

Kristina Stankevičiūtė

Vilniaus Universiteto Kauno humanitarinis fakultetas

Muitinės g. 8, 3000 Kaunas

Tel.: (370-37) 42 26 04

E-mail: kristina.stankeviciute@ktu.lt

CONSTRUCTING THE POSTMODERNIST IDENTITY: THE CASE OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

One of the best-known Canadian writers, Michael Ondaatje has achieved worldwide fame largely due to the Oscar-winning screen version of his novel *The English Patient*, directed by Anthony Minghella. Both the book and the film demonstrate features of postmodern art, in terms of form as well as contents. The novel has been noted as exemplifying several aspects of postmodern and postcolonial literature, and though criticised for inconsistencies of the plot and linguistic puzzles¹, it has received a great deal of attention. The controversial reactions only mean that the issues explored in *The English Patient* are of crucial importance to the contemporary society and that Ondaatje has managed to create a striking and impressive novel.

A number of themes have been outlined by Ondaatje's critics as the most important in the novel, such as race, ethnicity, identity, history, nationalism, Western colonialism, romance, war, and the human body. This article will attempt to identify the postmodernist techniques employed in the novel, and explore the ways in which they contribute to the creation of the postmodernist subject and to the questioning of the notion of identity. Concentrating on the character of the English patient, the article will analyse how, with the help of postmodern tools such as narrative discontinuity, mini-narratives, fragmented story-line, decentered and dehumanized subject, the absence of a single truth, identity in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* becomes as a textual construct.

The action of the novel takes place during the later stages of the Second World War in a damaged villa north of Florence. The story revolves around the four occupants of the villa: Hana, the fatigued and dispassionate twenty-year-old nurse who is unable to accept the death of her father; Caravaggio, the former spy-thief who was caught by the enemy and physically maimed; Kip, the young Indian sapper who was trained in bomb disposal techniques in England before applying his talents in Italy; and the English patient, a nameless man who has been severely burned in the war and is attempting to reconstruct his mysterious past. The Villa, originally a nunnery, has been a war-hospital. The war being over, all the hospital was retreated to Pisa, except Hana, who refused to leave her patient, as he could not be moved. Caravaggio, having heard of Hana at the hospital where he was staying, comes to see if she is all right. The young Sikh sapper arrives in search for mines and stays in the Villa, continuing to work as a sapper in the neighbourhood towns.

In the personal recounts of the four occupants of the villa, Ondaatje ingeniously asserts the notion that all people are creatures of the past and try to define future events accordingly. By incorporating a variety of nationalities into the novel (Hana and Caravaggio are Canadian, Kip is Indian, and the English patient is Hungarian), while depicting the last stages of the war, Ondaatje investigates the perception of identity through the transient movement of

¹ E.g. O. W. Pollman claims that "the book only just knocks on the door of good enough literature" (POLLMAN, O. W. "Canadian Patient: Visit With An Ailing Text", *The Antigonish Review* 113, www.antagonish.com/review/113.pollman.html)

the characters². All the four main characters of the novel are in the process of self-re-evaluation, the process of discovering their new identity after the war. However, the novel evolves around the mystery of the English patient – he seems not to remember his name, and the main narrative of the novel is continuously interrupted by the memories that he is telling to Hana and other inhabitants of the villa. It is obvious that the identity of the English patient is the central concern of the novel, and the identities of other characters are often revealed through their relation to the burned pilot.

The problem of identity is one of the most important issues for the postmodern epoch. Postmodernity is an entirely different style of thinking about the world, which no longer has large place for determinism, the so-called iron laws of history, or objective truths of history that, as Foucault claims, are essentially the function of power and knowledge, at the service of the former³. There is no decision-making centre which would resolve what is good and bad, or what is desirable and undesirable; instead, there exists a multiplicity of challenges made by the given epoch, and options that have to be taken into account in order to be capable of tackling those challenges. In an intellectual perspective, postmodernism appears to be, therefore, an immense domain of anti-fundamentalism, a freedom of the spirit, ensuing joy of independent thought, rejecting all the theories about the correctness of a single reason, a single truth, a single faith, and a single world outlook⁴. The source of the postmodern is not unity but the multiplicity of options, ideological

and aesthetic pluralism. It is expressed more by dissention than by consensus, by a fragment rather than by the whole, by difference rather than by a totalising entity⁵.

