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**EXAMINING GAZE AND THE WOMAN'S BODY IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S  
*THE ENGLISH PATIENT***

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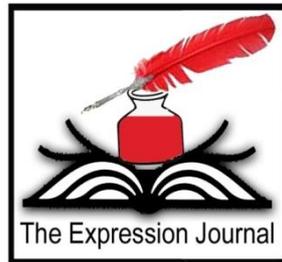
**Abstract**

Michael Ondaatje's award winning novel *The English Patient* (1992) is a tale of the quest for selfhood of an explorer, a thief, a nurse and a sapper sheltered in an Italian villa in a war-torn country. This article will focus on Ondaatje's *The English Patient* with the intention of closely reading how the wartime body embarks upon a search for home/ self by travelling through the mindscape. The mind is exercised to go in search of the past to retrieve fragments of the self, thereby encouraging the reconstruction of the self and the formation of an "oasis society" as an alternative space inhabited by these marginal figures. The main narrative moves along the story told by the burnt and calloused desert explorer Count Almásy of his beloved Katharine. The male gaze directed towards the body of Katharine and the depiction of her as essentially feminine reduces her to a mere representation of her sex type as opposed to Almásy who is not bound by nations and is a representative of his race type. From a feminist point of view, the article will analyse scopophilia, storytelling and cartography. Additionally, allusions to the cinematic adaptation of *The English Patient*, by Anthony Minghella, will be included.

**Keywords**

Scopophilia, Male Gaze, Cinema, Gender, Adaptation, Identity.

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Celebrated Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje's works form an important juncture in the New Wave of Diasporic literature in a Transcultural Canada. His migration from Sri Lanka to England and then to Canada gives him the migrant's perspective and makes the discourse on alternative histories have an immediate significance. His most well-known novel *The English Patient* (1992) is a tale of the search for identity of 'an oasis society' comprising a Hungarian "English" explorer, a Canadian Army nurse, a Canadian thief, and a British-Sikh Army sapper sheltered in Villa san Girolamo during the Italian campaign of the Second World War. The main narrative revolves around the complex story of Katharine's clandestine affair told evasively by the burnt and calloused desert explorer Count László de Almásy. They had met on a geographical desert expedition during the North Africa campaign of the Second World War. The narrative of Almásy presents an erotic depiction of the desert terrain as the woman's body. In this regard, Almásy's map making skills may be regarded as an imperial art which inscribes territory to establish an oppressive culture. In its attempt to fit unexplored territory into measured boxes or grids, mapmaking became a potent element in the hands of the coloniser whose desire was to organise lands near and far according to their recognised system of knowledge. The production of colonial literature, including cartographical records, was an important means of validating the British colonial expeditions which were undertaken to define and limit the unconquered Orient. "The appearance of naturalness and objectivity...masks the function of maps as representations of space that suit particular interests and projects" (Bolland 44).

The gaze of the colonial explorer is further problematised by the cinematic gaze of the 'male' camera. The 1996 cinematic version of the novel, by Hollywood director Anthony Minghella shows Katharine's body as being commodified: the desert is presented as the contours of the female body which is being scrutinised scopophically by Almásy, the colonial cartographer. It opens with the gaze of the colonial cartographer flying over a vast desert terrain which is rippled in a manner that suggests the feminine form. Moreover the shadow of

the plane on the sand is captured in a shape that resembles a woman's body (Minghella n.pag.). Thus the idea of the body of a woman as geographical space is established early on in the movie. Being the opening scene of the movie, it determines the kind of gaze the viewer is to direct at the women characters. Such deliberate sexualising of the desert terrain is the prelude to the scenes that follow in which Katharine is seen as an object of great beauty coveted equally by the two men, Katharine's husband and her clandestine lover.

Critic Laura Mulvey discusses the relation of patriarchal power and cinematic gaze, by arguing that pleasure in a sexually imbalanced world is split between the active male and the passive female, where the male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure. She uses, from Freud's *Three Essays on the theory of Sexuality* (1905), the concept of 'scopophilia' which Freud defines as, "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Waugh 510). Mulvey notes:

"[T]he mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. (Mulvey 17)

Even after death, Katharine's gendered body is represented only through the eyes of the lover and it is in such voyeurism that Almas's fellow home mates—Hana, Kip and Caravaggio engage. Consequently, it is only the male protagonist, Almas, who can walk on an earth that has no maps but his beloved Katharine is already mapped into grids on the earth.

The final scene of the couple in the Cave of Swimmers, shows Almas mummifying the body of Katharine with the saffron he had gifted her. However, in the novel, it is the pigments taken from the cave that are used to mark her body as if it were a map, on which he could plot geographical features: "the ochre went into her face, he daubed blue around her eyes" (Ondaatje *Patient* 248) But the use of saffron makes it an act by which the lover intends to preserve and fossilise the beauty of his beloved: "There were traditions he had discovered in Herodotus in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made eternal— a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing" (Ondaatje 1992: 248). It is such mummification that allows the English patient to preserve their love story and to repeat it to Hana, Caravaggio and Kip in order to piece together fragments of his own lost and continually evasive identity, a "space without contours" (Hall 3).

However the problematic representation of the beloved's true identity, emotions and actions cannot be ignored, since the poet-lover crystallises the beauty and personality of his beloved by speaking for her, thereby, denying her voice, as practised in the tradition of the blazon technique of Petrarchan love sonnet compositions. Such action reduces Katharine to being only an image reflected in the mirror of Almas's consciousness.

Through the story told by the patient, the reception of it by the other inmates of the villa, and the scraps of information found in Almas's copy of Herodotus' *Histories*, the reader sees Katharine as nothing more than the English patient's clandestine love interest. Her prowess as a desert explorer is neglected in both Almas's story as well as Minghella's film. The story the younger woman, Hana carries forward is sadly a tale of Katharine which is coloured by the beliefs of the colonial cartographer Almas. The male gaze of her lover as well as the camera projects Katharine as the embodiment of the essential feminine and robs her of her vitality and individuality. Even if Almas poses to tell her story, he is essentially telling his story.

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