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The Quest for Home and Prelapsarian Innocence in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992)

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Abstract

This article examines the conceptualization of the African Sahara as a constructive space in *The English Patient* (1992) by Canadian author Michael Ondaatje. It seeks to develop a postcolonial argument on Ondaatje's representation of the desert through an exploration of its sacred geography, drawing on Carl Jung's archetype of the mother and Martin Heidegger's concept of "dwelling," which he associates with "being" and homeliness. In doing so, the study analyzes the depiction of the desert as a healing space where one can reconnect with prelapsarian innocence and regain a sense of home. It challenges portrayals of the desert as a destructive territory. Instead, it elucidates how geography and space are rearticulated in postcolonial literature as part of a counter-hegemonic discourse of resistance and reclamation. The paper argues that colonial explorations of the Orient resulted not only in acts of exploitation and violence but also in phenomenological and psychological homelessness, as well as the loss of physical dwelling. It concludes that Ondaatje's achievement in the novel lies in his effort to search for and restore the dignity of the desert of the Orient.

Keywords: Archetype of the mother, desert, dwelling, Michael Ondaatje, prelapsarian innocence

ملخص

يدرس هذا البحث تصوير الصحراء في رواية المريض الإنجليزي للكاتب مايكل أونداتجي. واستنادًا إلى نظرية أدب ما بعد الاستعمار، تحلّل هذه الدراسة تمثيل الصحراء بالاعتماد على مفهوم النموذج الأصلي للأم لدى كارل يونغ، إضافةً إلى مفهوم السكن عند مارتن هايدغر الذي يساويه مع "الموجود" والحنان المنزلي. ومن هذا المنطلق، تسعى الدراسة إلى إبراز الصحراء كمساحة للشفاء واستعادة إحساس البراءة ما قبل السقوط، في معارضة للخطاب الاستعماري الذي يصوّر الصحراء على أنها منطقة خالية ومدمّرة. ويوضح البحث أن الحملات الاستعمارية في الشرق لم تُسفر فقط عن أفعال آثمة، بل أدّت أيضًا إلى التشرّد الفينومينولوجي والنفسي، فضلًا عن فقدان المسكن المادي. وعليه، يؤكد المقال دور أونداتجي في الرواية في كسر الصور النمطية عن الصحراء الإفريقية والمشرقية وإعادة الاعتبار إليها.

كلمات مفتاحية: النموذج الأصلي للأم، الصحراء، المسكن، البراءة ما قبل السقوط

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Introduction

In *The English Patient (*1992*)*, Michael Ondaatje raises concerns about the issues of self, nation, and identity, and challenges the established truths underpinning dominant Eurocentric ideologies of white, male, and Western superiority. For a fruitful invocation of such concerns, he gives crucial importance to the concepts of place and space. His ideas fall under the vast garb of the study of geography, which increasingly found "renaissance" during the second half of the twentieth century, either as a result of the rise of Western imperialism and its obsession with land acquisition or as a consequence of the postcolonial endeavors to resist the European attempts at dominance over the colonized territories (Upstone, 2009).

For Westerners, the desert topography "has burned itself upon the Western imagination" ever since the time of the Greek historian Herodotus in the 5th century (Jasper & Klemm, 2004, p.154). For the Orientalists, however, the desert of the Orient has been associated with negativity, backwardness, and nothingness (Said, 1978). It has been depicted as being as historically "retarded as it is geographically" (p. 235). Therefore, the desert narrative became a "privileged trope of postcolonial reflection" where postcolonial identity crises and negotiations between "imperial domination and counter-hegemonic appropriation" are enacted (Gil, 2011, p. 64).In this respect, this study aims to demonstrate that Ondaatje, in a postcolonial engagement to "write back" to Orientalist discourse, enters into the struggle for land and geography in *The English Patient*. It draws inspiration from psychological and existential approaches to analyze the interconnectedness between the characters and the desert during World War II in the novel.

The novel capitalizes on the history of the European exploration of the African desert. It revolves around the story of the protagonist, Count Lazlo de Almásy, a Hungarian geographical explorer, who embarks on a journey in 1930 to the African Sahara to fulfill an imperial mission of mapping the desert and recovering lost places within its vastness. Almásy learns to read and enjoy the desert tracks, heat, storms, and exceptional topography. Gradually, all his imperial objectives changed to love and passion for the desert paraphernalia. These feelings separate him from the European nations whose fundamental aim is to enslave and render the desert "one of the theatres of war" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 134). [i]

This paper examines the constructive role of the desert space in *The English Patient* by relying on Carl Jung's archetype of the mother in *Man and His Symbols* (1964) and *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster (1986)*, in addition to Martin Heidegger's concept of "dwelling," which he develops in "Building Dwelling Thinking" (2008). This study aims to challenge Ondaatje's portrayal of the desert by examining its positive psychological and existential effects. It examines the symbolic aspects of Almásy's journey through the Libyan Desert, demonstrating that the crossing represents his unconscious attempt to reconnect with human essence and prelapsarian innocence, seeking purification from adultery and the burdens of empire. This article argues that Almásy's trophy during this journey is the search for and finding a home, as well as experiencing a sense of dwelling. The representation of the African Sahara as a space of baptism and physical dwelling reimposes its worth and dignity.

