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## Mapping the Woman's Body in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

### Summary

This article shows that fixed national identities in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* are not only questioned but relinquished in favour of a flux of multiple, incessant becomings, while the specificity of a woman's identity, far from being decentred and evacuated of its discursively produced socio-symbolic meanings, continues to be addressed in terms of supposedly homogeneous female body and its institutionally sanctified appearances. Imbued with socially marked distinctiveness, such female body consequently gives forth a particular embodiment of feminine which comes to operate as its unproblematic facticity, thus simultaneously narrowing down the scope of identity options from which the feminine is compelled to derive the make-up of its very much truncated existence. The paper then seeks to apply the argument developed here to a classroom situation and students' creative approach towards redressing the problem of gendering the text at the expense of women characters by lending them their own voice.

## Kartografiranje ženskega telesa v literarni predlogi *Angleškega pacienta*

### Povzetek

Prispevek izhaja iz teze, da Ondaatjejev *Angleški pacient* gradi na prediranju in razkranjanju nacionalnih identitet, ki so končno tudi opuščene v prid vzpostavljanja pomnoženih, neprestano porajajočih in prelivajočih se subjektivitet. Kljub razdiranju in razsrediščevanju iluzorne stavbe nacionalnih identitet, Angleški pacient zanemarja preizpraševanje spremljajoče identitetske politike ženskosti, ki jo, nasprotno od pričakovanj, pogloblja na način naslavljanja skozi problematične leče kartografsko poustvarjenega ženskega telesa. Le-to tako ostaja prežeto z odtisi orientalističnega diskurza, iz katerega se lahko izvije šele s prehodom v smrt. Tezo, ki jo prispevek razvija na tem mestu, avtorica preizkusi tudi v literarno-pedagoškem procesu, da bi študentkam in študentom postkolonialnih literatur približala nekaj osnovnih teoretičnih nastavkov, na podlagi katerih bi študentke in študenti sami nadalje razvijali kritične vpogleda v način besedilnega vzpostavljanja spola. Zadnji del članka natančneje dokumentira enega izmed tovrstnih načinov opazovanja besedila med študentkami in študenti ter njihovega poskusa komunikacije s takšnim besedilom na način deaktivacije njegovega, skozi orientalistično dogmo zakoličenega, vzpostavljanja institucije ženskosti.

# Mapping the Woman's Body in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* questions the idea of fixed identity for nations and by analogy for men but not so for women. It relinquishes fixed national identities in favour of a flux of multiple, incessant becomings. In contrast, far from similarly decentring woman's identity by undermining and emptying its discursively produced socio-symbolic meanings, the novel continues to accept identity addressed in terms of the female body, that is its culturally reinforced materiality, and its institutionally sanctified appearances. Imbued with socially marked distinctiveness, this female body consequently gives forth a particular embodiment of the feminine that operates as its unproblematic facticity, thus simultaneously narrowing down the scope of identity options from which the feminine is compelled to derive the make-up of its very much truncated existence.

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Ondaatje's preoccupation with issues of identity permeates his postcolonial texts, which present identity as a matter of multiple cultural origins and dispersed (geographical) locations. Such spatial dispersions in turn render it not only heterogeneous, fluid, and fragmented but also strikingly indeterminable. Identity, for Ondaatje, resists all closure and fixity. Perhaps surprisingly, he does not deploy this notion of identity as multiple (and therefore beyond definition) to question the identity of women. Indeed, he accepts the socially induced particularities of woman's discursively entrenched identity. Although the identity of culturally posited woman could easily feature as another site of ideological contentions and examination of imposed meanings, it remains instead entangled in traditional networks of prescribed, seemingly monolithic and indisputable, bodily figurations. Veiled by the cloak of unassailable neutrality, these, however, bear the imprint of invading, alien connotations as imparted by a male gaze, which turns the female body into a self-divorced, socially shaped and historically colonised territory. At the same time these culturally generated manifestations of a female body also carry the echoes of social practices aimed at containing and controlling women's bodies, which in the course of history have ranged from '*foot-binding and corseting to rape and battering, to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilisation, unwanted pregnancy and [lately] explicit commodification*' (Bordo 1993, 188–9).

