fragmented, discontinuous, and cyclical narrative patterns of the late twentieth-century postmodern novel, *The English Patient*, written by Michael Ondaatje.

Keywords: Continuum, Memory, Chiastic Structure, Non-linearity, Space-time.

Introduction

Albert Einstein proposed his theory of special relativity in 1905, giving rise to a new stream of thought, where the emphasis was given on the geometric qualities of space and time. Accordingly, individual existence of notions as time and space gave way to an interwoven single four-

dimensional continuum known as ‘space-time’ (Redd). Over the years, however, the impact of these revelations on non-scientific fields remained overlooked, as many conceived science and art as ‘mutually antagonistic.’ Many failed to acknowledge that in their “ultimate purpose” of arranging “experience in such a way as to give it meaning,” “the artist and the scientist are not unlike” (Johnson 217). The only probable difference is that the influence of science on art is rather philosophical than mathematical. As Lawrence Durrell reflects in his *Balthazar*, “Our view of reality is conditioned by our position in space and time—not by our personalities as we would like to think. Thus, every interpretation of reality is based upon a unique position. Two paces east or west and the whole picture is changed” (Durrell 14-15). Therefore, the space-time continuum offered by the relativity theory can be duly treated as a suitable rationale behind the use of structural narrative techniques like multiple perspectives or shifting spatial and temporal configurations. A perfect specimen to prove this point would be Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*.

Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan-Canadian author of the late twentieth century, who expounds on the cultural tensions and identity strains innate among races and societies. His Booker Prize-winning novel *The English Patient* (1992) is profoundly based on the Second World War Italy. “The novel is characterized by a complex narrative structure which includes multiple shifts of narrative time frames and narrative voices” (Evain). Ondaatje employs techniques like flashbacks, flash-forwards, fluidity of memory, stream of consciousness and subsequent disruption of time to unfold the psychological variations and identities of the characters. The novel sweeps through time and space to follow the central motif,

the Second World War; dismantling the notions of coherence and wholeness. Thus, disruption of time is a key feature of the novel. There are quick shifts in perspectives evoking the reminiscences of the tenets of the 'stream-of-consciousness' technique perfected by writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

The English Patient follows the lives of four characters brought together – Almasi, Caravaggio, Kip and Hana - relentlessly by the circumstances of the Second World War. Almasi, 'the central mystery of the novel' (Mortensen), was an archaeologist well versed in the geography of Northern Africa who worked as a spy for the Germans during the war. As the novel opens, he is seen languishing in a war-destroyed monastery-turned hospital in the Northern parts of Italy at the end of the war. He is deeply wounded by a plane crash, which leaves his face scarcely recognisable. He is taken care of by Hana, a young Canadian nurse, as affected by the war as the rest of the characters in the novel. She lives with a profound, inner void -- a distress brought on by the death and absence of her dad, her husband and her unborn child, whom she was forced to abort in a similar conflict. Hana perceives Almasi as 'her despairing saint' and nurses him loyally and constantly. The third character is Caravaggio, an extremely adept thief and childhood friend of Hana's dad, whom Hana has known and respected since her adolescence. He presently has hands without thumbs; the thumbs were hacked off by the Germans and he currently battles his agony and embarrassment by relying on huge dosages of morphine. The next prominent character is Kirpal Singh or Kip, as the British call him; a trained mine-diffusion expert, who fought in the British armed force during the war. These four characters come together

in Villa San Girolamo, recently used as a war-hospital by the Allies but formerly used by the Germans.

