

Intertextuality: Reinforcing Thematic Subjects in *The English Patient*

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Abstract

No text is a complete creation of its author; rather, it is constructed through the process of interconnections of textual elements of the relating texts and the author's creativity (Ahmadian & Yazdani, 2013, p 155). All texts have a particular relationship with the models, narrative structures and characters in part from previous texts. Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French literary critic who was influenced by both Saussure's and Bakhtin's theories, coined a special term for these texts; intertextuality. The crux of intertextuality is that the author is not the sole source of the meanings of the text. However, the intertextual elements combined with the author's creativity produce the whole and final construction of the text. *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje is a novel richly encapsulated with intertextual elements. The readers need to understand the intertexts mentioned in the novel so that they can understand the core themes of the novel. If the novel is striped off these intertextual elements, it becomes no more than a love story in the time of war. This article is an attempt to analyze and decode those intertextual layers the writer has put there as extra meaning to his novel.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Text, Intertext, Intertextual Relations, Literary Theory, Postmodernism, Narrative Structures

The Concept of Intertextuality

No text is a complete creation of its author; rather, it is constructed through the process of interconnections of textual elements of the relating texts and the author's creativity (Ahmadian & Yazdani, 2013, p. 155). All texts have a particular relationship with the models, narrative structures and characters in part from previous texts. The act of reading engages the reader in discovering the network of these textual relations. When the reader goes into the world of a text, she or he analyzes it based on the intertextual elements to get the meaning and interpretation out of the reading.

The crux of intertextuality is that the author is not the sole source of the meanings of the text. The term intertextuality, as most critics agree, was coined in the late 1960s by

Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French literary critic who was influenced by both Saussure's and Bakhtin's theories. She combined ideas on reading Bakhtin's social context of language and Saussure's systematic features of language. In "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," Kristeva (1986) writes that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double." (p. 37). Kristeva believes that no text is original and no text is made by itself isolated from those existing before it, such a text is influenced by the texts and textual elements relating to it. She also argues that all the intertextual elements combined with the author's creativity produce the whole and final construction of the text. Though, as Alfaro (1996) puts it, intertextuality as a term prevailed in some three decades ago, but it is by no means bounded to a specific time. On the contrary, intertextuality is a phenomenon at least as old as recorded human society (p. 269).

Zengin (2016) argues that in a broad sense intertextuality is a poststructuralist, deconstructionist and postmodernist theory that changed the concept of text, naming it as intertexts that are linked. A reader, through the application of the intertextuality theory, can have numberless ways of deciphering the texts, because it considers texts as an open product containing the remnants of other texts (p. 300). Allen (2000) in his book, *Intertextuality*, writes that, "Kristeva is concerned with establishing the manner in which a text is constructed out of already existent discourse" (p. 35). Thus, it can be claimed that every text is the product of two levels: intertextuality and author's creativity.

Reinforcing Thematic Subjects through Intertexts

The English Patient is a novel richly encapsulated with intertextual elements such as portraits, statues, myths, books, writers, and poems. *The Histories* by Herodotus is an important text referred to in *The English Patient* as it is a book the Almasy/English patient, one of the major characters in the book, carries with him at all times and is constantly mentioned in the narration and dialogues. Almasy "added to [*The Histories*], cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations—so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus" (p. 16). Ondaatje's novel (1993) is similar in its structure to Almasy's book. *The English Patient* is swollen with different elements just like Almasy's copy of *Histories* is swollen to "twice its original thickness" (p. 118). Ondaatje himself takes excerpts, names and paragraphs from other books and includes them in his novel.

The readers need to understand the intertexts of writers such as Herodotus, Rudyard Kipling, and James Fenimore, and artists of the ancient world as well as the modern world so that they can understand the core themes of the novel. If the novel is striped off these intertextual elements, it becomes no more than a love story in time of war. Ondaatje, by making reference to the intertextual elements and borrowing excerpts from

them, puts extra layers of meaning to his novel. When the reader unearths these layers, they are led to a deeper meaning of the plots, characters, and themes. When the novel is read in the light of these elements, all the assumptions and effects of them give new meanings and influence the way of interpreting the novel.

The texts that are referenced in *The English Patient* echo important issues and concerns in the novel and deal with lost love, the might of Empires and the exploitation of indigenous people. In this way, Ondaatje draws parallels between his text and other texts and informs and projects his narrative onto others.

