

VIOLENCE, PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AND THE QUEST FOR FAMILIAL BOND IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S NOVEL *WARLIGHT*

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Abstract

This research paper entitled *Violence, Psychological Trauma and the Quest for Familial Bond in Michael Ondaatje's novel Warlight* aims to provoke the psychological aspects of an individual whose life was affected by the warfare activities. Ondaatje figurates war as a ruination that affects the lives of ordinary people and weighs on their minds in most of his novels. He highlights the importance of familial bond to rectify the issues of solitary and melancholia in his novel *Warlight*. The images of violence in many novels of twentieth century depict the restlessness, hostility, melancholia, environmental destruction and devastation of familial bond that prevail, especially during and aftermath of World War I and World War II. The post war writers like Ondaatje displays not only the catastrophe of war, resulting in large-scale ruins and dead bodies but also the impacts of post war effects.

Keywords: violence, psychological trauma, melancholia, familial bond

Michael Ondaatje is an acclaimed postmodern writer. His novels elevated him to the international arena of modern fiction as they deal with the reality of life and society. War, violence and traumatic experience of victims in the war torn countries are the backdrop of many of his novels. His novels depict the impact of war and violence on the relationship at social and emotional level. His novels are examined through the sociological and psychological aspects of postmodern theories. Racism, discrimination, minority oppression, nostalgia, identity crisis, migration and displacement, transnationalism and multiculturalism are the predominant themes of his novels. The traumatic experiences and rootlessness of characters in Ondaatje's novels reflect his own life. His choice of using brutality and violence in his works seems idiocentric that arise directly out of postmodern milieu on which he operates.

The graphic depiction of aestheticized brutality draws the prolonged attention of an audience. He denies to apologise for the delineation of violence and defends his works alluding to the socially conscious playwright Edward Bond who also tries to justify the violence of his own work in the author's preface to *Lear*:

I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society, and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People do not want writers to write about violence want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence. (V)

Ondaatje in a Paragraphinterview highlights the importance of experiencing violence, especially the kind that the official history tries to ignore:

If there was a kind of direction in [*In the Skin of a Lion*], it was making sure that something got said to write about the unofficial thing that was happening, There were a lot of strikes, just as violent and extreme as anywhere else, but you hardly ever read about that in Toronto history (5).

In the third Chapter of *Beyond Pleasure Principle*, Freud discusses a pattern of suffering that is inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals. Terrifying experience of the victims of

war torn countries affects their psyche and behavioral patterns. Freud wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them. Ondaatje's novels are explicit in exposing the psychological issues triggered by the environmental factors that influence the behaviour of an individual. His recent novel *Warlight* moves around the life of a fourteen year old boy Nathaniel who aspires for a familial bond. The central characters of Ondaatje's novels long for a familial bond as the writer has experienced it in his own life. His characters such as Buddy Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), Patrick Lewis in *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) Anil Tissera in *Anil's Ghost*(2000), Hana in *The English Patient* (1992), Anna in *Divisadero* (2007), *Cat's Table*(2011) and Nathaniel in *Warlight*(2018) are detached from the family. He makes a vivid description of the effects of war and violence on the psyche and the behavioral patterns of an individual. He sets World War II as the background of his novel *Warlight* and portrays the psychological issues caused by war and violence. He unveils such issues in *Warlight*, as Moth says:

Yes, Tulse Hill. What does that mean? *Tulse*? Your father used to warn you. Do you remember? He would come into your room that was next to his and your mother's and take the cat and put it outside for the rest of the night. But this made it worse. It would only sing louder. Your father did not think it was singing. Of course. Only you did. That is what you told him. The thing was, the cat would not start its howling until you were asleep, as if it did not want to disturb you while you were beginning to fall asleep. So your father killed it one night (...) He was brilliant, your father, but he was not stable. You must understand that the war damaged him badly.(30)

The term trauma or wound originally refers to physical injury. In its later usage, especially in medical and psychiatric literature, and most obviously in Freud's text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted upon the mind. Psychological trauma is a response to a painful experience of an individual. Overwhelming amount of stress caused by the painful events affect the psyche of human beings. Terrifying atmosphere in which Nathaniel's father live in Ondaatje's novel *Warlight* results in the emotional imbalance that drove him to kill the cat. Warfare environment made him intolerant when the cat was howling. Rachel, Nathaniel's sister who suffers from epilepsy is an another evident to substantiate the authors intention of unfolding the post war effects on life and psyche of the people. The violent atmosphere to which Rachel is exposed made her suffer when she watched a violent incident on the screen.

One Evening Rachel and I took off to a seven o'clock screening of a film, and sat in the front row of the Gaumont. At some point the hero's plane plunged towards the earth, with his foot caught among the controls so he couldn't get free. Tense music filled the theatre, along with the scream of the plane's engine. Caught up in the moment. I was unaware of what was happening around me.