In relation to this, the postmodernists speak of the disappearance of the subject or the abandonment of the subject. The author of the text and the intentions of the author become irrelevant. The context within which the text was written or created are also irrelevant. Rather, the postmodernist can read the text, and interpret it without considering the context. If the text is the actions of a person or the interactions of a group of people, the subjects may be irrelevant for the postmodernists⁶.

As a result, the issue of the subject, or the self, becomes "the most problematic facet of postmodernism" – its psychological pre-suppositions with respect to personality, motivation, behaviour⁷. Preoccupation with the fragmentation and instability of language and discourses carries over directly into a certain conception of personality. This conception focuses on schizophrenia (not, it should be emphasised, in its narrow clinical sense). Fredrich Jameson, exploring this theme, uses Lacan's description of schizophrenia as a linguistic disorder, as a breakdown in the signifying chain of meaning that creates a simple sentence. When the signifying chain snaps, then 'we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers.' The effect of such a breakdown in the signifying chain is to reduce experience to 'a series of pure and unrelated presents in time'⁸. Fragmented language and consciousness bring about a new individual who

² GIRTON, Josh. Michael Ondaatje. www.linkstoliterature.com/ondaatje.com

³ FOUCAULT, Michel. *Power, Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. Transl. Colin Gordon. New York: Panteon, 1980.

⁴ BAUMAN, Zygmunt. *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge, 1992, p. 278.

⁵ LYOTARD, Jean-Francois. What is Postmodernism? In *The Post-Modern Reader*. Ed. Charles Jencks. London: Academy Editions, 1992, p. 138–150.

⁶ Notes On Postmodern Perspectives. *Sociology* 250. Dec. 2, 1999.
www.philipallan.co.uk/system/index.html

⁷ HARVEY, David. The Condition of Postmodernity. In *The Post-Modern Reader*. Ed. Charles Jencks. London: Academy Editions, 1992, p. 309.

⁸ JAMESON, in HARVEY, footnote 7, p. 310.

has a new attitude towards himself, his personality and his identity – a fragmented self, that seems to have emerged from the crisis of the modern self. It is difficult to imagine a self without an integrated identity, a “subject in process” that is “constructed in and through language”⁹. Yet, this is what self and identity mean in postmodernism, a movement that disparages closure and completion. Because of linguistic relativity, the self cannot maintain a solid identity but must defer to the arbitrariness of all conversational interactions. Hence, the self appears fragmented as a consequence of the fluidity of speech¹⁰. It is not seen as a unified whole. Identity, according to postmodernism, is not some solid, identifiable thing; rather, the “self” is a mosaic of the different context, roles and experiences the individual encounters. One way of looking at this is to say that each individual is not simply an “individual”, but is defined by countless experiences, roles, and influences as he or she moves through the world. Lyotard described the self, using electronic communication as a metaphor, as “nodal” points through which messages and experiences pass. The individual, then, lacks any unified self, and exists only as the ever-changing sum of these messages¹¹. Thus, in postmodern approaches, identity shifts and is not stable over time. In addition, it is mainly local circumstances rather than longer structural conditions that are important in shaping these identities. [...] Shared and common identities give way to shifting and localized identities that may or may not be shaped by the individual¹².

“The question of ‘identity’ is being vigorously debated [...]. In essence, the argument is that the old identities which stabilized the social world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. This so-called ‘crisis of identity’ is seen as part of a wider process of change which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies and undermining the frameworks which gave individuals stable anchorage in the social world”¹³.

The existence of a relatively stable identity has never been questioned before postmodernism¹⁴. From the Enlightenment, it was assumed that individuals were well-centered, with a mind and self that was relatively fixed and unchanging, at least when one became an adult. In that sense, postmodernists develop a new approach; while particular individuals may have relatively stable identities, these identities differ greatly among individuals, they differ across place and time, and different situations and experiences may be more important to analyze than are common features affecting everyone.

The postmodernist, according to Lovlie, “does not go for identity but for manifold and equivocal”¹⁵. The strategy implied in this statement pertains to the de-socialization of the subject. In other words, the postmodern self is released from the fixed relationship between nominal identity and social roles. Freedom is found not in the pursuit of authenticity but in

⁹ SARUP, Madan. *Identity, Culture, and the Postmodern World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996.

¹⁰ LEE, Raymond L. M. “The Self, Lucid Dreaming and Postmodern Identity”.
http://dreamgate.com/pomo/lucid_lee.htm

¹¹ ANTLITZ, Susan E. Postmodernism. www.wiu.edu/users/musea2/pomo.htm

¹² Notes On Postmodern Perspectives. *Sociology* 250. Dec. 2, 1999.
www.philipallan.co.uk/system/index.html

¹³ HALL, S. The question of cultural identity. In Hall S., Held D. and McGrew A. (eds.). *Modernity and its Futures*. Polity Press, 1992, p. 274.

