

ENGLISH PATIENT

By Michael Ondaatjee

*A Review by Paramjeet Singh, IRS**

The above mentioned book won the prestigious Booker Prize for fiction. Michael Ondaatjee, the author was born in Sri Lanka and lives in Toronto. He is the author of many books and *English Patient* was even made into an Academy Award winning film. The final curtain is closing onto the 2nd World War, and Hana, a nurse, stays behind in an abandoned Italian Villa to tend to her only remaining patient. Rescued by Bedouines from a burning plane, he is English, anonymous, damaged beyond recognition and haunted by his memories of passion and betrayal. The only clue Hana has to his part is the one thing he hung onto through the fire, a copy of 'The Histories by Herodotus', covered with hand-written notes describing a painful and ultimately tragic love affair. But why is such a book being reviewed in a magazine like "The Sikh Review"? What relevance does it have to Sikh issues? The answer lies in the fact that despite it being the story of an English Patient and a dedicated Nurse, of just 20 years, who refuses to leave the dying patient, yet it portrays the best of Sikhs and, Sikhism and that too, in such a subtle manner that you, dear reader, will be proud of being a Sikh, once all over again. Perhaps this book depicts Sikhs and Sikhism in such a beautiful manner before the global audience, which no other author would have done. Let us see how.

In the quiet electricity-less Italian Villa of the patient and the Nurse, there enters, one fine day, a young Sikh Sapper – Kirpal Singh (Kip, to all Britishers) and then silently and, in a dignified manner, takes over the entire series of events.

Kirpal belonged to the Sikh Regiment in the Indian Army which had been brought by the British to assist them in the World War-II. He had opted to work in the Bomb Disposal Unit. He worked very hard when England was being bombed. He single handedly disposed many complex bombs, leading from the front and at great risk to his life, earning the respect of his English counterparts, many of whom were initially reluctant to even call him 'Sir'.

The Sappers were then flown into Naples at the beginning of October, 1943, the best from the Engineering Corps. Kirpal was among the 30 men who were brought to demine the booby trapped city.

The Germans in the Italian campaign had choreographed one of the most brilliant and terrible retreats in history. The scale of laying of mines in Italy and in North Africa cannot be imagined. From 300 to 8000 mines in a city!. And they mined almost everything. From buildings, vehicles, to even corpses hanging from trees etc. It was a nightmare for these Sappers. The mining was to make the advance of the Allied Armies impossibly slow. An advance which should have taken a month, took a year.

Kirpal is one of the 30 Sappers assigned to Naples. He is allotted the area around the Villa. He sets up a tent in the far reaches of the Villa Garden. Everyday in the morning he, in his full uniform, rifle, a crystal wireless transmitter over his ears, goes around for dismantling of the mines. Always courteous. He hums western tunes, which he has learnt for himself in the three years of war. He allows himself half an hour for lunch, and works carefully and timelessly as a cat, never speaking about the danger that comes with this kind of searching.

Yet, he is soon loved and adored by Hana, the Nurse, the English Patient and

Caravaggio, the only other person staying in that Villa. They are astonished at his youthfulness, his dignity and his fearlessness. He calls Caravaggio, and the English Patient, as uncle, and soon befriends them. With the English Patient he even discusses the bombs and the various tricks used by the Germans to camouflage them and their wires. He also comforts him with stories of war and valour.

As for Hana, she simply falls in love with Kirpal. She had recently lost her father and her husband in the war. She even had lost a child in her room during the strenuous nursing during the World War-II and had suddenly grown wiser than her 20 years. **But even their liking of each other is very dignified and both had strange rules about their relationships.**

But the best part is still not all this. The best part is the manner in which the author has fleshed out the character of Kirpal. Michael Ondaatjee is referred to as a poet novelist and his writing is set apart by the sensuality with which he imbues his prose and characters. Generally his novels demand a 2nd and 3rd read to fully submerge oneself in the intricate delights the novel offers. As Pico Iyer has said 'Michael Ondaatjee has rare gift of language and observation'.