The villa is that topographical narrative space in the novel where most of the actions take place and “has all the protagonists placed (together) physically.... After a while, the narrative follows each one wherever they go, in time and space. (But) by having the characters placed at the same location, (the readers) can observe them in relation to one another” (Bache 20). The villa with “ghost(s) in the garden” (21) itself stands tall with perilous explosives surrounding its territories, sharing its inhabitants’ terrors. It is an architectural structure devastated by the war and is therefore symbolic of the injured and fractured souls of its residents. Thus, the villa at once becomes a reflection of the protagonists’ physical as well as psychological terrors (Bache 28). Referring to the villa, Ondaatje writes:

behind the villa a rock wall rose higher than the house. To the west of the building was a long-enclosed garden, and twenty miles away was the carpet of the city of Florence, which often disappeared under the mist of the valley. Rumour had it one of the generals living in the old Medici villa next door had eaten a nightingale. The Villa San Girolamo, built to protect inhabitants from the flesh of the devil, had the look of a besieged fortress, the limbs of most of the statues blown off during the first days of shelling. There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth. (30)

The uneven structure of the villa is significant because these initial descriptions of the villa themselves give the readers a direct hint at the very nature of the narrative. The

brokenness of the villa which gives the impression of an open and comprehensive space without any obvious boundaries, suggests the unbounded spatial and temporal constitutions of Ondaatje's narrative that are yet to be unfurled.

As many critics point out, this narrative is largely dependent on flashback, montages, and memory, patterned predominantly in a modernistic fashion. Ondaatje himself admits that the narrative depicts a world in near ruins. However, amidst this apparent incoherence, there does exist a chiastic structure of repetitive symmetry that provides great resonance and cohesion to the various narrative units within the novel. The chiastic structure here is composed of narrative motifs and characters who contribute to the 'onion-ring' structure through the recurrent recollections of their past trauma. The beginning of the story holds the ending within it. In other words, there exists an underlying ring structure that provides a narrative continuum to the story. Literally the term 'continuum' refers to a "continuous sequence in which adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other, but the extremes are quite distinct" (Oxford Lexicos). In a narrative, the term acquires an even dignified sense with its association with concepts like time and space. Thus, narrative continuum can be best understood as the "relationship between space and time throughout the flow of a given narrative" (Narrative First).

The first narrative element that stands exposed in the novel is the character of Hana, who herself is obsessed with the beginnings and endings of lives. Hana hints at how the narrative becomes an analogy of life. In the exposition, we see Hana working in the garden when she senses a shift in the weather. This transitional paradigm is something which underlies the whole narrative. The

occasional peace amid the war structurally resonates and envisages the probable peace at the end of the war and thereby indirectly of the narrative itself. Hana is introduced as an essentially mysterious character. There is a sense of darkness associated with her, the extent of which is unknown to the readers at the beginning, and she remains nameless like the patient for a while in the novel. The narrative space also holds structural significance here. The isolated Italian villa forms an appropriate setting, with its dream-like nature and resemblance to a 'puzzle with hallways and corridors leading to dead ends in some directions and dizzying open spaces in others'. The temporal plane that coincides with this space is the present. The circuitousness of the space coincides with the thematic girdle of the narrative which loops together character's consciousness, feelings, and dreams of the past, present, and future. The villa itself has a haunted historical continuum, of which we are constantly reminded. Nothing seems particularly dangerous, though the decided absence of conflicts evokes a sense of danger.

The conflict between memory and fantasy is another key feature in the narrative, and it is manifested through the characters of Almásy and Hana respectively. While Hana retreats into fantasy, the English patient embraces memory. Memory and time are treated as fluid or elastic elements, amalgamating past and present, reality and illusions. The relationship between Hana and the English patient is a mutually projective one, i.e., Hana experiences her father's death and overcomes the subsequent guilt through the patient and the latter absorbs the spirit of Hana's youth. Thus, the characters themselves form the two halves of a circle, attaining the wholeness only when considered together. Each character becomes a kind of an altruistic identity of the other. We should also note that

Hana remains a nameless woman cowering inside her own body, attached to a man, who himself is faceless, nameless and without a future, until Caravaggio makes his appearance. Caravaggio even points out that 'Hana has chained herself to a dying man in order to expedite her own spiritual death'. Caravaggio, on the other hand, is a foil to the English patient. He reminds us of the war, the central motif of the narrative. With him comes the 'clinicalness' of war which permeates the rest of the narrative. The introduction of Kip into the narrative frame completes the first half of the narrative equation and provides an anti-thesis to the English patient.