“*What's wrong?*”

I looked to my right. Between the voice that had said “*What's wrong?*” and me sat Rachel, shuddering, a moan, a Cow-like noise coming out of her that I knew was going to get louder. She was shaking from side to side. (68)

Both the World War I and World War II took the lives of a large number of people and made human civilization doubtful. Ondaatje pictures the effects of warfare activities that affect not only human beings but also all other creatures in the world. The atmosphere filled with the horror of war is expressed in the words of Ondaatje as follows:

On weekends Rose drives up to Suffolk to visit her children who are living with her mother, safe from the Blitz that is terrorizing London. During one visit, on her second night there, they here the bombers flying in from the North

Sea. A long night. They have all established themselves in the living room of darkened house, the children sleeping on the sofa, her mother, tired, kept awake by the noise of the planes, sitting by a fire. The house, the earth around it, does not stop shuddering, and Rose imagines all small animals, voles, worms, even night owls and lighter birds in the air, caught in the avalanche of noise coming from the sky – even fish in the river under the turbulence of water because of the never-ending planes from Germany coursing low through the night. She realizes she is thinking the way Felon thinks. (215)

Devastated family, struggle and aspiration of the family members for a reunion to rebuild the familial bond is an important phenomenon in the novels of Michael Ondaatje. Since the writer himself was not fortunate enough to be brought in an enjoyable familial relationship, he emphasizes more on the importance of familial bond in his works, especially Michael in *Cat's Table* (2011) and Nathaniel in *Warlight* (2018) reflect Ondaatje's boyhood quest for a familial bond with his mother. Nathaniel's attempt to discover the secret mission of his mother at the end of World War II in the novel *Warlight* shows the quest of boy who is detached from the family. He was not happy when his parents planned to leave him and his sister under the care of a stranger named The Moth "Neither Rachel nor I said a word. We stared at our father, who was expanding on the details of their flight on the new Avro Tudor I, a descendant of the Lancaster bomber, which could cruise at more than hundred miles an hour" (5).

Nathaniel's depression of solitary and quest for familial reunion can be examined as an important issue that arises stress in his psyche. Echoes of past in the works of Ondaatje exhibits the nature of psyche. *Warlight* provides significant insights to the concept of memory. Its protagonists memory of a chess game and the stories that his mother narrated displays with remarkable precision on how images of past interweave and connect with those of present life.

One night a thunderstorm perched at the top of our valley as we sat poised across from each other at a table in the greenhouse. There was a sodium lam near us. My mother set up pawns and castles at their starting gates as the storm gradually rolled over us. The lightening and thunder made us feel defenceless within the thin glass shell. (168)

The importance of parental care and familial bond is expressed in the words of Nathaniel, "There would be less calamity, less collapse of the family if we were left behind as opposed to her remaining in Ruvigny Gardens (...) Before his departure we all embraced our father in a huddle, The Moth tactfully disappeared for the weekend"(8). His recollection of past is firmly bound up in the relations he developed within the family. Memory develops a sense of nostalgia to recall a lost heritage. Memories of forgotten past can be communicated through landscapes and emotions. The affective ties between people and place makes an individual to live in past. Childhood memories of familial bond is a kind of psychic anchor that make us to be attached with familial bond. Though the major part of the novel runs around the struggle, memory and aspirations of Nathaniel, it uncovers his mother's firm attachment to the house she had inherited. As she was detached from her parents and later from her children, she wanted to spend the rest of the life at White Paint, an old house where she lived with her parents and grandparents.

Michael Ondaatje is meticulous in unearthing the reality of war and socio political conditions of England during and aftermath of World War II in his novel *Warlight*. He makes a scholarly attempt to unveil the politics behind the war as he states, "The British were not alone in this instinct to conceal certain truths of War"(133). Politics of war and the impacts of violence are the important features of his novels. The horror of war and violence is vivid in his novels. The odd response of

Nathaniel's father to the howling cat and Rachel's sickness caused by the sound of a plane that she has watched on screen clearly records the psychiatric disorder of the people who have experienced or witnessed the traumatic events during war.

In 1904, French psychologist Pierre Janet rightly observed that when a patient found someone whom they could obey, their problems ceased. Ondaatje gives solution since he stresses the importance of relationship as a psychotherapy to overcome their psychological trauma, such as solitary, melancholia and depression. Nathaniel, the central figure of the novel detects to rebuild the familial bond with the people whom he loved. The author stresses the importance of reconstructing the self as Nathaniel finds none to be reunited at the end of the novel. His quest ends in vein when he visited the family of Rachel and Agnes. Rachel finding fault with her parents as their departure resulted in her solitary and suffering sounds her hostility towards her parents. Nathaniel leaves the family of Agnes undisturbed after coming to know that she has settled down domestically.

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