

## FROM REAL TO REEL: HOLLYWOOD'S CULTURE OF ORIENTALISM IN AND AROUND *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

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### Abstract

*The English Patient*, one of the seven movies that won the most Academy Awards in movie history, has naturally been subject to many studies in literature and film. Although the movie has mostly been acclaimed by movie critics and audiences, its loyalty to the original work has much been questioned since the movie was based on the novel by Michael Ondaatje. However, it cannot be said that much has been written regarding the movie's Orientalist undertones. The radical change of perspective from the novel to the movie in this particular regard is so striking as to change the themes of the original text that it deserves attention on its own terms. Therefore, in this article I contrast the movie to the novel by arguing that Minghella, the director, follows the age-old Orientalist tradition in his (mis)representation of the Near East; of Muslim Culture, and of Arabs, whereas Ondaatje, the novelist, deconstructs this very stereotypical narrative about the East. Whereas the author of the novel takes apart the official history in a puzzling fluidity of nations and selves, the director reconstructs history back to its Eurocentric context. By also looking at the movie criticism published in the industry's major venues, I try to demonstrate a culture of Orientalism in the promotion of the movie that goes well beyond the discussion of a single work.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial studies, film studies, *The English Patient*, comparative literature, English literature and culture.

## ROMAN, GERÇEKLİK VE FİLM: İNGİLİZ HASTA VE HOLLYWOOD'UN ORYANTALİST KÜLTÜRÜ

### Öz

Tüm zamanların en çok Oskar ödülü alan yedi filminden biri olan *İngiliz Hasta*, gösterime girdiği günden bu yana yıllardır pek çok çalışmaya konu olmuştur. Film eleştirmenleri ve genelde izleyici tarafından büyük beğeni toplayan yapımcı Michael Ondaatje'nin aynı adlı romanından uyarlandığı için filmin esere ne derece sadık kaldığı da epeyce sorgulanmıştır. Ancak filmin bu bağlamda Oryantalist bir okumasının tam olarak yapıldığı pek söylenemez. İşte bu makalede, filmin sömürgecilik-sonrası araştırmalar çerçevesinde analizi yapılmakta ve yönetmen ve senarist Anthony Minghella'nın, Ondaatje'nin romanının aksine Oryantalist ve Batı-merkezci bir tutum içinde hikâyeyi adapte ettiği ileri sürülmektedir. Ondaatje'nin romanı Avrupa merkezli, Oryantalist tarih anlatımını sorgularken ve bu anlatımı alt üst eden bir söyleme hâkimken, romanın adaptasyonu Batı'yı Doğu kültürleri karşısında yüceltmektedir. Makalede ayrıca film sanayiinin olmazsa olmazları arasında yer alan film eleştirilerinin yarattığı Oryantalist kültür de ortaya konularak tartışma tek bir eserin incelemesinden öteye geçmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sömürgecilik-sonrası araştırmaları, film çalışmaları, *İngiliz Hasta*, karşılaştırmalı edebiyat, İngiliz edebiyatı ve kültürü.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

When Anthony Minghella, writer and director of *The English Patient* (1996), the movie, said, "The book [*The English Patient*] defies adaptation," an controversy which existed since the first time he suggested shooting the film of Michael Ondaatje's Booker-winner novel, he was expressing a common concern among cast and crew<sup>1</sup>. In a special features section called "From Novel to Screenplay" on the movie's DVD, he further added that the only way to film the novel was "to abandon the book" (Minghella 1996), revealing the problematic task he had undertaken. Of course, the difficulty of adaptation, transferring content from one genre into another, especially from page onto screen is not a new issue. Most of the time the novel aficionados grudge against the adaption of one of their most beloved texts; such movies are usually appreciated only by those who have not read the book first. Despite all these concerns and issues involved in a work of adaptation, however, no one expects a radical change of perspective in the representation of the themes of the original text.

Contrary to movie critics, who have mostly acclaimed the movie's loyalty to the novel, many scholars have written extensively on why the movie is not so faithful to the text from a variety of perspectives. In "The English Patient: From Fiction to Reel" (1998), Maggie M. Morgan, for example, compares and contrasts the two works, analyzing how the movie distorts the multi-layered postmodern essence and framework of the novel and how it misrepresents the characters on the page. Eugene Sensening-Dabbaous, on the other hand, traces the history of Almasy in history, the novel, and the movie in "Will the Real Almasy Please Stand Up! Transporting Central European Orientalism via *The English Patient*" (2004). In his comprehensive analysis, the writer contextualizes the matter around Eastern European relations with the Ottomans through the lens of German and Austrian-Hungarian Orientalism. Finally, in his book, *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology* (2000), William K. Ferrell adapts a less focused approach in his demonstration on how the book is theme-driven whereas the movie's concerned with entertainment.