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<sup>1</sup> Germane to literary studies in their broadest international range is a wide proliferation of feminist (literary) theories which are finally inching their way forward and beginning to make significant inroads into literature courses organised at the university level in Slovenia. What follows is a demonstration of how some of these feminist tenets and subsequent literary approaches can be channelled into a compelling dissection of the textuality of gender and how they can be utilised in a classroom situation to instigate a fruitful discussion on socially framed gender identities as captured or constructed and conveyed in literature. This contribution consists of my personal rendition of a close reading of the chosen literary piece, the purpose of which is to demonstrate some of the issues at stake. The first part of the article is then followed by an example of classroom action research conducted among second-year

In the novel woman is embodied in the figure of Katherine – the lover of the English patient (or rather Almasi). Ondaatje defines Katherine solely in terms of her body which, since she is denied a voice of her own and can therefore spring into life only through the narration of her observer, consequently becomes her only reality in the world of the text. Traversed by the investigating, possessive and recasting gaze of her lover (himself a dedicated desert explorer and map-drawer) Katherine's body is criss-crossed by male inscriptions of significance. These form an imprisoning network of artificially imposed relations that speak for her and instead of her. By virtue of being enmeshed into this constricting, defining structure, the body of the woman becomes a repository of other people's projected desires. She cannot escape the straitjacket of being tampered with, mapped and designated according to the culturally implanted expectations and desires of gazing man. His perception and his language trap her in a fixed position that reduces her to selected bodily manifestations alone.<sup>2</sup>

Woman's entrapment within narrowly schematised identity is further compounded by the novel's metaphors that question artificially erected national boundaries and the attendant phenomenon of crumbling national affiliations. The image of the desert captures such displaced and eroded national identities that defy any precise definition, for desert *'could not be claimed or owned [for] it [is] a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names'* (Ondaatje 1993, 138–9). Caught in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of its disappearances and self-fashioned appearances, the desert's specificity is put under question for, paradoxically enough, it can be defined only in terms of its indefinability. Folding and unfolding itself every single time as an eclectic collection of permutations, the desert refuses to be mapped. It denies the validity of any single pattern of understanding imposed by outside observers, by those who create maps of the desert. The activity of charting desert maps therefore translates itself into the imposition of artificial boundaries and fabricated identities pieced together from scraps of self-contradictory legends. Out of such an effectively uncharted territory, in which one becomes her/his own invention, emerges a 'citizen of nowhere or somewhere in one's mind', enjoying a multiple and multi-layered view that fans out and spills across state boundaries. Poised at the same multicultural intersection, from where he can simultaneously embrace a diversity of unobstructed views, exploding into a myriad of directions, is the English patient, or Count de ~~Almasi, who is both English and Hungarian, and yet neither of the two.~~

<sup>2</sup> The reduction of woman to her body undergoes its ultimate enactment in the advertising industry where an archetypal female model implies a decontextualised woman that is cast outside any specific setting and deprived of individuality features, but locked into/petrified in the coy position of her body. The eradication of her individuality features is most frequently secured through an absence of facial expression considered to be a key-encoder of one's personality. Removal of personal history from the woman's face leads to an imposition of a wax-like mask, which allows for meanings of all kinds to flow through the figures of women so that they can attest to the identity and values associated with somebody or something else. In this vein, ads for women's perfumes would typically zoom in on the facial close-up, but then partially obscure its features by means of tight framing, the graininess or soft-focus image. The viewer is thus invited to impose on woman as an empty sign the fantasy stirred by a brand name behind or above which hovers the woman's face or figure. In addition to being divested of her personality, which is never the case with men for they radiate self-contained individuality and display active and vibrant poses, a woman is also extrapolated from reality by the absence of location or its exotic mysteriousness. A model is always cast in sculpted and languorous poses and is never engaged in an activity other than narcissistic or vacant self-contemplation. By contrast, men are always defined in relation to leisure activities, whether sporting or musical, and accompanying objects such as a saxophone or basketball, which are guaranteed to point to and retain their individualism. Unlike the female subject that is reincarnated as a pure fantasy on the account of signifying with its