Literature Review

In the vast array of scholarship examining Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, postcolonial perspectives have predominated as a critical lens of analysis. For example, in "A Postcolonial Perspective of Alterity in Michael Ondaatje's 'The English Patient'," Riaz-ud-Din and Anwar

(2024) employ Edward Said's theoretical framework to examine themes of racial and cultural alterity. In due course, they examine the unsuccessful journey of Kip's assimilation into English society and shed light on the discriminatory attitudes toward non-white characters. Diverging from this interpretative approach, the present study seeks to explore the potential for interracial reconciliation and harmonious cultural dialogue within the liminal landscape of the African Sahara.

The scholarly contribution of Abd Al-Janabi and Az-Zubaidy (2024) in "Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient (1992): The Question of Identity" explores the question of identity in the context of the desert and argues that "the identity of the English patient and the travellers is backgrounded and eluded for addressing wider questions of saving a human soul beyond all narrow sectarian imperative and national boundaries" (p. 4892). However, the article does not adequately explain how identity is dialectically negotiated through the desert's symbolic landscape, and consequently fails to fully illuminate the novel's representation of the terrain as a potentially transformative and humanizing space.

In other studies about the novel, minimal emphasis is placed on the psychological or existential impacts of the desert land. On the one hand, Sharyn Emery (2010) reads the love relationship between Almásy and Katharine against the backdrop of the Libyan Desert. He claims that while Almásy aligns with the desert, Katharine stands as a woman of water and gardens (p. 211). Interestingly, Sharyn associates the desert with “heat” and “dryness,” which she defines as traits of masculinity, refusing to admit its connection with feminine traits such as water and moisture. In addition, Stenberg (1998) suggests that Romance serves as the channel for the novel and its cinematic adaptation, arguing that water symbolizes the essence of Almásy's love for Katharine (p. 257). These views are too limited in interpreting the meaning of the desert and its relation to water. In this study, I discuss both claims by showing that crucial symbols of water are present in the desert, making its figurative connection possible with the feminine womb to uncover the characters’ need to repossess the prelapsarian tranquillity.

On the other hand, Pressman (2003) argued that "with Almásy's being fixated on the past, a past that doomed him, there is no hope for the West, which victimizes even its children, such as Hana” (p. 30). However, his study falls short of explaining the reasons behind Almásy’s fixation on the past through memory. Besides, in “A question of scale? Làzlo Almàsy’s Desert Mapping and its Postcolonial Rewriting,” Gil (2011) provides essential insights into the understanding of the desert as a privileged site for “the reverse appropriation of hegemony” and illuminates space in modernity with its relation to identity and resistance, colonization and decolonization. Despite its significance, her article fails to explain the existential or psychological role of the desert space in Almásy's life, who was seeking innocence and a sense of home. In this paper, I aim to chart new territory in understanding the desert space in The English Patient by projecting the sense of existential dwelling and foregrounding the psychological healing that is sought and found in the Libyan Desert.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Carl Jung’s psychological concept of the mother archetype to demonstrate that desert geography operates both as a physical space and a symbolic setting associated with a longing for “prelapsarian” purity. Jung (1986) studied the archetypes to understand the collective unconscious of humans, demonstrating that every archetype has an image through which it is manifested (p. 2). Speaking of the archetype of the mother in

particular, he says that no image of mothering encompasses all its aspects, and man's actions are directed mainly by the instincts with which he is born. Thus, the archetype's role is to give these instincts something toward which "to direct the organism's attention, generally in the form of mental representations ... of that which can gratify the instinct" (Van Eenwyk, 1997, p. 23). When the individual is in a state of confusion over life choices, the archetype intervenes to direct our attention "and move[s] us beyond it" (p.35).

Jung (1980) explained that the archetype of the mother epitomizes the feminine mysteries of "formation, preservation, nourishment, and transformation," and is strongly connected to the element of water, which the Christian Church regards as a symbol of baptism (p. 89). Deep in their unconscious, humans are aware of the spoiling emotions and pain that accompany conscious awareness of the horrible realities of human existence. Consequently, one's latent wish to return to the mother's womb points to the need for salvation and purification (Nichols, 1980). Jung speaks of the natural mother and the mother in the figurative sense, which appears in "things representing the goal of our longing for redemption." The archetype, according to him, can be associated with "many things arousing devotion or feelings of awe, "like" the sea or any still waters "as it can be attached to " a rock, a cave, a tree…" (p. 14).