One of the intertexts that is strongly embedded in the novel's overall plot is Herodotus' *The Histories*. It was written from the 450s to the 420s BC in classical Greek. It serves as a record of the ancient traditions, politics, geography, and clashes of various cultures that were known in Western Asia, Northern Africa and Greece at that time. The significance of the book in *The English Patient* lies in several points.

First of all, it gives an implicit comparison between Herodotus and Almasy. Herodotus spent his life traveling from one Persian territory to another. While he traveled, he collected what he called "autopsies," or "personal inquiries"; he listened to myths and legends, recorded oral histories and made notes of the places and things that he saw (historychannel.com). That is pretty much what Almasy does; he embarks on an expedition and spends his life travelling through the desert to find the legendary Zerzura and collects personal inquiries. In this regard, Donna Lund (1998) in a review to *The English Patient*, writes that "So, just as Herodotus wove together a mélange of ancient stories, gossip, battle plans, body counts, geography, and astronomy, so has Almasy overlaid the pages of Herodotus with his own drawings, letters, maps, and notes" (p. 1).

Second, the story of King Candaules and Gyges from *The Histories* works as a background to Ondaatje's romance narrative about Geoffrey Clifton, his wife, and Almasy. The story is about King Candaules who is so proud of his wife's beauty that he does not believe any other man could imagine her great beauty. He forces his friend Gyges to view her naked, but the queen sees him and later tells him that he must die himself or kill the king. Gyges kills the king and marries his wife, the queen. The story, as an intertext, is not parallel to the romantic plot of the novel. Katharine's husband does not brag about his wife's beauty. Almasy doesn't see her naked body until they become lovers. Gyges is forced to make two painful choices: whether to die or to submit to the queen's command, to kill the king. Almasy and Katharine choose each other freely. Herodotus' story ends happily for the murderers; Gyges chooses to live, marries the queen and becomes the ruler for twenty-eight years. In *The English Patient*, the romantic plot ends disastrously. In a jealous rage, Clifton kills himself and severely injures Katharine when he crashes his plane while trying to run down and kill Almasy. But the suggestive story of Candaules inspires Katharine and Almasy to fall in love and foreshadows their tragic end. The reader expects something similar to happen in the book.

Finally, Herodotus was the first historian of the ancient world, and he explored the enmity between East and West, stating the two could never be reconciled. Walder (1998) writes about Herodotus's *Histories*, stating that the book "becomes the metaphoric bridge across time and space that replaces simple historicist conceptions of time" (as cited in Abu Bakr, 2008). To Almasy, Herodotus' book remains useful even in modern times for colonial exploration and exploitation of the natural resources of other countries. According to Stephen Batchelor (1999), the origin of the enmity between East and West is found in Herodotus and is due to "the epic conflict between Hellenes and Persians, giving rise to the mythical contrast between heroic, liberty, loving and dynamic west and the despotic, stagnant and passive East" (as cited in Abu Bakr, 2008). Ondaatje (1993), by referring to Herodotus' recordings of the war between East and West, wants to convey that there is still the case; history repeats itself and that the present is an echo of the past. It is this realization that drives Kip to his renunciation of the West, claiming that they would have "never dropped the bomb on a white nation" (p. 286).

Kharbe (2016), in her paper, believes that intertextuality is related to the idea of the boundary between history and fiction. She also believes that it challenges history in search of providing an objective truth (p. 115). Another intertext in the novel that attempts to set this boundary between history and fiction is *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling. The narrative that Ondaatje provides, draws a blurry line between history and fiction. Reading his version of the history, one would be confused and lose himself. Even with that, one of the novel's most important themes is reinforced. *Kim* was first published in October 1901. Its story unfolds against the backdrop of the political conflict between Russia and Britain in Central Asia. Through using Kipling's *Kim*, Ondaatje sets up another level of meaning in relation to colonial dispossession and cultural imperialism that foreshadows Kip's realization at the close of the novel. Although, at first, Kip is depicted as the reversal of Kim, as Ondaatje (1993) writes, "Hana had watched [Kip] sitting beside the English patient, and it seemed to her a reversal of Kim. The young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English" (p. 111), later Kip turns out to be a revolutionary version of Kipling's *Kim*. It is not Kip who "guided [his master] over the mountains to the sacred river" (p. 111), it is Hana. Kip, like Kim, begins as a devoted colonized who serves the British Empire, but he will rebel against the empire after the nuclear bombing of Japan. Again, like Candaules story, the story of Kip is not parallel to Kipling's *Kim*, as Kim remains the devoted servant of the empire and works against his own people, or at least the reader does not know whether he will choose the road of the British Empire or the spiritual way of Tibetan Buddhism, Kip leaves his colonial shell. But both stories share the same theme, the colonizer and the colonizer's subject.