Both Sensening-Dabbaous's and Morgan's texts, two prominent examples among others, discuss Orientalism in Minghella's movie but only as parts of their main arguments. However, the radical change of perspective from the novel to the movie in this particular regard is so striking as to change the themes of the original text that it deserves attention on its own terms. Therefore, in this article I will contrast the movie to the novel by arguing that Minghella, the director, follows the age-old Orientalist tradition in his (mis)representation of the Near East; of Muslim Culture, and of Arabs, whereas Ondaatje, the novelist, deconstructs this very stereotypical narrative about the East. Whereas the author of the novel takes apart the official history in a puzzling fluidity of nations and selves, the director reconstructs history back to its Eurocentric context. By also looking at the movie criticism published in the industry's major venues, I will try demonstrate a culture of Orientalism in the promotion of the movie that goes well beyond the discussion of a single work.

## II. MYSTIQUE EAST VS. SCIENTIFIC WEST

One of the dominant references in Ondaatje's novel is the learned Arabs. This set of references mentions very highly of the Arabic and desert cultures. This discourse is easily traceable from the very first pages of the novel. "What civilization was this," asks the narrator while trying to make sense of the Bedouins, who saved him after his fall out of the sky, "that understood the predictions of weather and light? El Ahmar or El Abyadd, for they must be one of the northwest tribes" (Ondaatje 1993: 8-9). One thing to appreciate here is the approach of relativity, a perspective of understanding each culture on its own terms as opposed to binaric comparisons of different

<sup>1</sup> In the interviews which are extensively included in the Special Features DVD of the movie, almost all of the cast and crew, ranging from the producer Saul Zaents to scenarist-director Minghella to actor William Defoe, tell an anecdote about or mentions how it would be difficult to adapt the novel into a movie at the beginning of the project.

cultures with value judgments. This is to say that Orientalism is based on the antithetical binaries of the West and the East, the first one being always privileged; rational, scientific, and logical, the latter always undervalued; mystic, exotic, and irrational (Said 1978: 205-7).

However, the language in the novel does not buy into these binaries. It is true that words such as "tribe" or "Bedouin" are ubiquitous in the novel, as is the case in the above excerpt. Yet, unlike the dominant connotations of the typical Orientalist discourse, they are used with consistent neutrality. One does not need to see skyscrapers or four-wheel SUV's to realize the "civilization." "This was a world that has been civilized for centuries, had a thousand paths and roads," (Ondaatje 1993: 141) says Almasy while trying to define, once again, the Arabic culture, which reminds one easily the roads of the mighty Rome across the known World, except that this time the signified is the Orient in positive terms.

Unlike the stereotypical imagery of Arabs in movies and literature, Ondaatje's novel foregrounds the Arabic culture whereas slightly pushing back the European so much so that the latter is almost erased in the glorification of the former. "We disappeared into the landscape," says Almasy, "*Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Shaduf*. I didn't want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase the nations! I was taught such things by the desert" (Ondaatje 1993: 139). After all, Almasy of the novel is free from national, and for that matter colonial interests; he has severe problems with the idea of nationhood. While mentioning *Histories*, he mentions, "how people betray each other for the sake of nations..." or simply, "I hate nations" (Ondaatje 1993: 119). In such a context of nation-free language, hierarchical classifications among cultures is easily diminished.

However, in the movie the line between Eastern and Western cultures in terms of civilization is clearly drawn; the natives of North Africa and Egypt are as if characters taken from an exaggerated cartoon. They are depicted with definitive imagery foregrounding the red fez, the beard and the turban, whereas the Europeans are shown as familiarly elegant, in their safari apparel in the dessert, or in their tuxedos in the parties of the "International Sand Club." There is no doubt that one cannot expect to see Arabs in tuxedos; it would be as weird as expecting to see a McDonald's in the Sahara. Yet, the notion of cultural relativity which is necessary to evaluate people with references to their own environments and cultural histories rather than starkly defined Western and Eastern allusions is completely missing in Minghella's adaptation. The only Arab, who wears a suit in the movie is Fuad, who celebrates Christmas with the rest of the Europeans.