Unlike Katherine's body, which reduces her to her sex, his body oozes with universally invested meanings. Retrieved from the wreckage of a burning plane, his body is later carried across the North African desert strewn with the wreckage of WWII battles and finally ends up splayed out on a sickbed in an Italian villa. The blackness of its charred skin might, as some have suggested, possibly connote the demise of the white male civilisation ravaged by WWII and the onslaught of the nuclear war. However, it also raises the question of what an Englishman really *is* after all these centuries of colonisation – centuries when blackness and whiteness unavoidably crossed rigorously maintained socio-political boundaries in an unconscious attempt at cross-pollination. And it is precisely this permeability of borders that is enacted between the English patient and a Sikh British army sapper.

Kip, the sapper, is depicted as enamoured of the white culture that invaded his Indian being and ousted its constitutive core. Accordingly, when Kip is sent out on his first training mission to defuse a bomb, he finds himself literally cradled in the bosom of white civilisation, and the very act of his descending, '*down into the giant white chalk horse of Westbury, into the whiteness of the horse, carved into the hill so that now he was a black figure (ibid., 181) [coming to the rescue of his master's civilisation]*' indicates his immersion into the bowels of white culture. In this respect Western civilisation does not only swallow Kip by cocooning him into its modes of perception but literally ingests him in order to gain a new creative potential. White supremacy has posited the 'other' so as to be able to barricade itself behind the moat of imaginary security of an unproblematic, clear-cut and easily recognisable identity. In fact, it turns out to have no separable or fully independent existence from any absolute outside, since the culturally designated inside and outside turn out to swap places constantly, producing intricately intertwined, mutually informing relationships.

The charred blackness of the English patient's skin then signifies the permeability of borders, an unconscious absorption or gradual conversion of the dying empire to the elements of 'beastly otherness' it had fervently sought to expel but failed in its anguished attempts to do so. An Englishman turns out not to be so English after all. Rather he is an amalgam of inverted or decentred identities devoid of the meanings with which he originally started. The notion of an Englishman as an origin source of self-explanatory ideations turns out to be a deep-seated illusion. In other words, the English as a 'species' are extinct – they are merely a compulsive citation of long ago disaggregated, vibrantly discordant meanings and equally faded connotations.

Outlined against the constellation of bodies gushing forth with a preponderance of loosened, dismantled and obliterated national borders, Katherine's body, an exemplary enshrinement of female specificity, appears anachronistically trapped in a fixed position. Transfixed by 'the cold blue thumbtacks' of Almasy's eyes (Atwood in Staels 1996, 5), she becomes '*her sweating knee beside the gearbox of the truck, the knee swerving, rising with the bumps*' (Ondaatje 1993, 150); a cluster of '*awkward limbs (and thin lines of her ankles)*' (ibid., 218) *climbing out of a plane, bending down in [the desert researchers'] midst to prod a fire, her elbow up and pointed towards*

[Almasy] *as she drinks from a canteen*' (ibid., 145); a sensuous mouth gulping *'the chlorinated water [with] some coming down her chin and falling to her stomach'* (ibid., 149). The gaze of Almasy's tracking eyes coils itself around Katherine's highlighted body parts, supposedly pervaded with the marks of her sex, which congeal into an artifice of unity and univocity projected onto her. His gaze thus not only delimits but literally sculpts the body it then claims to find. Weighed under this burden, the carved up and remoulded body of the woman becomes and is understood as her essence. Furrowed with the imprints of the observer's culturally conditioned perceptions and linguistic coinages, it yields a particular embodiment of female that in fact displaces it at the moment it purports to represent it. Instead of functioning as a feasible site of individual self-determination, the specularly constructed body of the woman resonates with the evocations of a voice that cannot speak itself. It is a muffled voice – a voice that must always attest the identity and values of its male designer.