By relying on these views, this paper argues that the Libyan Desert in Ondaatje's novel represents the features of the womb and mirrors Almásy's need to find purification and peace. Moreover, to demonstrate that this space grants Almásy the option of belonging and feeling at home, this article calls upon Martin Heidegger's concept of "dwelling." In Being and Time and "Building Dwelling Thinking." Heidegger (2010) emphasized the significance of place and space in fostering a meaningful existence, arguing that "Being" is deeply intertwined with the world and is spatially structured as "being-in-the-world" (p. 41). In addition, space holds existential significance in accounting for one's experience of environments and well-being in the world, and one of the essential structures of "Being" is "Being-in-the-world" (p. 54). Hence, the implication of the "in" in "Being-in-the-world" should be attributed to its familiarity and "heedful dealing with the beings encountered in the world" (p.102). "Dwelling" refers to "how we humans are on the earth" (p.349). Heidegger (2008) explains that "Dwelling is the end" that any human searches in the place, space, or buildings that one "inhabits" (p.347). This end in itself is not found everywhere. Dwelling, or buan, is the fundamental quality of human beings. It completes one's existence, and signifies how "you are and I am, how we humans are on earth" (p.349).

These ideas provide the necessary theoretical principles to demonstrate that the colonial projects of mapping, invasions, and wars threaten the establishment of meaning and belonging in The English Patient. Because of these colonial missions, the European nations turn into confined spaces where the sense of home and dwelling is erased and lost for Almásy. The latter's inability to establish any existential meaningfulness in the Western nations stands for a spatial crisis he seeks to overcome through nomadic displacement and memory. Colonial projects, from this perspective, are reducing some places into uninhabitable ones while throwing people into the abyss of homelessness. The Search for PreLapsarian Peace: The Desert as a "Womb" and Place of Baptism in *The English Patient*.

In *The English Patient*, Almásy is overwhelmed with remorse for both his adultery and imperial mapping of the desert, and he demonizes the reality of the colonial explorations. Indeed, as he distances himself from his European milieu and travels to the desert, he comes to understand that mapping is one of the European powers' strategies to instill dominance and

power. During his long journey in the Libyan Desert, Almásy develops a growing disdain for his assignments. He discovers that destruction is the unique truth about his mission, and that his achievements will facilitate the invasion of the desert, stripping it of its holy beauty. In a moment of epiphany and bitter realization, he laments the fierce violation of the desert, saying:
Was I a curse upon them? ... For the desert raped by war, shelled as if it were just sand? The Barbarians versus the Barbarians. Both armies would come through the desert without a sense of what it was… I do not think I entered a cursed land or that I was ensnared in an evil situation. Every place and person was a gift to me… Had I been Madox's demonfriend? This country—had I charted it and turned it into a place of war? (Ondaatje, 1992, pp.257-60)
In this passage, the author implies that while considering the destruction of its sacred places by war, Almásy understands that mapping the North African desert was an act of blasphemy. He admits that the land and its Bedouins were gifts he betrayed by his job. Therefore, when he joined the Bedouin Caravan in 1932, he depicts his joy and fondness for these people, who teach him the meaning of peace and simplicity. He says: "Gradually, we became nationless. I came to hate nations. Nation-states deform us. Madox died because of nations" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 13). This statement attests to his detachment from the European background and his inability to feel safe or at home in these countries.

By capitalizing on a protagonist—Almásy—whose most ubiquitous doctrine is to wipe out all relations to his colonial background an d belong to the desert, Ondaatje (1992) represents the latter as a space that allows "becoming" to take place because it does not limit but instead encourages the rise of individual agency and free action. By refusing to adhere to any nation or system of thought, Almásy shows affinity to Karyn Anderson's definition of the nomad as "inclined to reject genealogical ties and pre-established systems of religion and civilization" (p.216). His desire to do away with his name suggests his free nomadic thought, and shows that the desert can replace the importance of one's name, family, and whole nation: "We disappeared into landscape…the places water came to and touched … Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Shaduf. I did not want my name to be associated with such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! The desert taught me such things" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 139). The adjective "beautiful" in this sentence mirrors Almásy's belief in the purity of the place and willingly submits to it, reflecting his unconscious yearning to be relieved from the weight of his sins. The fact that he did not want his name associated with the names of these places attests to their sacredness while deeming the European privileges as offensive.
Theoretically speaking, the African desert manifests as a mother, a nurturer, and a guide for Almásy. Jung (1986) summarized the features of this archetype, which refers to the maternal aspects of our unconsciousness, as follows:

The archetype is often associated with things and places standing for fertility and fruitfulness… It can be attached to a rock, a cave, a tree, a spring, a deep well, or to various vessels such as the baptismal font, or vessel-shaped flowers like the rose or the lotus. The qualities associated with it are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility (p.16).

Following this rationalization, one may assert that the desert, which is an arid, hot, and desolate landscape, is of no relation to the mother archetype. However, in The English Patient, the presence of some attributes such as"darkness," "water," and "milk," in addition to the places

to which Jung attaches the mother in the metaphoric sense, like caves and rocks, helps us to interpret it as a symbol of the mother and as a constructive fertile territory, which awakens new feelings in the individual leading to one's "transformation and rebirth" (Jung, 1964, pp. 15-16). Jung (1986) added that many things arouse devotion or feelings of awe in the desert, including "the moon," which invokes the figurative mother (p. 15). In this context, Almásy regrets that while his imperial projects took him, he forgot to look at the moon, which is also the epitome of human goodness (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 2). His feelings of unhappiness affirm the sour recognition of disloyalty to the land, which was once a source of psychological well-being for him.