¹⁴ Notes On Postmodern Perspectives. *Sociology* 250. Dec. 2, 1999.
www.philipallan.co.uk/system/index.html

¹⁵ LOVLIE, in LEE, footnote 10.

the interplay of multiple roles that signify the openness of all meanings. The self is no longer defined as a consistent conglomeration of attitudes and perceptions strung together by the power of reason. Neither is behaviour necessarily considered an outcome of clear intentions. The postmodern self rejects the policing action of social institutions and pre-existing social scripts. The identity of the postmodern self does not have a center. Sarup described such an identity as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash ...[and] not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each observer in each period"¹⁶.

Postmodernism rejects boundaries between high and low forms of art, refusing rigid genre distinctions, emphasizing pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness. Postmodern art (and thought) favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the de-structured, decentered, dehumanized subject. Identity in the postmodern era is constructed with the help of postmodern tools. Postmodernist authors focus on the formation of individual and collective identity. For the postmodernists, identity is unstable, changing and decentred. An individual may be identifiable as having a certain age, class, religion, ethnicity, or gender, but none of these can be regarded singly as determining individual identity. At one time, one or more of these may be primary in affecting individual identity, at other times and in other situations some different aspect may be the key.

The issue of identity is of primary importance in the cosmopolitan today's world characterized by blending of cultures and globalization processes. "Identity is a construct: the ways an individual understands what it is to belong to a certain gender, race or culture.

Identity is initially constructed by the discourses operating in society which naturalises certain ways of knowing what it is to belong to this social group. In *The English Patient* Ondaatje writing in the 1990's about the Second World War questions the very notions of identity, showing how the dominant discourse of Western imperialism and civilisation have dispossessed those people of different races and cultural identities"¹⁷. In Ondaatje's novel identity becomes a textual construct, as its characters perceive themselves not so much through their gender, race or culture, but through their experience. They appear in a simultaneity of narratives that have the form of memories or stories told to others, and are defined by the shifts in their individual time, space, speech, rather than by belonging to a certain social group.

The emphasis on identity is accentuated at the very beginning, and it is focused on the mystery of the English patient. At the outset of the novel the reader learns that the patient does not know who he is, even though Hana keeps asking him that all the time. The enquiry into the patient's identity is continued by Caravaggio, who has his own suspicions about the burned pilot. He thinks that the English patient is not an Englishman at all, but the notable African explorer Count Almisy, who was the German spy-guide in the desert during the war. He is very anxious about identifying the patient, while Hana is merely curious, though their aim is the same – to learn whom he really is. The answer seems to be at hand – they just have to follow his stories and organise them into a coherent and unified chronology. For the stories of the English patient do not come in a chronological way. His mind flashes backward and forward under the influence of morphine, and it is in those flashes that the story of his life is revealed. As a matter of fact, other characters have the same way of telling their stories as well. Thus the text of the novel is composed of many mini-

¹⁶ SARUP, Madan. *Identity, Culture, and the Postmodern World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, 25–26.

¹⁷ LEACH, Roland. *The English Patient*. http://plc.wa.edu.au/personalpages/R_Leach/Leach.html

narratives that disclose the lives of the four characters before their meeting in Italy. This postmodernist manner of text-creation reminds of a mosaic. It may seem to imply the need for a universal knowledge, the need for one truth – the answer to the question who the English patient is, and in this way reminding of the modernist approach. However, *The English Patient* as a postmodern novel demonstrates that a single truth is impossible. Despite all their attempts, the other characters as well as the reader never learn whether the burned pilot really is the Hungarian Count Almásy, as the overall narrative seems to suggest. The truth and objectivity are not possible for postmodernists. Postmodernism undermines the notion of what Jean-Francois Lyotard describes as meta-narratives, or over-arching, absolute stories that explain the nature of the world. The literary critic Terry Eagleton writes:

Postmodernism signals the death of such 'meta-narratives' whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimate the illusion of a 'universal' human history. We are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern, that heterogeneous range of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalise and legitimate itself... Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives¹⁸.