As the narrative progresses these characters follow different tangents only to be re-joined by a centripetal force provided essentially by the character of Almasy, the eponymous patient. He is the main narrator, who "drag(s) the listening heart beside him to wherever his mind is, into that well of memory he kept plunging into before he died" (6). His narrative skips in time, leaves out details and is as fragmentary as consciousness. Yet there seems to be an underlying resonance with the narrative of Caravaggio. The tenuous nature of identity, a by-product of the war becomes more prominent here when the past mysteriousness of the space-time continuum is replaced with a purgatorial sense of hope for the days to come. For instance, there is the confessional narrative of Kip, where Hana becomes his asylum to relieve the tragic memories. All the intradiegetic narrators, be it Almasy or Hana or Caravaggio, or Kip, tend to plunge into their own worlds of "memory and solitude" (32). This act of storytelling gives these protagonists a "chance to figure out when and how things went wrong in their past lives" (Lee 243). The capacity of storytelling to give order and continuity to fragmented experience is quite evident in these stories,

where past and present are conjoined by the space-time coordinates of memory, thereby creating a cyclical narrative pattern. Thus, each of the protagonists retells the same stories and revisits the same disturbing, yet crucial events of their pasts (Lee 243). For instance, each of Caravaggio's stories begins and ends at the night when the Italians had caught and dismembered him. The repetition offers a kind of refuge to him, helping him get rid of the terrors of that night. Similarly, Kip's stories also circle around the "explosion in Erith" (119), which killed his dear ones, who treated him as their own family.

The non-linear pattern of the narrative also allows the characters to exert some control over their past trauma. When these characters, Hana or Caravaggio narrate the same story over and over again, the memories of the dead are resurrected in the narrative as well as in the minds of the readers. Thus, the narrative enables an escape from the spatial or temporal boundaries of reality. The stories Hana reads to the English patient also become a partial narrative frame that enables a similar deliverance. Again, the stories of Kip's childhood, which he relates to Hana, too offer an opportunity to escape beyond the limits of time and space. Together they travel to "his country of five rivers, the Sutlej, Jhelum, Ravi, Chenab, Beas" (169). Thus, memories become their "only way to survive" (31). In the course of their memory, "they reshape their identities, impose some sort of continuity on their experience of chaotic reality" (Lee 243). However, memory here is a drifting reality, like a "piece of cloth carried by winds" (88), exactly as Almásy warns Hana; that it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation" (16). Almásy's past experience in the desert, thus, becomes symbolic, signifying the reality of memory, which keeps drifting and can never be fully

encompassed within the time-space grid. In Nina Bache's point of view:

The desert is a landscape containing both beauty and danger (that) can be explained and described with highly opposing adjectives, such as calm – chaotic, peaceful –dramatic and so forth.... The desert seems to be an extremely moody environment that shifts rapidly.... More strikingly, this is a landscape almost impossible to cross as it goes on as far as the eye can see even when travelling for days.... [Almasy] saw the landscape as a space free of limitations and borders. He perceived it as a boundless area. The desert gives an impression of being part of an endless landscape of sand, rocks and sand dunes. I am tempted to suggest that the desert (along with other endless landscapes, such as the sea and the sky) has no room for time. The space of the desert excludes time since it gives the impression of being a geographical area that goes on forever. (Bache 47-48)

Yet there is something reassuring in the desert with its even and continuous distribution. Despite the harsh coldness, there is an exotic and beautiful harmony that underlies the desert scape. The desert, in consequence, becomes a similar topographical space as that of the villa with a more significant deliberation on the narrative pattern.