It is this rare gift that is showcased here while fleshing out Kirpal's character. Kirpal is a purist – he does not eat non vegetarian food or drinks. He never shouts or screams. **Michael Ondaatjee brings his understanding of the Sikh way of life by describing how Kirpal wears his 'Kara', his turban and how he keeps a drawing of a Saint and a musician in his tent (alluding to Guru Nanak Dev).** Then how in intimate moments with Hana, Kirpal describes his city – Lahore, guides her through into the great Gurudwara (alluding to Harmandir Sahib), removing her shoes, waiting as she washes her feet and covers her head. How, in the morning, there is a mist over the water which lifts to reveal the holy temple. How the *ragis* sing the Holy Book's verses, and then how he walks her beside a pool, to the Tree Shrine where Baba Buddhaji (wrongly mentioned as Baba Gujhaji, in the book) the first priest of the temple is buried. But above all, it is the human values of Kirpal. He is extremely conscientious. Despite his elder brother fighting the British at home for India's freedom, he chose to join the army as per the family tradition. But he reverses his elder brother. Yet having joined the army, he serves it loyally, risking his life day in and day out, despite Caravaggio exhorting him not to unnecessary risk his life. But when, one fine day, he hears, in his wireless set, that the U.S. has nuclear bombed Japan, he is shattered. He weeps from shock and horror and his whole life changes. Caravaggio and the English Patient realize the truthfulness of his statement that, **'they would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation'. He calls it 'the death of civilization' and says 'if you can rationalize this, then you can rationalize anything'.**

He cannot eat and drink and finally leaves everything. He leaves his Bomb Disposal Kit, the tent, even his personal belongings and of course Hana, Caravaggio and English Patient; no longer their sentinel and goes back to India.

Kirpal's character is such that all those who come in touch with him, simply cannot but love him. And this is when only half the book is devoted to him. The story of the **English Patient** dominates the second half. The English Patient's story moves side by side with that of Kirpal. Readers are made aware of who he is, how he explored the desert, worked as spy and finally his love story and how he got so badly injured. There

are snippets of information about Hana and Caravaggio also. **But it is the Kirpal's character which is most endearing. He is a thorough professional. In England he defuses large and complicated bombs but makes light of it.** He explains to Hana, 'We Sikhs have an affinity for machines'. He was loved and adored by Lord Suffolk, his mentor and the incharge of the Bomb Disposal Unit in England. Yet despite his professionalism and careless dare devilry, he is a man rooted in his customs and a simple man at heart. When Hana turns 21, he goes to great lengths to celebrate her birthday. He puts 45 snail shells filled with oil, for the 45 years of the century (he explains that 'in our country, we celebrate the age as well as ourselves'). And despite the fact that he himself never drinks nor eats non vegetarian food, he forages wine bottles and prepares meat with his own hands for the others and then toasts with a beaker of water.

The book ends in India, in a semi urban town, some 13 years later. Kirpal is now a Doctor has two children and a laughing wife. He is permanently busy attending to patients and then cycling his way to his house. Some evenings, 'The stone of history skips over water' and he is reminded of Hana and wonders what she does. She had written letters to him for almost a year, but getting no reply had stopped sending them. At these moments he gets those urges to talk to her and recalls the time when he was just as fascinated – boyish and earnest.

The imagery in this book is so vivid that one can see it in one's mind's eye. **Reading this book is like watching a film and is a must read for all literary lovers.** Michael Ondaatjee deserves all praise for this beautiful story and the way he has depicted the Sikhs. It is a welcome and refreshing departure from the caricatures that most authors make of Sikh characters in their work and the stereotyping of things related to Sikhism. **The sensitivity shown by the author towards all his characters proves that he is a genius and a true deserver of the Booker prize.**



WITHOUT FEAR: THE LIFE AND TRIAL OF BHAGAT SINGH

By Kuldip Nayar

Published by Harper Collins

Pages: 244 Price: Rs. 395

A Review by Gillian Wright



Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "There has never been within living memory, so much romance round any life as has surrounded that of Bhagat Singh." Kuldip Nayar's Bhagat Singh is indeed the stuff legends are made of. Revolution was fed to him with his mother's milk. His father and uncles had been jailed for their part in the Ghadar movement. Bhagat Singh attended a *swadeshi* school, became a voracious reader and chose Marxism as his belief. By the age of 16, he had chosen his vocation - to devote himself not just to the political but also the economic independence of India's masses. There was no room in the revolutionary's life for marriage, but he valued love, beauty and poetry. "*Inquilab zindabad!*" was his slogan.