Looking at the following scenes will clarify this point further: In the script, after describing that the pilot has been rescued by the tribesmen, Minghella introduces the second scene as, "Behind them, the wreckage of the plane, still smoking, the Arabs picking over it" (Minghella 1995: Scene 2). The writer-director does not waste any time in these opening sequences to introduce the typical, beggar-looking Arabs, who can only "pick over" this new found treasure in the middle of the dessert. It is true that Ondaatje also keeps "the healer Arab" as it would most probably be impossible to keep the story intact without the Bedouins rescuing Almasy. However the way Minghella develops these scenes suggests a most unwilling approach to the idea of Arabs having experience and knowledge in medicine. Unlike Ondaatje's generous observations about the Arabic scientific and medicinal expertise, Minghella demonstrates a most reserved stereotypical representation by shaping the material into the frames of filthy people practicing a scary operation, which almost leads the audience to think Almasy had better die rather than being a toy in the hands of these 'tribesmen' with unusual methods of healing. It is telling how the script-writer Minghella establishes the scene:

The SOUND OF GLASS, of tiny chimes. A music of glass.

AN ARAB HEAD APPEARS ON A MOVING TABLE IN THE DESERT. It floats in darkness, shimmering from the light of a fire. The image develops to

reveal a man carrying a giant wooden yoke from which hang DOZENS OF SMALL GLASS BOTTLES, on different lengths of string and wire. (Minghella 1995: Scene 5) (*sic.*)

What the script does not tell are the lightening conditions of the scene; mostly dark and gloomy, with strange light and shadow games on the walls behind, which are all in harmony with the “music,” the chanting of the Arabs, practicing some sort of “voodoo.” The people are dark, the surrounding environment is dark, their faces and hands are dirty as well as little bottles and other materials. A careless audience would even think that the current disfiguration of Almasý in his bed in Tuscany Villa is the result of this horrible practice which happened after the burning; had there been a proper European doctor around, most probably he would not be in such an extreme condition.

This unusual and alienating Arabic medicinal practice in the movie comes out even more marked when the scene moves on to the Red Cross wagons of a train where we are introduced with nurse Hanna. This time, even if they are in the confining, narrow space of a wagon, patients are as comfortable as they might be in a hospital room; the beds are orderly, the nurses and doctors are around in their now sparkling white uniforms. The medicines and materials are this time familiar; insulins, needles, and pills seem to guarantee life rather than death. And of course, the compassionate nurse Hanna can even give the wounded soldiers a kiss if they want it so much, unlike the bearded Arab witch-men of which a kiss would be the last thing one would ask for.

The starkly contrasted nature of the above scenes does not occur randomly; rather, they operate on a well-defined pattern which governs the entire movie. The Arabic settings and those which are Europeanized even in Cairo are represented as two different worlds. The bazaar in Cairo is a crowded, disorganized, dusty and suffocating place; it is extremely filthy and mostly dark. The Arab sellers are always devious trying to cheat the Europeans, and of course almost all of them are ugly with filthy beards and turbans. “In the film, Arabs are constantly in front of the camera, albeit in obviously subservient, often ridiculous roles” (Sensening-Dabbaous 2004: 173). On the other hand, the Europeans’ club is a five-star hotel where Almasý, Clifton, Madox and many other members of the Geographical society or of the British government drink their whiskies in their sparkling outfits. They are cleanly shaven, handsome, sitting in exquisite furniture reading newspapers or discussing political matters. The Arabs in fezzes around can only serve them. Katherine is safe here, dancing in the well-lit ballroom, unlike she is in the streets of Cairo when Almasý would be worried about her. All in all, the imagery about the Arabs fits into the framework which Said demonstrates as: “Arabs . . . are thought of as camel riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth as an affront to real civilization” (1978: 108).

### III. MAJOR CHARACTERS:

The movie’s representation of the main characters is another problematic feature. Although the title of Ondaatje’s novel gives the impression that Almasý is the protagonist of the story, the novelist seems to have taken great pains to distribute the roles equally to the other four main characters, as well: Hanna, Kip, Caravaggio, and Katherine. Rosenfed demonstrates the shared nature of these characters as, “an explorer, a sapper, a nurse, and a thief. Because of their vocations, all of these figures are compelled to be exceptionally attentive to what others overlook. They must notice telltale signs and symptoms and attend to them. Detail cannot elude them” (2006: 351). Each character in the novel completes a vital part of the story, and one’s resolution is completely dependent on the other; there’s an organic unity among these five characters. Of course, at the center of the story lies “the English patient,” but he is in no way a typical protagonist which subsumes the entire text. It can even be argued that Kip’s role in the novel is more predominant than the title character. Morgan indicates, “It is expected that Ondaatje should give the Indian sapper so much weight in the novel . . . He inserted the story of this Indian sapper unto the story of

Count Almásy, who was indeed a historical figure: a spy and a member of the International Sand Club (1998: 161). To further develop Morgan's point, it should be noted that Kip's part is not an "inversion" into the story; it *is* the story.

