Political Criticism On The English Patient Essay, Research Paper

From the war-torn wastelands of Europe to the exotic Cairo, The English Patient, is a reader’s delight. This novel set in the twilight stages of the Second World War was created by Michael Ondaatje. Amongst Caravaggio, Hanna, Almasy and other minor characters, Kip is the only coloured character in the cast. Almasy, is the sick patient while Hana nurses him. Caravaggio is a thief who used to work for the Allies while Kip forages through the war torn regions of Europe, incapacitating unexploded bombs. The story revolves around a few individuals and reflects upon the metamorphosis of their lives, brought about by the war. However, while the story vitally revolves around Almasy and the fate of his love in face of the war, Ondaatje, an East Asian, glorifies Kip (an East Indian), as the ideal male while chastening the Caucasian race.

Born in a family of tradition and values, Kirpal was the second child. The family customs dictated the first son to join the army, while the second would become a doctor and the third, a businessman (Ondaatje,1992).

“He was the second son. The oldest son would go into the army, the next brother would be a doctor, a brother after that would become a businessman. An old tradition in his family”

(Ondaatje, 1992, #201)

The tradition however, was transgressed due to conflicting propensities of the eldest brother who chose to resist the indigenous British rule rather than fight on their side. In light of the resulting imprisonment of his brother, Kirpal chose to fill the void by enlisting in the army. Following his enlistment, Kip chose to join the bomb-squad whose duties were to nullify the unexploded hazards and eliminate booby traps, thus saving innocent lives. Fully cognizant of the fact that the field of bomb disposal was in its infancy, and that the average life expectancy of bomb experts was pegged at ten weeks, he still proffered himself for the cause. While the doctor’s duties are to heal the sick and forestall the loss of lives; Kip indeed became the doctor in the view of the fact that he was indeed rejuvenating the afflicted land and saving innocent civilians from traumatic disfigurations and death. Kip, therefore, fulfilled the traditions of his family, first by enlisting in the army and then by preventing the loss of lives, in doing so displayed the qualities of thoughtfulness and intrepidity.

While the Germans brazenly acknowledged their goal of racial cleansing and exterminated innocent people of Jewish origins, the Allies asserted time and again that they were fighting to impede racial cleansing and saving innocent lives. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, aligned the motives of the Allies with that of the Nazi.

“One bomb. Then another. Hiroshima. Nagasaki”

(Ondaatje, 1992, page #284)

Admitting that the Allies could have warranted the bombing of Hiroshima, Nagasaki was an exceedingly unjustified and inhuman act, costing thousands of innocent Japanese the ultimate price. One could also deliberate on the fact that the Allies would desisted from bombing Europe since it was principally inhabited by Caucasians. This form of premeditated manslaughter caused Kip to reconsider his allegiance since it opposed everything that he was fighting for. In acute mental turmoil, Kip considered killing the English Patient to pacify his anguish, however, he let him subsist. The momentousness of this act is that he merely degraded the white man rather than killing him, in doing so proving to the Caucasians as to who is the better race while manifesting the qualities of forgiveness and self-restraint.

Following the bombing, Kip repudiated his allegiance to the allies and returned back to his homeland. He becomes a doctor back home and leads a prosperous and contented existence amongst his cavorting wife and his two scions.

“He is a doctor, has two children and a laughing wife. He is permanently busy in this city”

(Ondaatje, 1992, page #299)

Hana, on the other hand, still muses about Kip, longs for him and craves for his company. While Kip knows where he belongs, Hana wants to be belonged.

” Even at this age, thirty-four, she has still not found her own company she wanted.”

(Ondaatje, 1992, page #301)

The connotation of this fact is that Kip is shown to be an integral man, true to his predisposition and his principles while still Hanna wanders around, searching.

The predominantly quiescent character of Kip does not play a significant role in this novel, yet his qualities are that of the protagonist. On synthesizing the qualities displayed by Kip, one would find that Ondaatje has contrived the ‘ideal’ male in his character: thoughtful, courageous, caring, true to his morals, forgiving and self-restraining. A preponderance of his qualities become obvious in circumstances where white characters are affected in a potent manner. In many a situation, Kip emerges the victor, be it at diffusing bombs, captivating women, or in emotional battles, while white characters are left feeling remorseful (in Almasy’s case) or longing for him (in Hana’s case). This is clearly the manifestation of Ondaatje’s strength of convictions in his origins, and in a very astute yet powerful manner.

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