Meta-narratives present the world from only one perspective, even when it may make sense from several different angles. Trying to force everything to be seen only through the eyes of one point of view is referred to as colonization. The term can be used abstractly or figuratively

to describe imposing a certain view or interpretation of something, but it is derived from examining the political and social domination that has been exercised over smaller nations and minorities by Imperialism and ethnocentrism. Postmodernism tends to encourage placing value on the unassimilated other – on accepting and respecting differences¹⁹. The idea that all groups (colonised peoples, blacks and minorities, religious groups, women, the working class) have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is essential to the pluralistic stance of postmodernism²⁰. The different situations of everyday life and the mini-narratives that are provided by people in "folk wisdom, myth, popular 'stories', legends" may have "error, inconsistency, and relativism"²¹, but it is these narratives and stories that present the situations of ordinary and of marginal people. These mini-narratives may provide a "common story that unifies people and promotes a social bond among individuals in their everyday life"²². This is exactly what happens in *The English Patient*: story-telling is the most important occupation of the characters of the book. Telling each other about their individual past, the characters of *The English Patient* become a small community of war-sufferers, united by their experiences, in which earlier prejudice is finally overcome by the sense of communal self-awareness: Hana cooks for the whole group, Caravaggio steals food and wine, Kip cleans the area of mines and later organizes a party, and they all take care of the English patient. In the end it does not matter to them who the patient really is. Hana says it is not important: "I think we should leave him be"; "It doesn't matter who he is. The war's over." (p.p. 165–166). The result of the story-telling proves to be less important than the process.

¹⁸ EAGLETON, in HARVEY, footnote 7, p. 300.

¹⁹ ANTLITZ, footnote 11.

²⁰ HARVEY, footnote 7, p. 307.

²¹ ROSENAU, P. M. *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions*. Ithaca: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 84.

²² Ibid.

Though the mystery of the English patient remains dominant throughout the novel, the reconstruction of the chronology of events that would allow an explanation of that mystery grows significantly. With the help of their mini-narratives the characters of the novel create their new selves – in the case of the English patient it is his single preoccupation. It seems that the only reason for his still being alive is the necessity to tell his story to his audience, in this way being able to re-live, and re-read it once again. Like an author creating a text, he arranges and re-arranges the most important episodes of his life (the death of Katharine, events of their relationship, his discovery of Zerkura oasis), retelling them for a few times. Due to his fragmented narrative his life as well as his identity becomes a text that can be read and re-read, a construct that may be re-arranged and manipulated for achieving the desired effect, whatever it may be in the case of the English patient.

The text is an extremely important concept in postmodernism. While written work are texts, the idea of a text includes artistic works and spoken statements²³. For some postmodernists the notion of the text is extended to include as texts all phenomena or all events. These postmodernists aim to “offer indeterminacy rather than determinism, diversity rather than unity, difference rather than synthesis, complexity rather than simplification”²⁴. The intertextual weaving has a life of its own. It is vain to try and master a text, because the perpetual interweaving of texts and meanings is beyond our control. Recognising that, postmodernists look inside one text for another, dissolve one text into another, or build one text into another. Collage/montage is therefore considered the primary form of postmodern discourse²⁵. Its inherent heterogeneity stimulates the receivers or the text or image – the audience – to participate, along with the creator, or the artist, in the production

of significations and meanings. Minimising the authority of the cultural producer creates the opportunity for popular participation and democratic determinations of cultural values. The cultural producer – the author – merely creates raw materials (fragments and elements), leaving it open to consumers to recombine those elements in any way they wish. The effect is to break (deconstruct, to use Derrida’s term) the power of the author to impose meanings or offer a continuous narrative²⁶. The text of *The English Patient* provides an excellent example of this. The story-telling is mostly a third-person narrative, therefore the reader, too, becomes involved with the community at Villa San Girolamo, he becomes part of the group; at the same time, he becomes a co-author of the text, participating in the creation of the coherent whole of the story, in the process of montage of its fragments. The scattered story-line and the absence of clarity as to ‘what really happened’ urge the reader to join the story-telling activity, and make up his/her own version of the sequence of events.

In the case of the English patient, his story has been developing in the following pattern: he is presumably the famous geographer and explorer of Africa, the Hungarian Count Ladislaus de Almásy. It is in Africa where he meets the woman of his life, Katharine, who is accompanying her husband to a desert expedition. Almásy and Katharine fall in love. Her husband having found out about the relationship, Katharine breaks up with her lover. But she cannot break up with the emotion. The three people remain suffering. The husband decides to finish the story attempting to kill all the three of them in a plane-crash in the middle of the desert. His success is partial, as he is the only one who dies. Almásy is not killed, Katharine is mortally wounded. Almásy leaves her in a cave and goes to look for help. He can come back only after three years, during which

²³ HARVEY, footnote 7, p. 308.