The text is woven so intricately with the narratives of these characters that the form also deconstructs the dominance of one single character. The structural framework of the novel revolves around different narrators, psyches and memories, which sometimes makes it difficult to figure out who is narrating what. My purpose is not to discuss these structural differences between the movie and the novel. Rather, what I am trying to draw attention to is the marginalization of Kip, the Indian sapper in the movie to such an extent that it leads to its own way of orientalization thus undermining an important characteristic of Ondaatje's work.

The image which would dominate the reader's mind with respect to Kip after finishing the novel would be an Indian, always troubled by his own identity among the British, but who after all served those same Europeans by cleaning the land miles risking his life each time. The image of an individual who was able to move beyond rigid boundaries of nationhood despite the curse of the nations hanging over him until the all-destructive bombs thrown over "brown races;" a person with a sincere attempt to live and function to the best of his abilities regardless of culture as long as he sees the same sincerity around himself, like he did in Lord Suffolk. "The futility of war is also projected through Kip's character," Adhikari notes, "His presence in Italy as a sapper, jeopardizing his life for the British and the Americans, is an example of how colonial powers used those they colonized (2002: 50). Ferrell comes to a similar as yet a less nuanced conclusion about Kip's role in the novel: "By including a Sikh Indian, and by ancestry a product of the East, the conflict expands to include a clash between cultural ideologies, giving the quest a greater universality" (2000: 110). As both of these critics indicate, Kip not only symbolizes one of the central discussions in the novel, the colonization and its aftermath, but also comes out as a person who speaks for himself in a manner to give Spivak's famous "Can the subaltern speak?" question.

On the other hand, the first image about Kip to come to mind after watching the movie would be the wet, long, dark hair. Kip is eroticized in the movie, a point which is triumphed in the scene when he is washing his hair, his naked and dark upper body visible, an instance which reminds the barbaric but sexual Moor of the Orientalist narrative. It is true that Kip is not barbaric in the movie; if anything he seems to be the opposite by saving lives. However, under the surface of this basic perception, there lies an intricate set of details put carefully into the script which problematizes the safe assumption about truthfulness of his representation. Although Kip is not vulgar, it seems that he is not well educated enough even to read properly; in the scene when he and the patient are discussing Kipling's book, the patient literally teaches him how to pay attention to punctuation marks. In the DVD scene selection menu, the chapter is titled as "Reading Lessons," which functions both literally and figuratively. While reading the lines, Kip says, "I can't read these words. I can't read them. They stick in my throat." The patient answers, "Because you are reading it too fast. You have to read Kipling slowly. Your eye is too impatient. Think about the speed of his pen. (Quoting Kipling to demonstrate) What is it – he sat comma in defiance of municipal orders comma astride the gun Zamzammah on her brick" (Minghella 1995: Scene 123; Minghella 1996: "Reading Lessons"). The patient's calling of Kip as "boy" also reinforces a teacher-student or master-disciple type of relationship.

Kip's immediate sarcastic response that he is against the message of the book, "And the message in your book however slowly I read it that the best thing in India is to be ruled by the British" happens in the blink of an eye. Although Kip's anti-colonial argument is very well encapsulated into this one single sentence, the fact that it is not developed at all undermines its representation. The point when Kip utters this line occurs in a whirling moment of exchanges of lines among Kip, the patient, and Hanna, who has just brought milk into the room makes the lines dissolute as quickly as they are uttered. The patient's only response is a joke about how both the

“boy” and he like condensed milk. It wouldn’t be fair to expect a long conversation about politics and colonization in the scene, but it is at least as unfair to use this important issue as a way of spicing the dialogues in such a manner that it wouldn’t matter if it went unnoticed by the audience. We should also note that it is the “impatient Indian boy” who cannot think about these matters unemotionally, which forms the focal point of the scene, rather than a discussion of Kipling’s text or the colonization.

In the novel however, both Kipling’s book and other characters’ attitudes around it, especially Hanna’s are covered and developed in depth and sophistication. The part where Hanna reads the chapter on the Zam-Zammah cannon is not only assigned a chapter status (Ondaatje 1993: 118-9), but also given weight with important symbolism such as Hanna’s writing notes on the margins of this work, a clear indication of deconstruction of colonialist literature. Talking of books, we should also touch very briefly on Almay’s ubiquitous *Histories* (note)book, which the movie is quite faithful in representation of. What Minghella excludes is an amazing number of Arabic and Persian literature and scholars which Ondaatje consistently mentions throughout the novel ranging from *Kitab al Kanuz* to *The Book of Hidden Treasures*, from Kemal el Din, geographer and cartographer, to Abd el Melik Ibrahim el Zwaya, who is implied to be the first photographer (Ondaatje 1993: 136, 143). None of these names makes its way to the movie; as far as the scholarship of the East is concerned, the closest one can get is an Indian “boy” who cannot read properly.