When he falls "burning" from the sky, Almásy is found by the Bedouins and begins a different life on earth. They save him from death and nurse his wounds using very primitive methods (Ondaatje,1992,p.6). Jung (1986) explained that rebirth is one of the primordial affirmations of humanity, based on archetypes. These affirmations are underlined by "psychic events," and grasping their phenomenology requires "to sketch the whole field of transformation experiences in sharper outline"(p.73). He adds that during this transformation, one is reborn; or is given an other name and thereby another soul, and then the demons no longer recognize him; or he has to pass through a symbolical death; or, grotesquely enough, heis pulled through a leathern cow, which devours him, so to speak, in front and then expels him behind; or he undergoes an ablution or baptismal bath and miraculously changes into a semi-divine being with a new character and an altered metaphysical destiny. (p.73)

In light of this, Almásy's transformation and rebirth may have taken place at the moment his body is burned to blackness, distorting his identity from the English or the Allies, whom he considers as demons. His survival with a mysterious face and body frees him from the old self and turns him into a tabula rasa, vulnerable to new identities (Ondaatje, 1992). While Goldman (2001) linked Almásy's fall to Milton's Satan in Paradise Lost (p. 905), the researcher considers that his fall is not from paradise to hell but rather from wretchedness to heaven given that after his fall, he is met as a hero or a "semi- divine" by the Bedouins, who provide him with the nourishing aspects of the mother. During this process of rebirth and baptism by fire, he returns to his human essence and purity, reincarnating the process of creation. Previously, humans were born with the ability to decide what and how to be on earth.

That Almásy's fall into the desert occurs at the onset of the novel is of paramount significance and suggests that the whole journey in the African Sahara symbolizes an unconscious longing for a new life, and the picture of the "falling man" stands as a metaphor for going back to human essence after purification by fire. Hence, he is given a new identity as "the English Patient" and finds alleviation and solace in the sites where he is cradled and nurtured. The nomads take him through the "desert's water tribe that spilt and slid over sand and stones, their blue robes shifting like a spray of milk or wing... he was within the larger womb of the canyon" (Ondaatje,1992, p. 19; emphasis added). The employment of the images of water, milk, and the blue color symbolizing peace and tranquillity marks the patient's baptism and articulates his return to prelapsarian stability.

Ondaatje's (1992) text rewrites the story of "Fall" and gives it a new dimension. Goldman (2001) believes that after their fall, Adam and Eve left the sacred Heaven and inhabited "a profane world" (p. 908). Differently, Almásy, after falling from the sky, is taken by the Bedouins to a sacred geography, which he describes, saying: "Here, though I was in the dry sands, I knew I was among water people" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 18; emphasis added). Water rearticulates the mother archetype, and the latter is associated with "the wisdom and spiritual

exaltation that transcend reason" (Jung, 1986, p.15). Almásy's insistence on building a raft after the fire suggests his yearning for maternal care and salvation (p. 18). Besides, the reference to water when describing sand marks the land as a wet, secure womb.

Rank (1929) considered that water is the source of maternal fertility. It is linked to being forced out of the "intrauterine situation." Moreover, the endless endeavors to return inside the womb stem from the wish to restore the embryo-like serenity (p.75). In this context, it is essential to note that an unconscious search for feminine shelter taints Almásy's most important mission in the desert, as it involves the quest for the lost oasis of "Zerzura." An Arab poet names the latter after his lover, whom he sees spreading water on her white dove shoulders while bathing in a desert caravan (Ondaatje, 1992, pp. 140-41). The search for the oasis, with its water as an essential element of life, recalls the liquid of the maternal womb.

To stay with the element of water and reconnection with the feminine, it is worth noting that when Almásy left the Cave of Swimmers, he filled a skin bag with water from "the ain. iii" The water, he says: "hung from his shoulder and sloshed like a placenta" (Ondaatje, 1992, p.249). This suggests that the water from the well gave him life, revived his spirit, and reminded him of his humanity. The placenta as a source of life foreshadows a new beginning ahead. Jung (1964) spoke of three "essential aspects of the mother: her cherishing and nourishing goodness, her orgiastic emotionality, and her Stygian depths" (p. 18). Because of the nourishment and sustenance it provides, similar to the mother's placenta, which gives food, life, and security to the baby, the desert can be a form of the mother archetype at this point.