Why is it that other identity trajectories free of nation-bound inhibitions can easily embrace their bearers' dividedness, rendering them at once plural and partial, while a woman's specific identity remains body-bound – that is singular and univocal, precluding the possibility of widening her frame of reference or acquiring a sense of gravity independent of the male gaze? In her exposition of the way a female body, under specular and exteriorising conditions, gains its materiality that over time stabilises to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface, Butler (1993, 48–9) takes issue with Plato's postulation of male and female embodiments respectively, whereby she observes that men's intelligibility

*depends on the exclusion of women, slaves, children and animals, where slaves are characterised as those who do not speak his language, and who in not speaking his language, are considered diminished in their capacity for reason. This domain of the less than rational human bounds the figure of human reason, producing the man as one who is without a childhood; is not a primate and so is relieved of the necessity of eating, defecating, living and dying; one who is not a slave, but always a property holder, one whose language remains originary and untranslatable. This is a figure of disembodiment, but one which is nevertheless a figure of a body, a bodying forth of a masculinized rationality – the figure of a male body which is not a [corporeal, immanent] body. The body that is reason ... is itself a phantasmatic dematerialization of masculinity, one which requires that women, slaves, children and animals be the body, perform the bodily functions it will not perform.*

In the process of being divested of any kind of corporeal specificity, which is grafted onto the female body, the bearer of the male body is assigned the qualities of a body-transcendent and therefore universal personhood. As males within the system of gender specific embodiments appear to participate in the form of a universal and not a sexed person, it is the female body that shoulders the burden of corporeal immanence. Contemplated in terms of their corporeality only, women become *'ontologically suffused with the projected marks of their "sex"'* (Butler 1990) which qualifies one as particular and relative, especially when subjected to the surveillance of

the male gaze. However, the social practice of tinkering with the body as a locus of culturally configured meanings extends beyond the mere discrepancy between disembodied male and fully invested corporeal female bodies to encompass a reinterpretation of physical features whose regrouping and remodulation under the category of sexual markings remain obscured under the protective layer of seemingly neutral linguistic operations.

As pointed out by Witting (in Butler 1990, 114), it is not only the accumulation of attributes under the category of one's distinctive sex that qualifies as highly suspect, it is the very discrimination of the features themselves for they gain social meaning and unification only through their articulation within the category of sex. The very fact that *'vagina, breasts, and so forth, are named sexual parts is both a restriction of the erogenous body to those parts and a fragmentation of the body as a whole'* (ibid.). Witting goes on to argue that the unity of the female body, whose features could have been named in a way that would not reproduce the reductive operations of the category of the sex, is in fact a disunity, a fragmentation and compartmentalisation as well as a reduction of erotogeneity. The installed integrity and unity of the body, which are hardly ever thought of as having been first dismantled and then reassembled to suit the currently entertained notions of what goes into the construction of a socially accepted gendered subject, in fact serve the purposes of fragmentation, restriction, and domination of the body, which in turn not only produce its materiality but also streamline its forces, energies, sensations and pleasures. In Katherine's case, these are supposed to proliferate precisely at the level of her bodily contours as fractured, regrouped and remoulded by the English patient's gaze, from which the facticity of Katherine's body also derives its only form of sustenance.