When we think of all the other peculiar details about Kip in the movie, his “natural” characteristics become more obvious. The first instance when he comes to the villa happens in a comic manner; he shoots the gun to stop Hanna playing the piano, and there is a somewhat childlike manner (not obvious all the time) in his talking and movements, as well. After all those years of coming face to face with death every single day, in every single time when he tries to dismantle the mines, the only thing he could do at a moment which requires absolute cold-bloodedness (while the tanks are crossing the bridge), is to cry and lose his self-control. Were it the encouragement and directions by Hardy, who never loses his control, it seems, he wouldn’t be able to complete the task. It was also Hardy who saved Hanna in the opening sequences rather than Kip. Would it be too much to depict an Indian, saving a British woman from dying on the silver screen?

Yet, Kip is a lovable “boy,” Minghella seems to have thought everything to make him loved by his “Western” audience. He is not a typical Hindu or Muslim Indian; there is nothing in the movie which marks him as a believer of either of these religions. On the contrary, his gift to Hanna is a church, in the most literal sense of the word. The night when he, in his own “Oriental” manner, invites Hanna to his place by putting mini-candles on the track, he brings her to a church where then they look at the amazing Christian frescos on the walls of the church. We all love Kip, not *due* to his race, but *because* his race is only for decorative purposes, which can at most signify his erotic hair and body for Hanna; we love him because there is nothing essential to mark him as an Indian.

This aspect that the movie erodes his national origin is made worse with the total elimination of his argument with the patient after the bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On the contrary, it is that very moment in the novel which not only defines Kip’s character but also many other themes about the problem of reconciliation with the past or a post-colonial world. Kip’s eloquence about colonialist powers never make its way to the movie. As Morgan indicates, “The timing of his outburst is indicative because it transports the concerns of the novel from being the issue of Britain fighting against the fascists, into being an issue of colonialism, the abuse of power, and the oppression of the weak (1998: 163). The elimination of American bombings drastically alters the presentation of issues and Kip’s role in the story. In the novel, Kip’s outburst is a memorable scene: “American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of

the world, you're an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of USA. You all learned it from the English (Ondaatje 1993: 286).

What we have in the movie is, however, a romantic scene, where Kip presents the church to Hanna. And how could it be otherwise given that Hanna is but a nurse at Red Cross? Unlike Ondaatje's version, in Minghella's world, Christians can only love Christians (or those who are religion-blank). It is true that this church scene is also in the novel, however, in a radically different way. As Ferrell indicates, "The novel uses the scene to provide insight into the nature of Kip" (2000: 118). Through his conversation with a medievalist professor, the dialogue between different belief systems becomes more clear. Moreover, regarding Hanna's service in the Red Cross, in the novel, just an opposite message is vividly developed: "The fallacy of the 'greater good' had penetrated into her, and yet the war had taught her to nurse suffering humans irrespective of their nation, culture, creed, or race. The need for multiculturalism, even internationalism, is the positive fallout of war" (Adhikari 2002: 50).

#### IV. DESERT OF HOMOEROTIC DESIRES

As much as Minghella excludes major parts of the novel which defy Orientalism, he also adds new content, which fits perfectly into his Orientalist framework. On the way back from the Cave of Swimmers, a homoerotic relationship is suggested between Bermann and Kamal. This relationship which has been developed since the first scenes en route to the cave reaches to its climax when Bermann is driving the car along some steep dunes. Scenarist Minghella writes the scene as, "Bermann is peeling AN ORANGE, a segment of which he holds out of the window. Kamal, riding shotgun, leans down and collects it, his head dipping in to grin at Bermann. Bermann looks uneasily at Almasy. He wants to tell him of his passion, of his absolute love for Kamal, but he daren't" (Minghella 1995: Scene 76).