Against the mystical nature of the Libyan Desert, Ondaatje projects the need for identification with the feminine, which underscores the importance of maternal solicitude and sympathy in times of competitive war and wreckage. This unconscious quest and the human need for care and being looked after are gained during his days with the Bedouins when Almásy is nursed, cradled, and treated like a baby by these people who "poured oil onto large pieces of soft cloth and placed them on him. He was anointed… Unclothed"(Ondaatje, 1992, p. 6). After this encounter, he wonders: "What great nation had found him…What country invented such soft dates to be chewed by the man beside him and then passed from that mouth into his…he was on an altar of hammock" (p. 6). This treatment of the fallen man recalls certain religious rites aimed at reestablishing a spiritual connection with God. Ondaatje pictures his protagonist as an "anointed" man, balancing in the cradle like a baby who floats in the mother's womb while sleeping undisturbed. As such, the desert allows for the manifestation of the archetypal mother, with its qualities of care and nurturing.

The cultural richness that the Bedouins represent in the novel highlights the desert as a therapeutic space for psychological well-being. Almásy states: "The Bedouin knew about fire. They knew about planes that, since 1939, had been falling out of the sky… it was the time of war in heaven. They could recognize the drone of a wounded plane, they knew how to pick their way through such shipwrecks…" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 5; emphasis added). Interestingly, the period (1942-1945) he spent in the desert with the Bedouins protects him from more crimes during the war, reducing, as such, the amount of his sins as implied by the expression "war in heaven."

Almásy's rewriting of Herodotus' text in the novel suggests his unconscious desire for renewal. It expresses his inner longing for rectification of his personal history and Western accounts, as well: "he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from others or writing in his observations—so they all are cradled within the text" (Ondaatje, 1992, p.16). The verb

"cradled" indicates Almásy's intention to create a place for the pages of realities he writes with the already existing words of Herodotus. After long years in the desert, he feels antagonistic toward all that is urban, and Herodotus' The Histories connects to both these spaces and Western history. The book is revealed not as a book of truths but as a "guidebook, ancient and modern, of supposed lies" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 247). Claiming that Herodotus lied about the harshness of the desert is of paramount importance to this study as it expounds the novel's questioning of the reliability of Western writings regarding the depiction of Oriental geography.

When discussing the different symbols that exemplify the process of transformation, Jung draws on the representation of the cave in the eighteenth Sura of the Quran, "The Cave" (in Arabic, Al-Kahf), and focuses on the "mystery of rebirth" that accompanies this process. As a result, he comes to identify the cave as "the place of rebirth, that secret cavity in which one is shut up to incubate and be renewed" (Jung, 1986, p.69). Jung explains that the source of life is relegated to "the place of darkness" (p.88). Critics argue that the symbolism of the swimmers repeatedly focuses on "a return to a more primitive, idealized state of being" and resonates with what Freud calls "the oceanic feeling," the return to the wet maternal womb (Baker, 2005, p. 312). In this sense, swimming and being in water are powerfully connected to the unconscious retreat into a state of ecstasy and pleasure.

In Ondaatje's novel (1992), Almásy is destined to enter the Cave of Swimmers thrice. The first time he entered it was during the 1930s as an explorer. Back then, he discovered "caves with rock painting" where they could get water and take shelter, and "when they were spotted from the air, they hid in the Wadis" (pp.164-5). The second time, he goes there as a lover who aims to help Katharine after the plane crash (Ondaatje, 1992, p.235). The last time he enters the cave like a man torn by guilt who undertakes a heroic journey back seeking to recover Katharine's corpse (p. 163). The repetitive entries of the cave pinpoint both its importance to Almásy and his unconscious search for psychological rehabilitation in that place. Given its"depth," "darkness," and the images of water and baptism, which are invoked by the paintings of the swimmers, this place stands for the womb and the prenatal place of peaceful life. Almásy's choice to put Katharine there reflects his unconscious wish for her preservation and redemption after their adultery (p.157). Therefore, in opposition to Orientalist representations of the desert, Ondaatje employs images of water in a supposedly arid space to create a healing environment for the European characters.

Almásy's behavior accentuates the holiness associated with the cave before he enters it:

He removed all his clothes and soaked them in the well, put his head, then his thin body into the blue water… and went naked into the darkness of the cave. He was among the familiar paintings… several figures in the unmistakable posture of swimmers. Bermann had been right about the presence of an ancient lake. He walked farther into the coldness, into the Cave of Swimmers, where he had left her. (Ondaatje, 1992, p.169)

Away from any possible necrophiliac interpretation of the scene and the assumption that Almásy approaches the cave naked because they contain Katharine's body for sexual ends, I argue that the description of the caves points towards its manifestation as the womb. In Man and His Symbols, Jung (1964) referred to the cave as a holy place, a place of "meditation and of the mystery of transformation from the earthly to the heavenly, from the carnal to the spiritual" (p.284). The symbolism of the cave in this quotation incorporates the process of baptism and rebirth; Almásy enters the water headfirst and then the body, just like a newborn

coming to life. By so doing, he expresses the desire for regeneration and hunger for the remote serenity of pre-birth. While his first journeys between the desert and the city of Cairo have mere economic and political taints, the last one he leads back to the cave has spiritual and humanistic purposes because it is a quest for liberation from the appalling burdens of the past, a journey motivated by a burning desire for the peace provided by the secure womb of the mother before humans could know the ordeals of life.