## Conclusion

Obviously within the system of representing the universal then, as Braidotti (1994) observes, the cost men have to pay is disembodiment, or elision of gendered specificity into the abstraction of phallic masculinity. And the price women are compelled to pay so as to secure at least some semblance of social visibility, even though it spells their reduction to the immanence of the body that is both exploited and reduced to silence, is loss of subjectivity through over-embodiment and confinement to their gendered identity. In order to disrupt and counterbalance the socially enacted distribution of asymmetrical modes of coerced male and female embodiment, Braidotti further notes that

*'men need to repossess their abstracted bodily self by shedding some exclusive rights to transcendental consciousness. They need to get embodied, to get real, to suffer through the pain of re-embodiment, that is to say, incarnation, whereas women need to repossess subjectivity by reducing their confinement to the body'* (1997, 527–8).

Only in death can Katherine, whose contingent body is tattooed with the inscriptions of the map-charter's gaze, extricate herself from this kind of embodiment; in death that the shell

of her specularly constructed embodiment is cracked open to reveal a corpse whose stiffened features can no longer be construed along the lines of gender. For in death these dissolve to be replaced with the projections of a transcendental entity. The body of a woman is now finally attended to as transcendental, so that Katherine dies

*containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes [one has] swallowed, bodies [one has] plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters [one has] climbed up into as if trees, fears [one has] hidden in as if caves. [And just like Almasy she, too, can ] wish for all this to be marked on [ her] body when [ she is] dead. [ Just like Almasy she can now] believe in such cartography – to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. [Finally, she too can] walk on such earth that [has] no maps (Ondaatje 1993, 264).*

## Appendix: Responses in prose and verse to ‘The Cinnamon Peeler’

by Michael Ondaatje

Against the backdrop of some of the points elucidated above, students were asked to contemplate Ondaatje’s poem *The Cinnamon Peeler* and elaborate on the way the woman’s body is streaked with the inscriptional marks as purveyed by the male lover. The students could relate, or were at least in agreement with their schoolmates, that a woman’s identity is established in relation to that of a man (e.g. *the lime burner’s daughter, the grass cutter’s wife and the cinnamon peeler’s wife*) and when coaxed into the open as her own, it is mediated through the fragmentation of her body as induced and orchestrated by the lover’s searching gaze as well as his burning touch. It is only after these fragmented parts have been soaked in the smell or fragrance of the cinnamon peeler (which of course bespeaks of his identity only) that a woman can be galvanised into social existence and recognised as being in possession of internal, but in fact very much distorted, coherence, when weaving her way round the bastions of homosocial fabric (e.g. when *walking through the market among the vendors, in whose eyes she would be acknowledged as a viable social entity providing she can be claimed as somebody’s proprietorial extension*).

The students were then invited to lend the woman a voice and possibly unearth and pursue the convoluted maze of the woman’s thoughts that would either reflect her ruminations on having been subjected to this kind of treatment or lead to an articulation of a liberated retort. The students were not expected to merely evoke and reiterate the already dissected pattern of the way a woman’s body is colonised and mapped so as to be able to cast her in a rebellious posture (although this kind of approach had yielded some interesting results – see **Section A**). Instead they were supposed to embark on the search for the way in which the woman’s emerging sense of her reclaimed identity could be at least glimpsed at or even retrieved by delving into her realisations about the way her self-awareness has been affected and shaped

under the impact of specularly imposed meanings (Section B). In the long run, a hope was entertained that the woman in the students' written responses might not only return the glance, revert the gaze and question the authority of the male gaze as the expression goes, but probe into the possibilities of refashioning the existing framework of social relations by taking on the image of male body/identity, emptying it out of its purported originary and incontestable meanings and investing it with her own projections that would point to either ironical or serious attempts at staging a true counter-colonisation. No such approach had been taken for obviously it would have been a rather hard nut to crack.

### Section A<sup>3</sup>

a.