The scene is pictured in such a way that it is impossible not to pity the humiliation of Kamal by Bermann; the way the former leans from the top of the car, the manner he smiles and acts like a clown are used in a successful way not only to feminize him, but also to turn him into a ridiculous sidekick for Bermann. But we should not be misled by this representation as Bermann truly loves him. However, the following lines makes things unjustifiably worse: "I love the desert, you see," says Bermann to Almasy, "That's my, that's my – I cannot think of the word. . . . How do you explain? To someone who's never been here? Feelings which seem quite normal" (Minghella 1995: Scene 76). What does the desert signify for Bermann? What kinds of feelings does he have? What is the connection between the desert and a homoerotic relationship? We don't know the answers to these questions; but we do know that there is a giant of body literature and art, which depicts the East as the queer, as the hotbed where heteronormative standards and values fail in sex as much as in everything else. And in these works, as Said demonstrates, "The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness" (1978: 103).

The East as the center of sexual irrationalities is also cleverly tied to the theme of betrayal in the movie. As Sensening-Dabbaous also points out, all the three major love scenes between Almasy and Katherine are accompanied by the sound of the *ezan*; the call to prayer in Islam. Two of these scenes; "An Unexpected Visitor," (Minghella 1996: scene 14) and "Plan of Surprise" (Minghella 1996: scene 16) take place in Almasy's hotel room which is elegantly orientalized with red carpets, Persian rugs, and Eastern carafes. The sound of the call to prayer is carefully juxtaposed with other details in the imagery surrounding the passionate couple. Sand brown oriental blinds with ornate squares stand in front of every window and create a mystic light and shadow effect. In both of these scenes, through the main window we see an exquisite mosque; its beautiful dome and minaret, an image so perfectly centered that the window looks as if it were a painting of the mosque. The third scene takes place inside the ambassador's residence, a former Moorish palace

(no surprise). This time there are no mosques around, but the place itself seems almost like the inside of a mosque in terms of the decoration of the walls, with obviously Islamic styles and images. Among one of these walls, Katherine leans back while she and Almasy are making love, an act always graphically demonstrated amidst explicit Oriental imagery. "The scene does little to enhance the theme," points out Ferrell, "however, it do doubt provided audience stimulation, much needed in so long a movie" (2000: 109). Sensening-Dabbaous interprets these scenes, on the other hand, as "the juxtaposition of the exotic, Islamic Other and Western forbidden sexuality (2004: 101).

However, one should not be misled by the beautiful mosque or the refined decoration of the walls to believe that Muslims are civilized people. Even if this was going to be the case, this possibility is gone after the scene when Caravaggio's thumbs are cold-bloodedly cut by the "Muslim" nurse. While Caravaggio is being interrogated by the Nazis in Tobruk, Muller, the German soldier who is in charge, gets irritated when he cannot get satisfying answers from the prisoner, and he calls a nurse. Muller's introduction of the nurse and what he is about to do is revealing:

MÜLLER

I'll tell you what I'm going to do. This  
is your nurse, by the way. She's Moslem,  
so she'll understand all of this. What's  
the punishment for adultery? Let's  
leave it at that. You're married and  
you were fucking another woman, so  
that's - is it the hands that are cut off?  
Or is that for stealing? Does anyone know?

There's silence. Müller turns to Caravaggio.

MÜLLER

Well, you must know. You were  
brought up Libya, yes?  
(Minghella 1995: Scene 147)

After threatening the prisoner to lose one finger for each name not given, Muller orders the Muslim nurse to take the cut-throat razor he has just pulled out of the drawer. It is further interesting to see an iron crescent close to the ceiling in every shot Muller is seen in the scene. In the meantime, one of the German clerks in the room seems to resist to Muller, trying to remind him of the Geneva Conventions just like all the other soldiers who look terrified and uneasy by the whole idea. In the midst of Carravaggio's screams "Don't cut me! Jesus Christ!" the nurse cuts the fingers, the act of which is directly shot. Sensening-Dabbaous defines the scene as "the film's borderline racism with respect to the portrayal of Muslim rituals and Koranic law" (2004: 174). Moreover, the impact of the scene increases much more in the context of the whole movie of which the plot revolves around a Red Cross nurse who literally dedicates herself to her patient. Thus, the scene turns into a total foil for one of the major characters: The Cross nurse loves and heals; the Crescent one cuts thumbs.