²⁴ ROSENAU, footnote 21, p. 8.

²⁵ HARVEY, footnote 7, p. 308.

²⁶ Ibid.

he works as a German spy-leader in the desert. He comes back in a plane he found hidden in the desert. But on the trip back the plane explodes; Almásy, burned, falls down from the sky. A tribe of Bedouins finds him and carries him to the British base from where he is taken to Italy, Florence. There, in the nunnery hospital, he meets Hana. Both of them stay in Villa San Girolamo after the hospital retreats to Pisa. When Caravaggio and Kip arrive, the English patient's audience grows, and the text-creation process intensifies as now four characters are presenting their lives in the form of disrupted, fragmentary narratives.

According to the theory of postmodernism, language is the basic means of self-perception. The language of a subject is the most important part in his/her existence; the language reflects the subject's identity to the full. The fragmentariness and decentredness of the postmodern subject is revealed through his/her fragmented language. The perception of one's own self is based on intertextuality – as everything is text in postmodernism, so the postmodern subject is continuously participating in the re-creation of the texts that comprise his/her life: events, memories, emotions. The postmodern identity is fragmentary, its existence is based on the constant shifts in the combinations of the mini-texts; there is no organising centre, there is no "fixed authorial voice providing unity and continuity to the disparate materials of a particular narrative experience"²⁷. It is true of all the characters of *The English Patient*, and it is especially true of the patient. His consciousness demonstrates linguistic disorder – he is inconsistent in referring to other people that he tells about as well as in referring to himself. The English patient's abrupt shifts in his narrative point of view, his habit of speaking "sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person..." (p. 247) are disconcerting, both for Caravaggio as he listens (pp. 244, 247) and for the reader. The English patient is also adept at

collapsing temporal and spatial distinctions: he transports himself suddenly back to the Renaissance Italy, to the age of Pico della Mirandola (pp. 56-58), he sees the present in terms of the past: the Allied campaign in northern Italy in terms of the Crusades against the Saracens (p. 96), the present day Sahara in terms of the inland sea he knows it once was (pp. 18-19). Such shifts point to the problem of self-hood, which in the case of the English patient has reached the climax: his existence in the villa is based on morphine only. Made aware of the fact that he keeps referring to himself in the third person, he explains: "*Death means you are in the third person.*" (p. 249). His self is too fragmented, too decentered to remain alive. He has become a dehumanized subject, too: he has no face, and he has no body – only a set of bones, held together by what used to be his skin and has been burnt into unrecognizable "ebony pool", as Hana thinks of him (p. 48). He has no unified self, his identity is defined merely by his memories – a collection of stories characterized by narrative discontinuity and disconnection.

The narrative point of view in *The English Patient* is used as a device to explore the concept of identity, too. Each of the four characters has his/her own narrative, told in the third person and reflecting their individual experience. The very technique of their story-telling seems to resemble the stream of consciousness, particularly William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. However, if Faulkner's characters have a different attitude towards the same event, and the point of his novel is the difference between these attitudes, the characters in Ondaatje's novel have independent narratives that reflect their attitudes first of all to themselves. Subjectivity, the difference between their individualities comes into the focus in *The English Patient*. As a postmodern text, the novel does not make attempts to promote one truth – every character is allowed to have his/her own. It is in the desert

²⁷ COOK, Rufus. 'Imploding Time and Geography': Narrative Compressions in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. Vol. 33-2, 1998, p. 110.

that makes the English patient (and presumably the reader) discover what centuries of nomadic desert people had always known: There *is* a truth in the desert, but it is never fixed. Like sand it shifts suddenly – circling, rising, settling in re-configured patterns, which although familiar, are always original²⁸. In this way the novel questions the notion of a single truth as well as the notion of a unified and wholesome identity.

It is important to note that of all the four inhabitants of Villa San Girolamo the English patient seems to be the least concerned about his own identity. The desert taught him that names, nationalities, religions, races were not important. “We were German, English, Hungarian, African – all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states.” (p. 136). He desires anonymity and seeks to forget his identity, to lose it in the dunes of Gilf Kebir. The plane-crash accidentally helps him to achieve this aim. His body burned beyond recognition, his plane damaged and his brain working only on drugs, “riding the boat of morphine” (p. 161), the English patient is not a person anymore. He turns into a likeness of his Herodotus’ *Histories* – a collection of stories glued into a whole from a number of other stories. “You must talk to me, Caravaggio. Or am I just a book? Something to be read, some creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies, loose vegetation, pockets of stones.” (p. 253). He becomes just another text – like everything in postmodernism.