Although Almásy is aware of the fatal consequences that he may face during the last journey, he displays brave actions and a strong determination to complete it. Because he is imprisoned by the Allies, who mistake him for a spy, Almásy volunteers to lead the German secret agent, Eppler, across the desert to return to the cave (Ondaatje, 1992, pp. 253-4). Therefore, in 1941, he became "a guide for spies, taking them across the desert" (p.163). Such an engagement underscores Almásy's previously unexpressed "death wish." Following Freud (1953), "death drive" is an aggressive wish to regress to the "primordial states of mind" that humans live only once in life within the warm womb of the mother (p. 260). He defines this instinct as the desire to return to "the state of zero tension" (p. 56). In this sense, Almásy ventures into the desert in an unconscious attempt to flee life tensions and find prelapsarian peace. His indifference to the dangers surrounding this trip through the desert reflects his Thanatos, which speaks for his unconscious infantile weakness toward the mother's protection and unselfish love, which means, according to Jung(1986), "homecoming, shelter, and the long silence from which everything begins and everything ends" (p. 26).

In the end, despite his multiple sins as a Western man involved in World War crimes and adulterous love, Almásy's soul has eventually attained salvation. His portrayal as a "desperate saint" after the plane crash reinforces the notion that the fire that consumed his body in the desert purifies him, as he was seen as "the bird from heaven" who succeeds in preserving Hana's humanity intact (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 122). Furthermore, his salvation a few moments before death in the Villa San Girolamo is shown by the "presence" of a man with plumes. A swimming figure he feels in his room at three a.m. Visibly, the scene takes him back to his times in the Cave of Swimmers because "when the figure turns around there will be paint on his back" (p. 298). Mitchell (2012) notes that this figure is symbolic of the release that comes to him at the end of his life (p. 121).

The English Patient portrays the African desert as an enriching territory where one can get in touch with one's human essence as a defying response to the European metaphors of the desert as a useless barren land, which, according to Kaplan (1966), "can never be innocent or separable from the dominant Orientalist tropes in circulation throughout modernity"(p.66).In a counter-discourse, the novel attributes peculiar anecdotes to the desert as a constructive space, empowering its geography against Orientalist falsification.

The Quest for Home: The Desert as a Dwelling Place in *The English Patient*

The phenomenological significance attributed to the issue of place by the works of such philosophers as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Ponty, in addition to the insights of cultural geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) and Edward Relph (1976), revolves around the assumption that "to be human is to be in place" (Verstraete & Cresswell, 2002, p. 12). "To be in place" does not necessarily imply sticking to one place without movement, but to exist, even if momentarily, in a place that can grant feelings of comfort and well-being.

In citing the existential characteristics of dwelling, Heidegger (2008) purported that to dwell is "to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence" (p.351). This claim provides a key to understanding the desert in Ondaatje's novel as a place that permits dwelling. The understanding of this land is provided by Almásy, who consistently praises it as a space of physical and spiritual freedom. In the desert, he says: "It was easy for [him] to ship across borders, not to belong to anyone" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 139). By not belonging to anyone, Almásy is free like the wind. In the desert, he finds the freedom of reasoning, as he speculates that "in the desert, you have time to look everywhere, to theorize on the choreography of all things around you" (p. 150). According to Heidegger (2008), "dwelling involves thinking" (p. 362). Following this, it can be stated that having time to 'look' and 'theorize' is what enhances the process of thinking and allows for dwelling.

Looking for peace and fleeing the city, which is the equivalent of war and sin for him, Almásywanders in the desert plateaus. In the city, he loses himself and seems to be away from his actual being; "he seemed either distant or restless" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 245). The time and space that separate him from reaching the desert becomes unbearable: "he was in the zone of limbo between city and plateau" (p. 246). The word "limbo" indicates the extent to which time in the city is experienced as hellish, and that emotions of void and oblivion invade him while waiting to join the desert where home lies. This echoes his dissatisfaction with the world he inhabits, and he aims to create a space of belonging somewhere else, away from the city's confines. Almásy is always inwardly homeless except when he is in the desert space. Therefore, a few days of comfort in the desert are enough to wash away the idea of the city, as he says:

> Within two weeks, even the idea of the city never entered his mind. It was as if he had walked under the millimeter of haze just above the inked fishes of a map, that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller. Stanford called it geomorphology. The place they had chosen to come to, to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry. (p. 246, emphasis added)

In this passage, the conceptualization of the desert and the city spaces is reconsidered. The urban Western space of civilization—city—is equated with estrangement, along with loss of self and authentic being. In contrast, the Eastern Desert is associated with reconnection with home, self, and free choice. It is represented as a space that preserves the quintessence of humans and things, standing as an ideal place to dwell.