Another important trick here is the uneasiness of the German soldiers other than Muller, which seems to imply that it is not that Germans are blood-thirsty people; rather this is quite an exceptional case, which is completely the result of one Muller. The stenographer's reminding of the Geneva Conventions is a strong proof for this matter. As such, whereas the director is meticulously planning not to misrepresent the Germans, he takes great liberty in the presentation of the Muslim nurse and thus Muslim culture. It is difficult to understand why Minghella is trying to be fair to the Nazis, who have created the biggest massacre of the twentieth century whereas applying all the



stereotypes for Arabs, who didn't even play a definitive role in World War II. In "Beauty, Evil and The English Patient," Jollimore's analysis of the movie might shed some light on the reasons behind such a portrayal:

*The English Patient* portrays in a highly distorted manner the wartime experiences of a Hungarian aristocrat and Nazi officer who served with Nazi Intelligence and Rommel's army in North Africa during World War II. But in the movie this Nazi is portrayed as a heroic, romantic character who becomes a victim of the war as he falls in love with an English woman and who helps the Nazis only as a way to be with his lover. (2004: 35)

## V. HOLLYWOOD'S CULTURE OF ORIENTALISM

While Ondaatje was trying to deconstruct history, he did not mean to misrepresent it for political or cultural interests. However, Minghella's fantasy of the East, which reaches its apogee when the Europeans celebrate Christmas in Cairo is unprecedented. In scene 104, a Christmas party is given to the troops in the courtyard of the ambassador's residence. All the wives serve voluntarily to the troops; the soldiers are happy and jolly, singing and chanting. One of these wives is Katherine, who also serves cakes and tea among the tables. His existence amongst those who serve in the party transforms the celebration from a background detail into a major element. The audience can now easily associate not only with the British troops thanks to the beloved main character but also with the spirit of Christmas in Cairo. Of course there is nothing to criticize about the celebration of Christmas; but what is absurd is that in a predominantly Muslim city, the rituals of Islam either function to host scenes of betrayal or they are used as the pretext of chopping human beings whereas the Christian religion suggests a cheerful spirit. It is true that in another scene, Al Auf, one of the workers in the group sings the call to prayer just before Almsy discovers the cave of swimmers, and that a couple of Muslims do the *salat*, an Islamic form of prayer. Yet, this time, the director's attention to detail is undermined by the setting; the Muslims praying in the middle of the desert, Al Auf's echoing call amidst the caves, and mountains of sand only reinforces the association of the sand with the mystique and the exotic, a religion which is not homely, at all.

The West's fascination with the desert mostly lies the latter's indefinable mysterious and exotic quality. The reviews of the movie demonstrate this point maybe much more than the movie itself does. In the Orientalist imagination, the Middle East is almost a synonym for the desert and vice versa, and it mostly does not matter which country is in discussion, let alone mentioning the differences between cities and cultures within a given country; the Middle Eastern people are all Arabs, and they all have deserts! The only thing one needs to know is that desert is mysterious and it tells a lot about the people around them.

"The movie is a time warp," indicates the *Washington Post* writer Rita Kempley, "as mysterious as the desert and as intimate as the hollow of a woman's throat." Richard Corliss, a movie reviewer for the *Time* states, "From their green, damp, congested homelands, Europeans come to the North African desert and fall in love--as if into quicksand--with the dry vastness," comparing the desert to quicksand, a place of treachery and ultimate death. After all, his title of the piece is "Rupture in the Dune." At the end of his review, Corliss goes so far to compare desert in a similar fashion as a nineteenth century novelist once did in his famous work: "To transport picturegoers to a unique place in the glare of the earth, in the *darkness of the heart*--this, you realize with a gasp of joy, is what movies can do" (italics mine). Chinua Achebe had called Conrad, the famous writer of *Heart of Darkness*, "a bloody racist" (2006: 343) expressing a shared dissent-albeit in extreme terms of questionable nature-which is common among many postcolonial scholars writing on the Victorian writer.

*Variety's* Todd McCarthy is less nuanced and more direct, expressing the same obsession: "With its exotic, tapestry-like backgrounds, this is a picture of resplendently textured, sensuous

surfaces, beginning with the sunbaked Tunisian desert..." *New York Times* writer seems to share *Variety's* point, by trying to explain "the spirit of this exotic material." The desert's contrast to the civilization (in the following case, the Club) is very well applied in Minghella's script, as well. When Madox and others leave the desert after the accident, Katherine and Almasy have to spend the night in the desert. The scene is described as: "Katharine sits alone on top of the Dune, smoking, surveying the landscape. Below her the makeshift camp - a fresh wind flicking at the tarpaulin, THE DEEP TRACKS OF MADOX'S CAR STRETCHING OFF TOWARDS CIVILIZATION" (*sic.*) (Minghella 1995: Scene 80). The scenarist doesn't forget to emphasize the main theme of the scene.