In terms of identity, the final conclusion that the English patient arrives at by the end of his excruciating narrative-sequence is, nevertheless, an exact opposite of what he has believed in his whole life: having insisted on the primacy of privacy and self-sufficiency, he comes to realize what the postmodern theorists have been

declaring all along; he says that human beings are in fact “communal histories, communal books”, that “[w]e die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees...” (p. 261).

In conclusion, the character of the English patient in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient* presents an essentially postmodernist view of identity, leaving the subject open to further discussion. Using the postmodern tools of simultaneity and discontinuity in storytelling and with regard to the concept of time, the fragmented and decentered subject, unstable identity, Ondaatje “invokes the chaos of experience; in fact, he tries to simulate it. He is fond of offering his opinion (as he does in *The English Patient*) that ‘there is no order in the world’”²⁹. The structure of the novel as well as the identities of the other characters of *The English Patient* supports this opinion, introducing more themes, not covered in this article but of utmost importance both to the novel and to the epoch of postmodernism: the issue of colonialism, the impact that Empire makes on its subjects; the issues of love and betrayal, the influence that a person’s past has on his/her present, to mention just a few. Apart from its ideas, the mastery and strength of the novel lies in its language, its quiet prose, its strange, troubling story, “its obscure dilations and tangents are so hypnotic that a reader can float to the end on a cloud of words without ever noticing the confusion that’s boiling underneath.”³⁰, which deserves another article. Despite some linguistic puzzles and plot inconsistencies, Ondaatje has created a complex and powerful novel that provokes the reader, using postmodernist techniques and promoting a postmodern world-outlook, and deals with some of the most sensitive problems of the contemporary epoch.

²⁸ SUMARA, Denis J. The Topography of Reading. www.ncte.org/pdfs/members-only/ee/0294-dec97/EE0294Topography.PDF

²⁹ SELIGMAN, Craig. Sentimental Wounds. *New Republic*. 3/15/93. Vol. 208 – 11, p. 38–41.

³⁰ SELIGMAN, footnote 29.

Kristina Stankevičiūtė

Vilnius University

(Kaunas Faculty of Humanities)

Kristina Stankevičiūtė

Vilniaus Universiteto

Kauno humanitarinis fakultetas

CONSTRUCTING THE POSTMODERNIST IDENTITY: THE CASE OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

Summary

The article discusses the problem of identity in the novel of the Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*. The characters of the novel are created with the help of postmodernist techniques and concepts: narrative discontinuity, mini-narratives, fragmented story-line, decentered and dehumanized subject, chaotic time and space organization, the absence of a single truth and rejection of a single, objective evaluation of history, war, love, betrayal.

Analysing the personality of the main character – the mysterious English patient – the article tries to disclose how the novel, using the postmodernist tools, questions and constructs the notions of identity and the subject's self.

KEY WORDS: fragmentic, identity, narrative discontinuity, mini-narrative, postmodern, self, subject, text.

KONSTRUOJANT POSTMODERNIĄ TAPATYBĘ: MICHAEL'O ONDAATJE ROMANAS „ANGLAS LIGONIS“

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama Kanados rašytojo Michael'o Ondaatje romano „Anglas ligonis“ asmenybės identiteto problema. Romano veikėjų paveikslai kuriami postmodernistinėmis priemonėmis ir sąvokomis: trūkinėjantis pasakojimas, mini pasakojimai, fragmentiškas siužetas, išcentruotas ir dehumanizuotas subjektas, išsklaidytas laikas ir erdvė, objektyvaus ir vienpusiško istorijos, karo, meilės, išdavytės vertinimo neigimas. Analizuojant pagrindinio veikėjo, paslaptingojo anglo ligonio, asmenybę, straipsnyje siekiama atskleisti, kaip šiomis postmodernistinės literatūros priemonėmis romane konstruojamos ir kartu kvestionuojamos asmeninė tapatybė bei subjekto savivoka.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: fragmentiškumas, tapatybė, pasakojimas, mini pasakojimas, postmodernus, „Aš“, subjektas, tekstas.

Gauta 2003 02 21

Spaudai įteikta 2003 04 02