When arguing about "imaginative geography," Edward Said explains that the universalist European discourse is a compelling space that renders the "Other" as a homeless subject feeling "out of place" (as cited in Al-Mahfedi, 2011, p. 6). What is interesting in Ondaatje's discourse, from this standpoint, is the deconstructive discernment he provides about the Orient and its being othered by Orientalist discourse, particularly in his association of homelessness with the West and the sense of home and familiarity with the Orient. Interestingly, he portrays the Western man as being lost and homeless, and finds relief only in the Eastern space. In this sense, Ondaatje restores dignity to the Orient and its desert. Besides, when interpreted from Heidegger's perspective, the West can be claimed only as a place to "inhabit" while the desert is a space to dwell.[iv]

Man, according to Heidegger(2008), is not only being in the world but also being part of the fourfold, which are the earth, the sky, the divinities, and the mortals (p. 350). He maintains

that only the place that preserves the unity of the fourfold can grant dwelling. The latter also signifies "being on earth … under the sky" and includes "belonging to men's being with one another" (p.351). The desert in *The English Patient* embodies such characteristics par excellence, enabling the manifestation of the fourfold. Therefore, it offers a dwelling and protects from homelessness.

Ondaatje's text implies that while the entire world dropped into a fierce World War, the desert kept its serenity and resisted being ruined for a long time. This resistance kept its sky clean and ornamented by stars and the moon. Upon her injury, Almásy left Katharine in the Cave of Swimmers and stepped out looking for help. Depicting the scene for Caravaggio, he says:"… the naphtha lantern over to her and sat for a while, beside the silhouette of her nod. Two lovers and desert … starlight and moonlight, I do not remember. Everywhere else out there was a war" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 174). When their confessions ended, Almásywent down "through darkness and into the desert full of the moon" (p. 249). This coming out of darkness (in the cave) into the light of the moon recalls the baby emerging from the dark womb into light during childbirth. In addition, the desert allows humans to coexist together under the sky. This place, unlike the cities where people were killing each other during the war, was a serene haven for shattered souls.

In *Building Dwelling Thinking*, Heidegger (2008) defined divinities as "the beckoning messenger of the godhead" (p.352). Though invisible, he writes, God is present in everything and everywhere: "the god appears in his presence or withdraws into his concealment" (p. 352). The desert in *The English Patient* evokes a sense of home, allowing the reader to feel the presence of something akin to God. According to Heidegger (2008), the essence of dwelling is ensured by "awaiting" and "remaining before the divinities" (pp. 351-53). Notably, the desert fosters a profound spiritual connection with the divine, serving as a place of dwelling while also being a site of profound belief and conviction. Almásy, describing one of his stays in the desert, writes that it was given "a hundred shifting names before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East. All of us …wished to remove the clothing of our countries. *It was a place of faith*" (p. 139; Emphasis added). What this suggests about Almásy's homelessness and search for dwelling is that in the desert, he and his companions find all the consciousness of devotion lost in their nations, which, contrary to the desert, deformed them and fostered absurdity and alienation.

The period during which Almásy wandered the African desert—the late 1930s and early 1940s—was a critical one in world history. Stromberg (1981) explained that WWI gave rise to a bitter pessimism and disillusionment that persisted during the following decades, which he refers to as the "Red Decade" or "Pink Decades" (p. 275). He says that it was "seemingly a world of terror and inhumanity, marked by the almost total breakdown of civilized processes and political rationality?" (p.292). The Western world had to face crises and problems of values. The majority of people have plunged into spiritual emptiness and loss of belief in God, who was believed to be dead, as announced by Nietzsche (2006,p.88). The plight of life in a godless world reduced people to "nausea and despair" and threw them into homelessness and a state of meaninglessness (Stromberg, 1981, p. 292).

In a similar context, Michael Ondaatje's narrative emphasizes Western characters who are unhappy with Western war states and religious corruption. His celebration of the nomads and their still uncorrupted way of life manifests his dissatisfaction with the modern war states.

Because the European governments and even churches were corrupted to serve only the imperialist inhuman ideology, Madox decided to put an end to his life in 1939. His decision comes after he enters a church and hears the priest"blessing the government and the men about to enter the war" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 242). In this way, religion and the holy space of the church turned into ideological weapons to endorse the plan of war instead of ideas of peace and mercy. By doing so, the author portrays the European state as an initiator of mayhem and destruction. In opposition, he borrows the trope of the nomadic wandering safely in the peaceful desert "between oasis and water camps" to invoke a longing for spirituality and peace (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 10).