Ironically, he and his comrade's attacks often missed their target and they become most popular when they adopted more Gandhian methods, voluntarily taking the oppression of the state on to themselves. The bomb Bhagat Singh threw into what is now Parliament House was carefully aimed not to harm anyone. Then, and during the trial that followed, he grew in stature. He and his comrades undertook hunger strikes in jail and endured the police's brutality. During the Lahore Conspiracy Case, in which he was accused of 'waging war against the king,' Sukhdev, a co-accused made a note of the false witnesses the State brought against them. Singing Urdu anthems to freedom, the revolutionaries used the trial to further their cause. When convicted, they faced death without fear. Indeed, Bhagat Singh seemed never to doubt. That was his strength.

Nayar contrasts Bhagat Singh's certainty with his father Kishen Singh's concern as he tried to save his son from himself. It was he who filed a mercy petition without his son's permission and addressed the Congress session of 1931 to report Bhagat's last words to him. Nayar does not ignore the comrades who failed, in particular, the sad figure of Hans Raj Vohra who turned State approver in the Lahore Conspiracy Case. Nayar concludes that Vohra was tricked into thinking his guru Sukhdev had given all their secrets away.

The tensions and sympathies between the revolutionaries and the Congress are carefully examined. Gandhi held that the "political murders" by the revolutionaries hindered India's passage to freedom. Singh argued that satyagraha should include physical as well as soul force. He had sympathisers in Congress. Before his execution, he thanked Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose for the interest they had shown in his case. It was only with difficulty that Gandhi's draft resolution condemning Singh and his comrades' hanging, but also disassociating the Congress from all political violence, was passed by the Congress.

Nayar says the hanging of Singh and his comrades sounded the death knell for the British Raj. But they had aimed at more than the end of British rule. Perhaps independent India could have profited more if, Mandela-like, they had survived to usher in a new era.

[Courtesy: *India Today*]



EXPLORING HARMONY AMONG RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS IN INDIA:

**Papers presented at a Seminar held at
Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata (Jan. 4-6, 2007)**

**Published by
The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata 700029.**

Page: 386, Price: Rs. 150

A Review by Saran Singh

This is basically an anthology of scholarly papers on various religions of India, presented at a seminar organised, in January 2007, by the highly respected Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture - celebrated for its dedication to the cause of inter-faith understanding. Apart from study of specific religious traditions - of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism and Catholicism - the Seminar had the opportunity to examine philosophic aspects of the teachings of Sri Ramanuja, Chaitanya, Judaism, the Bahai's faith, the Siddha Yoga and, of course, the contribution of Sri Ramakrishna and the inimitable Swami Vivekananda.

Objectives of the Seminar have been felicitously outlined in Swami Prabhanda's welcome address delivered at the inaugural session before a packed audience in Vivekananda hall. Unity in diversity is the key, truth the focus, prof. Mohanty's keynote address dwelt on 'the different paths, one goal', deriving inspiration from the Gita and other holy texts, and concluding that 'love conquers everything', bring rooted in 'sacredness'; it clears all cobwebs of profanity. However, he recognizes that religion is a complex phenomenon, with agglomeration of scriptural texts, rituals and liturgies, and above all - a sacred public place: Temple, mosque, church, et. al. Likewise, Dr. Pratap Chandra Chunder (who, sadly, passed away last December) recalled the classical Puranic definition: 'whatever leads to good (kOSI) is religion, whatever leads to evil is adharma - irreligious, the degree changing with times.

The main seminar, over most of the week, explored specific religious traditions. Presentation by scholars, Swamis and the Reverends philosophized on their own own belief systems as well as the concepts of the ultimate Reality, all of which has been faithfully recorded in the volume - with exemplary precision, care and devotion, characteristic of the Institute's tradition. The Paper on Sikhism, written by the noted scholar, Dr. Jaswant Singh Neki, was (in his absence) presented by this writer. There is no record of the discussion on the Paper.

Even as men of God engage in exchange of thought on the inspirational and philosophical aspects of religion, the world beyond the Seminar Halls remains a perilous place, where religions are monopolized by radical groups intolerant of diversity and dissent, ready to kill in the name of God. Such a scenario, however, reinforces the argument for unity in diversity. the seminar was thus a milestone and pathblazer. Fortunately, for humanity, there is One God, our last resort - and refuge - unity rests in Him, even as we pray: jgqu jludw rIK IY Awpxl ikrpw Dwir] ijqu duAwrY aubrY iqqY IYhu aubwir] [SGGS: 853] This excellent volume, meticulously edited, embodies the essential spirit of harmony of all faiths.