W(oman): *Who are you talking about?*

CP(eeler): *Well, I'm talking about you.*

W: *And who am I?*

CP: *What do you mean?*

W: *Well, who am I? What is my name?*

CP: *I don't know your name.*

W: *Then how can you talk about me if you don't know me, if you even don't know my name? Don't bother answering, I'll answer instead of you. You don't know my name, because inside, in your mind, you are still one of us. You are no better than other Indian men even though you camouflaged your hands over smoking tar. Women are for you, and will always be, just someone's wives. Even in your Western world you see women in the same way our men do, without their own feelings and brain – the grass cutter's wife or the lime burner's daughter, they don't have a name either. And a name is not really important, isn't that so? Why bother with names if all you want is a wife and a dancer. All you need and want is a nice body dancing for you, and even then you don't notice the face or the eyes of your dancer, but just her ankles, thighs, a belly, breasts and shoulders and hands. What is a woman to you?... And you are right, I will never be able to walk through the markets without being noticed. As you said, the blind would stumble certain of whom they approached though I might bathe under rain gutters. For them I will always be the cinnamon peeler's wife. They also don't care whether I am Maya, Sarita, Indira or Vandana.*

(Maja)

b.

*If I were a cinnamon peeler's wife,  
I would join my hands with water  
in repulsion against the yellow bark dust.*

*Ah, all the efforts I would make  
to clear my mind of who I am,*

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<sup>3</sup> Only minor editorial changes have been carried out where deemed appropriate. I would like to thank the second-year students (1999/2000) from the Translation and Interpreting Department for their co-operation on the

*to put myself on top  
and get rid of you instead.*

*For I may be your wife,  
but my intelligence  
breaks the boundaries of your yellow bark dust.*

*The act of love,  
sending shivers down my spine,  
not giving pleasure even to the bed,  
sends me off to softer arms.  
So you see, my poor and little cinnamon peeler,  
your days are over.  
I am my own ruler.  
Clear?*

(Iris)

## Section B

a.

*Here I am. You made me yours, you possess me, with my life I depend on you. You had cut me into pieces and thus I lost my own personality. I lost the control over my body. I am known among strangers only because of you, everyone knows me because of you. Where is me in this mess? You marked my breasts and shoulders, the upper thigh, my hair, my back, your smell is all over me, I am scared and my words were lost in the act of love. You pretended and foolishly thought that bodies are free? Why? Did you do this only for your pleasure, because of your egocentric nature, to show me that without you I am worth nothing? And what am I supposed to do now; how will I find my lost identity? I am not grateful to you for what you have done, for my dependence on you. I will leave you, I will wash your cinnamon smell off me, I will cut my hair, hide my breasts and shoulders. I will go back to my family who are people like me and not strangers like you. I will listen to the songs and voices of my country, of my youth. I will look at the faces of people who have the same history as I do and who do not want to possess me. I will look at familiar mountains, rivers and trees. You will no longer smell or touch me. For you I am lost.*

*However, this is not the only result of my liberation. I will not be satisfied with a mere escape to the other parts of my body, I will not be satisfied with returning to the relics of your devastation and with what you forgot to mark or what you simply considered not worthy of your attention. This is only the first step. I will fight back. I want to get everything back that you have taken although the things will never be the same as before.*

(Mojca)

*I slept. As I was dreaming, wrapped up in a green illusion, my nose was poisoned with the smell of cinnamon. Its fragrance stupefied me, the dust of the yellow bark stuck to my moistened lips. I*

*licked my lips and swallowed the dust. It was sweet. It tickled and seared my throat. I changed. I knew your desire, I wished your fingers to touch my ankle. I wanted you to breathe my new cinnamon breath. My supple skin yearned for your glance. You touched my thigh in water and looked at me impassively. I didn't shiver with excitement. My body stiffened. It was then I knew you were my master.*

*I touched my belly to your hands and said I was the cinnamon peeler's wife. I am naked. You have peeled off my skin. All that is left over is muscles, bones and blood. My eyes are blind with the smell when I look at you ... I buried my heart in cinnamon and it stopped beating. You [became] my mind, my soul, my life. Without you, the cinnamon peeler, I was nobody ... I followed the yellow path and got lost in the yellow forest.*

(Petra)

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