In *The English Patient*, estrangement from God is evident in the character of Almásy, who consistently responds to Madox's prayers and discourse about God by saying, "There is no God" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 247). However, his experience in the Libyan Desert seems to have convinced him of the opposite, as he claims that: "There is God only in the desert, he wanted to acknowledge that now. Outside of this, there was just trade and power, money and war. Financial and military despots shaped the world" (p.250). This shows that the desert projects the importance of God and his existence. It is, to borrow from Heidegger, the fourth element in the fourfold, which is safeguarded in the desert. The absence of God everywhere else and His continual presence in this place preserve all the elements necessary to ensure dwelling. While much of Europe promotes meaninglessness and the erosion of authentic being, the desert is home to existential meaning. In this sense, Ondaatje treats the experience of dwelling as being related to and possible in non-European countries. In contrast, Western ideologies of war have instead ruined the earth, the sky, mortals, and even the divine. All in all, the African Desert is the "one" where all the other elements belong together. It is, therefore, a space to dwell par excellence.

Actual authentic "being," Almásy thinks, can be realized in this place that protects and helps him to belong and feel at home. As "nostalgia," or "the aching for home, homesickness," is a key element to overcome homelessness, according to Heidegger (as cited in Bessedik, 2018, p. 84), Almásy's incessant nomadic displacement through memory to revisit the desert expresses his longing to subvert a sense of inner homelessness. Lobnik (2007) considered that "nomad memory" defies "a geographic or political enclosure of the past" (p.73). In this sense, it is significant that it is only in the desert that Almásyleaves behind his old self and identity and starts over as a new person. This nomadism heals his anxieties, implying that remembering the desert is an existential element of encountering his actual self and authentic being.

Significantly, memory is the "locale" of escape from the feeling of being "out of place" in Europe. As such, he condemns the European colonial societies and their ideals of fighting wars and expanding their influence, while celebrating the desert and the nomads for granting him the synchronization between his soul and body that allows him to retrieve a meaningful sense of "being." When Almásy becomes crippled, the phenomenological world fails to provide him with a home. In the villa San Girolamo, he chooses to become a wandering spirit to escape the consciousness of the place and its confinement. In "Who Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" Heidegger equates "homecoming with 'convalescence.'" He writes that: "the convalescent is *on the road to himself* so that he can say to himself who he is" (as cited in Bessedik, 2018, p. 85). One may assume that Almásy's homecoming through remembering represents a journey to encounter his "self" and recollect his spirit. In due course, he experiences homecoming and

convalescence through memory while being unable to wander physically. Almásy's homecoming to the desert should be read as a return to the place of baptism and a sense of "dwelling," while seeking the sedition of homelessness.

To sum up, wandering through nomadic memory stands for Almásy's need for "homecoming" and highlights the home crisis and loss of one essential character of "being," which is dwelling. The man's inability to dwell in the spaces of Europe and its nations suggests a loss of meaningful being, and that these countries are lacking the spirit of dwelling. As such, he strongly relates to the desert and creates a sense of belonging there. It suggests that memory is his "locale" of escape from feeling "out of place" in Europe and that finding a place to dwell is what endows existence with meaning.

Conclusion

Faced with the challenge of deconstructing the colonial tropes of the Orient and its desert as empty and useless spaces to legitimize imperial invasions and appropriation, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* restores to the African Sahara its dignity by showing that it is an enriching territory, which instigates cultural exchange, reconnection with human essence, and feeling at home. This study has revealed that the African desert is not merely a physical entity that connotes desolation and absence. However, instead, it represents everything a European individual may seek during times of instability and uncertainty, including peace, purity, freedom, and sensations related to a sense of belonging and finding a home.

The desert constitutes the source of significant changes in Almásy's life, as he evolves from a man who comes to explore the desert to someone with an atypical obsession to challenge and rewrite the history of Western exploration. The Libyan Desert's topography, with its elements of water, darkness, caves, and sand, recalls the mother, which brings him rest and returns him to a prelapsarian state of goodness. As such, *The English Patient* advocates for nomadism to deflate the power and dominance that threaten the enjoyment of a simple, free life of traveling through different places, refusing to adhere to titles or social privileges.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Almásy achieves a sense of unity between "Being" and "dwelling" in the desert. Outside it, he is a homeless wanderer without a meaningful place to rest or to dwell. His struggle to recapture the sense of nomadism through memory in the text affirms that the essence of "being" can be found in nomadism, provided that the latter ensures a sense of "homecoming." Therefore, Ondaatje's *The English Patient* succeeds in conveying the idea that the Sahara of the Orient is not a vacant space that can be filled with colonial projects.

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AI Statement

This document has benefited from the application of AI-driven tools, including Grammarly, to refine its linguistic aspects. These tools were utilised to correct grammar and spelling and improve the overall writing style. It is acknowledged that the use of these technologies may introduce specific AI-generated linguistic patterns. However, the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented remain the sole work of the authors.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

Endnotes

[i]Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Kent: Picador, 1992. Subsequent references to *The English Patient* will be made in the text.

Heidegger uses "Being" (with a capital letter) to refer to the state of being and ultimate reality.

[iii]"*Ain*" is the Arabic equivalent of well.

[iv] In this context, Heidegger says that not all buildings that "house man" are dwelling places because some places can be inhabited but cannot be dwelt in (347-48). Things of this sort are housing, though not necessarily dwelling-houses in the narrower sense (*Building Dwelling Thinking* 360).

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