There are many other texts, classic ones that are cited in *The English Patient*. These texts function as a self-reflexive intertextuality of the narrative (Jacobs, 1997, p. 105). One of the most important of these classics is *The Last of the Mohicans*. The narrative that

shows the dispossession and genocide of an indigenous race, the Indian. Written in 1826, *The Last of the Mohicans* takes place in 1757 during the French and Indian War, when France and England battled for control of the American and Canadian colonies. The recurring description of Uncas as the last of the Mohicans symbolizes the death of Indian culture at the hands of the encroaching European civilization. By referring to this book, Ondaatje wants to show the European's disregard and disdain for cultures other than their own. This sentiment is foregrounded in the novel when the two cities of Japan, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, are destroyed and Kip says that this would not have happened if they were a white race. Additionally, like Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, certain characters in *The Last of Mohicans* are based on real individuals and descriptions of certain incidents in the novel embellish accounts of real historical events. On another level, Hana by writing a description in the book and referring herself a "Mohican of Danforth Avenue," tries to depict herself as the victims of the war, like how the Indians had become. What she means by this is that war has taken every dear person from her: her father, boyfriend, and unborn baby.

On another level, the characters' relationship with writing becomes an example of intertextuality. The quotations embedded within a framing text or into the margins, the flyleaves, the gaps, pages from other books, and the blank page's function as a form of intertextuality. Instead of being just influence or allusion, intertextuality in *The English Patient* becomes an active interaction between texts. In the novel Ondaatje translates this theoretical concept, interaction between texts, into literal images. As Aaron Mauro (2007) puts it in his thesis, "*Intertextual Bastards: Mourning Literary Nationalism in Michael Ondaatje's in the Skin of a Lion and The English Patient*," Ondaatje "allows an intertextual relation to illuminate the lives of his characters as they, like him, engage with the literary tradition" (p. 88). Almsy writes his own observations into the blank pages of Herodotus. He "added to [*The Histories*], cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations—so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus" (Ondaatje, 1993, p. 16), and it was his "1890 edition of Herodotus' Histories," that contained "other fragments – maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books" (p. 96). Hana also does the same with books in the villa's library, especially *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Kim*, "She opens *The Last of the Mohicans* to the blank page at the back and begins to write in it" (p. 61). She writes a physical description of Caravaggio, "There is a man named Caravaggio, a friend of my father's. I have always loved him. He is older than I am, about forty-five, I think. He is in a time of darkness, has no confidence. For some reason I am cared for by this friend of my father" (p. 61). This form of interaction shows the connection between them and how they are created and conceived. While Hana discloses her feelings in blank pages of books and Almsy writes out his diaries and his love for Katharine Clifton, Ondaatje does the same in the novel by quoting endlessly from other texts. Even Hana's use of the books to fix the stairs parallels the readers' attempt to

pinpoint all the different books and images Ondaatje refers to in his novel to reach, as if climbing a staircase, into the room where knowledge is stored.

Conclusion

In reading *The English Patient*, the reader comes across references to many intertextual elements to which understanding will create a greater depth of understanding to the novel. *The English Patient* is significant for the number of intertexts that provide a more elaborated elucidation of the novel's themes. The major intertexts are: Herodotus' *The Histories*, Kipling's *Kim*, James Finimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Stendahl's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, *Aeneas*, *Odysseus*, *Savonarola*, *Lorenzo Medici*, *Queen of Sheba*, *Caravaggio*, and *Isaiah*. In this paper, I refer to some of them and I argue that the assumptions and effects of these intertexts echo and reinforce thematic subjects in *The English Patient* and influence the way of interpreting the novel.

Ondaatje uses intertexts to reinforce thematic subjects in *The English Patient*. In this sense, his text is not an individual, isolated object but, rather, a compilation of intertexts. Through intertexts such as *The Histories*, *Kim*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*, the reader understands more about the Clifton, Katherine, and Almasy triangle love story, the East versus West's depiction, the war's destructive power, and the notion of Otherness. These intertextual elements and Ondaatje's creativity have produced the whole and final construction of the text. Ondaatje leaves clues to the thematic importance of the references to help his readers dig, like archaeologists, into the thematic subjects of the novel. In this way, Ondaatje draws parallels between his text and other texts and puts extra layers of meaning to the novel.

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