After all, "With its immense seductiveness, heady romance and glorious desert vistas" Minghella's movie is compared to all-time classics not only in the *Times* but also in many other reviews to demonstrate its glory. Not surprisingly, the movie which *The English Patient* ends up being shelved next to is the familiar story of the most famous Orientalist in British colonization history: *Lawrence of Arabia*. "Photographed by John Seale ("Witness")," writes *Washington Post*, "the grandeur of the geography equals that of "Lawrence of Arabia," just as Almasy recalls the enigmatic, obsessive T.E. Lawrence." Yet, it is not only the grandeur of the desert which is comparable to David Lean's epic, but also the erotic qualities of it: "Like T.E. Lawrence, [Europeans] are awed by the womanly contours of the great desert dunes." *Time* also adds, "It borrows Lawrence of Arabia's epic intellect for a tale of potent romance." The *Times* makes the similarity between the main characters of two movies much more clear: "Like T. E. Lawrence, the English patient -- actually the Hungarian Count Laszlo Almasy -- comes to the desert as a cartographer and stays to find himself caught up in war." Of course; what else can one find in the desert other than war and fight?

Although the *Times* which also promotes the movie with its "Critics' Pick" award also calls our attention to the ubiquitous Herodotus in the movie, concluding, "Even without that book, the film's reverence for history and literature would be very clear." In an Orientalist framework, a movie which depicts the desert as a hotbed for war, as feminized, and as exotic no doubt has a reverence for that history. But not for what Ondaatje was trying to do in his novel. This is also why at least the *Empire's* Christopher Hemblade argues: "Some might argue that [the movie] is true to an "unfilmable" novel (Booker Prize-winner by Michael Ondaatje) but on the small screen, the majestic vistas of vanilla deserts and blistering sunsets are mere Discovery Channel fodder and do not make up for the low-fat epic romance," concluding in its "verdict" section as: "It does not deserve limitless adoration. Just quiet, reasoned admiration." However, Hemblade is alone in his sober admiration; the Hollywood's verdict is clear; *The English Patient* is "the sort of movie that people lament isn't made anymore: a sweeping romantic adventure in the tradition of DOCTOR ZHIVAGO and OUT OF AFRICA (*TV Guide* 1996). Such an epic can only be comparable to David Lean, the master of exotic landscapes and Oriental spectacles.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Before conclusion, we should keep in mind that Ondaatje's work also applies some of the Orientalist narrative techniques, occasionally as it does so. At some point, the patient says, "A woman in Cairo curves the white length of her body up from the bed and leans out of the window into a rainstorm to allow her nakedness to receive it" (1993: 141), or while he is describing Katherine, he indicates, "She wore an unconquerable face" (1993: 145). Such instances can be read as the feminization of the desert as much as association of the woman body with nature, which recreates another but related patriarchal hierarchy. A reference to Crusoe, in comparison to Hanna (Ondaatje 1993: 12) also reminds one of the workings of the colonialist explorer canon through the text as well as the definition of the Sahara as the "sea of darkness"(Ondaatje 1993: 16-7) brings to

mind familiar remarks. More than anything else, "the pure beauty of an innocent dancing boy in the middle of the desert . . . his genitals against the color of fire" (1993: 22) seem to undermine the novel's anti-Orientalist framework. "Ondaatje does," indicates Sensening-Dabbous, "seem to leave the Arab characters in his novel intentionally under-, if not completely un-developed. . . . Seen in comparison, Ondaatje's condemnation of the British in India or the United States in Japan stands in stark contrast to his seemingly intentional underdevelopment of the Arab Orient" (2004: 172).

However, a work can best be evaluated and analyzed by the sum of all its parts rather than exceptional and unusual instances. Unlike the movie's starkly clear pattern of Orientalism, contributed by the Orientalist language of movie reviews around it, the novel proves itself to be a deconstruction of official histories, including the dominant narrative about the Near East. The instances above can also be read as reminiscent of the European gaze in the psyches of the individuals in the novel; which thus fits perfectly to another theme of the work: is it really possible to create a hygienic memory? As for the argument about the underdevelopment of the Arab Orient, the critic responds himself: "Considering the author's personal background in British India (today's Sri Lanka), his decision to deal in depth with one Orientalism at the expense of another is, however, understandable (Sensing-Dabbous 2004: 172).

In conclusion, like many scholars who have pointed out and unlike most movie critics want to believe, Minghella's *Patient* is drastically different from Ondaatje's novel. As I tried to demonstrate in this paper, the case is also valid with respect to these works' approach to the representation and recreation of the Orient as the Other. As Morgan remarks, the movie is "brilliant in its own right, but radically different in its interest (1998: 159). The movie's nine Academy Awards after twelve nominations, which have made it one of the best movies of all time with Oscar's standards leave no ground for further discussion on the masterpiece quality of the work (although I doubt Minghella's work comes close to David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*). However, regarding the West-East binaries, issues of colonization and imperialism, much is still left to be discussed.

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