Another attempt at establishing the narrative continuum occurs with the juxtaposition of history and memory, two variants of the temporal equation. As Beverley Curran rightly comments, 'Almasy is a reservoir of information and a pool of memory', whose 'intimate geography has been burnt to anonymity', and yet he

revisits his past in the 'desert in his own seared somatic state and through his memory, as he mediates' it to the other characters who share 'the provisional space of the abandoned Tuscan villa'. Here, it is a "desert evoked by morphine and memory, a place rather than a time or an image, that holds the secrets of his identity" (Curran 5). Like these events and symbols in the novel, the characters and their interrelations also resonate backward and forward inconclusively, and allude, through memory, "to a whole network of cognate characters and relationships" (Cook 40). Again, Almásy's copy of Herodotus' *The Histories* which helps him know the desert in turn opens a path for others to understand Almásy's history and his love for Katherine, wife to his superior. This history is used to allude to the future of the blooming affair between Kip and Hana. The text refers to the importance of history in the novel and raises a concern on history's supposed authenticity. For Almásy, Herodotus is "one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis-to-oasis trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage" (78). He is in a way obsessed with the book and carries it with him like a talisman, through all the calamities. The other characters too draw inspiration from the sense of historical progression offered by Herodotus and return to their pasts to stabilize their lives. Thus, history recollected through memories becomes pivotal in orienting their futures and also in meliorating the multidimensionality of the text.

However, there is an apparent disruption in the chronotropic continuum as the narrative points of view shift quite abruptly. Such patterns can be observed throughout as the English patient insists on his right to abruptly take on alternative voices. Similarly, there is an

amalgamation of so many different narrative voices and simultaneous interior and exterior dialogues. But amidst these highly fragmented and discontinuous space-time paradigms, the reader still can find order and connection. For instance, there “are a lot of recurrent references to objects or phrases which in themselves have no meanings” in the novel. These recurrent clusters provide a certain degree of continuity, thereby reflecting the “contingent nature of reality” (Lee 248). The narratives of the four protagonists are wrapped in the accounts of an extradiegetic omniscient narrator, and the narrative focal keep on shifting among these multiple narrators. Each character enters the narrative of others, knowing that he/she would emerge from them feeling they had been immersed in the lives of others, “in plots that stretched back several years, with their beings and bodies full of sentences and moments; as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams” (12). Narration, as a result, resembles “the outdoor staircase that disappear in mid-air” (13) and what ultimately “remains is (just) a capsule from the past” (24) and a hope for the traumas to subside. This kind of an oscillating narration, however, helps the readers develop a “more intimate relationship with each of the protagonists” (Bache 19) and projects what Paul Lejeune calls as ‘the autobiographical pact’, or the readers expectations to have a close association with the author and the narrator.

The switching between the various narrative frames suggests a simultaneous shift in the spatial and temporal planes, providing different corresponding identities to the characters. For instance, Almasly lived an exploratory life of an archaeologist. The war made him a spy and its aftermath made him a nameless nationless patient. There occurs a confluence of nationalities and identities with

different spatio-temporal frames. Thus, as Sudha Rai comments “psychological time is valued more than the chronological time”, and “characters structure time in individual ways according to their experience, and memories” (Rai 161). The same logic applies for the spatial component too. Thus, the novel becomes “a series of chronologically scrambled narrative fragments held together by an intricate network of recurrent images” (Cook 35). For instance, Caravaggio’s act of sharing his morphine ampoules with Almásy to help the latter “return to his own world” (156) signifies the fusion of different spatial and temporal trajectories, something which occurs in the novel in a frequent manner. “The novel evolves backwards [and charges forwards] on itself most obviously through its obsessive repetition of certain key terms or images” (Cook 38). Throughout the novel, certain crucial episodes or incidents from the characters’ past lives are suddenly brought back by some “trigger(s) of memory” (Lee 187). This incongruous fusion of the past and the present makes the space-time continuum an “echoing episode, spread out like villages or mountain peaks on a map” (Miller 35). In the words of Rufus Cook:

[the] entire scenes or episodes in the novel are presented as re-enactments or repetitions, meaningful because they echo some cognate incident from the past...Practically every episode in the novel conjures up a past, analogous occurrence of this sort; indeed, some incidents seem to have no significance beyond such reverberation...Even when an incident has independent significance, however, its secondary, referential meaning is usually emphasized...No episode serves as the point of origin,...nor does the *chain of repetitions* end with the events actually depicted in the novel. There are repeated indications

that these incidents too are destined to be recycled into memory, at some indefinite point in the future, by yet further analogous occurrences. (Cook 38-39)

The narrative also contains several episodes of intertextuality that project multiple chrontopes. To begin with, Hana and Caravaggio are themselves characters from Ondaatje's earlier work *In the Skin of a Lion*. Again, the multifarious books read by Hana including Kipling's *Kim*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, and the Book of Herodotus *Histories* brought by Almas; references to classics like *Paradise Lost*, *Tempest*, *The Charter House of Parma*, and the countless Biblical engravings and paintings in the villa and their direct implications on the present lives of the characters also suggest the abutment of multiple space-times. Borrowing the words of Guru Charan Behera, Dr. Ambreen Kharbe points out that Almas himself "acts as an intertextual writer who receives and reconstructs texts according to his own sense of himself and the world" (Kharbe 115). These intertextual references are decisive as they:

give unity to the novel's scrambled narrative fragments. They also contribute to the feeling that the present is actually only a replica or re-enactment, and that genuine identity or meaning is always to be found elsewhere, in some experience remembered from the past, some sort of *original pattern* or prototype. Whatever significance may attach, for example, to the many images of walls, it obviously resides not in any specific instance of the image but in the entire *network* or *cluster* to which the image belongs: this image, like so many others in the novel, is constantly emptied or filled at the novel's well of memory. (Cook 38)

The final parts of the narrative echo a transmission of wisdom, completing the equation gathered from experience with a new found knowledge. The seemingly innocuous gesture of Kip catching a falling fork, dropped by his daughter mirrors his earlier action of diffusing the explosives in the garden and also hints at a more mature future. The simultaneous action of Hana dislodging a glass from the cupboard elsewhere marks the final fusion of the space-time continuum. The scene encapsules the essence of the whole novel: "And so Hana moves and her face turns and, in a regret, she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal's left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles" (188-189). As far as Malin Furuholm is concerned,

Time and space in both places happen to correspond in such a way that it would seem Kirpal saves the glass Hana dislodged, but in truth it is his daughter's fork he catches. The interaction would seem to be a reflection of previous times, a memory of their time together in the villa. However, the glass is not saved. Though nothing is said of what happens to it, it seems reasonable to assume that it is shattered, since no one is there with Hana to catch it. The fork, though, is saved and passed "into the fingers of his [Kirpal's] daughter" who is part of the next generation, one that may help heal the conflicts between cultures and restore the promise of a better future. (Furuholm 50)

The transition from the past to the present and then to the future completes the chiasm of Kip. Similarly, Hana also undergoes a transition, letting go of her guilt over her

father's death through the death of the English patient; who has become a utopian proxy for her dead father. For the English patient, however, everything except the memory of love, even his identity, is just third-person and hence, irrelevant. He stands out as the truest symbol of the war, a man whose identity is valued by everyone else, but who is unaware of his own political significance. He becomes the connecting unit in Kip, Hana and Caravaggio's journey towards growth and transformation. He resolves the conflicts thereby establishing a series of continuums between healing/denial, passion/frigidity, connection/loneliness, and life/death and completing the chiasmic structure of the narrative. "The novel ends in a flash-forward into the future, a future in which somehow Hana and Kip are still connected through the novel's poetry despite their separate lives" (Mortensen).

Thus, it is only in the concluding frame that Ondaatje wraps up this highly fragmented narrative. The readers have to travel alongside the multiple heard voices and triumph numerous spatial and temporal hurdles to reach the final destination of wholeness offered by the resolution of the thematic conflicts. The final continuum is established, reiterating the facts that end is just the beginning of a new journey and that the present is just a moment in the flow of the space-time spectrum, which travels down histories and continues its perpetual flow towards future, an open-ended continuum.

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