

PSYCHOLOGY OF DEFERRED ACTION AND AFTERWARDSNESS: A CRITICAL READING OF THE SELECTED NOVELS OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE

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Abstract:

The paper examines selected novels of Michael Ondaatje to examine the operation of 'Afterwardsness' and trauma that determines the notion of 'reality'. Based on a close reading, the characters are examined for going through the process of realizing, understanding and accepting their own darkness to transcend it, and grow emotionally. The fiction of Ondaatje is shown to possess a self-reflexivity that foregrounds the opacities of representation, and therefore the pressing need for evolving alternate forms of expression. Underscoring the traumatic effects of colonialism and migration, the points out that it crystallizes newer forms of identity that are cognizant of the altered realities of fragmentation.

Keywords: Trauma, Identity, Fragmentation, Reality

'The Oxford Reference' states that "Deferred Action" is a term, primarily coined by Sigmund Freud, which denotes "the revision of memories to fit in with new experiences or the attainment of later stages of development". (Colman, 199) 'Afterwardsness' is defined by Teresa de Lauretis, as a "mode of belated understanding or retroactive attribution of sexual or traumatic meaning to earlier events" (Lauretis, 118). To understand the above statements in simpler terms, we need to take into cognizance that quality of trauma, especially childhood trauma which impedes a person's ability to grasp, contemplate and accept traumatic events. This leads to the subconscious repression of one's memories and emotions which in turn causes the person concerned to be entrapped in a particular state of mind as a form of rejection of reality. Even if they seem to have moved on, they are reminded of the past continuously. This situation is lyrically well presented in the following lines of Michael Ondaatje's novel *Divisadero*:

"It's like villanelle, this inclination of going back to events in our past, the way the villanelle's form refuses to move forward in linear development, circling instead at those familiar moments of emotion. Only the rereading count, Nobokov said. So the strange form of that belfry, turning onto it again and again, felt familiar to me. For we live with those retrievals from childhood that coalesce and echo throughout our lives, the way shattered pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope reappear in new forms and are songlike in their refrains and rhymes, making up a single monologue. We live permanently in the recurrence of our own stories, whatever story we tell" (Ondaatje, 136)

Smyter says "The title of the book can be appropriately read as both "division" and "to gaze at something from a distance" (142), and it soon becomes clear that no division is final and no gaze all-embracing."The past is always carried into the present by small things" (77) and everything that is told appears to be the result of non-identical repetitions. The validity of binary thinking and thinking in strict categories is brought into question as oppositions such as fact-fiction, biography-autobiography, and self-other are deconstructed." (Smyter, na)

Ondaatje's novels like *The English Patient* (1992), *Anil's Ghost* (2000), *Divisadero* (2007), and *Warlight* (2008) deal with the traumas related to war. While *The English Patient* and *Warlight* are set during the time of the Second World War; *Divisadero* explores the whole period from the First World War till the 1970s although commencing in 1970 in France. *Anil's Ghost* entails the gruesome story of Sri Lanka's inner conflict. According to Kaur, the novel, in other words, self-reflexively underlines its own inadequacies and the need for alternative forms of expression, which could be found in the literary use of visual categories" (Kaur, 11723) War, be it amongst nations or within a nation, spells tremendous violence. This leads to trauma owing to various kinds of losses like the loss of identity, loss of humanity, bereavement, and fragmentation of the self. Ondaatje has explored a multitude of trauma-responses through his novels. In this connection David Jonathan remarks that "Ondaatje's form of philosophical thought juxtaposes many genres and expressive forms into a highly complex, playful and self-referential metafictional whole. With a focus on close reading supplemented rather than determined by critical theory,

the author's work advances the provocative central thesis that fictional texts not only reflect upon events, thoughts and emotions, but that philosophical works of literature and art are necessarily performative and interrogative, able to question aspects of the self, and ultimately able to present ethical ways of being and therapeutic escape to readers." (Amid, 5)

The central figures of *The English Patient*, a twenty years old Canadian nurse called Hana who serves the Allies in the World War II, a famous Hungarian explorer with the name of Almasy who served the Germans before becoming the "English Patient", the Sikh sapper Kip who works for the British forces, and Caravaggio, a Canadian thief who also served the British intelligence before losing his ability to use his hands properly after being tortured by the Germans. All of them are victims of the war who are dealing with their internal conflicts in their own ways. Hana has not only lost her youth but also her unborn baby, the father of her baby and her own father to the war along with witnessing tremendous bloodshed and death which resulted in her creating impenetrable walls around her. As if disconnecting her soul from her body and stopping the flow of time in her mind, she not only cuts off her hair but also refuses to look at her own reflection in the mirror afterwards. A woman cutting off her hair symbolizes many things throughout the world. One popular saying is that it is implicative of abandoning her sexuality. Despite the fact that Hana seems to be pretty nonchalant when she talks about her aborting her own baby, "the child didn't just die, I was the one who destroyed it" (Ondaatje, 147), it is obvious that the loss of her loved ones, especially her first child traumatized her enough to want to denounce her womanhood. In various places of Asia, hair is equated with life and cutting off one's hair is also equated with committing suicide. Hana's time seems to have stopped afterwards which makes her feel as if she is a walking corpse. She seems to have killed her emotions. People suffering from PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder sometimes resort to locking their emotions away in the deepest recesses of their mind. Often, their brain does it without even being aware of it. It is said that when one is overwhelmed by too many emotions and thoughts, they lose their ability to even surmise what is exactly hurting them, and such a situation is what affects their psychological development. This is what Hana, along with all the other residents of the villa seems to be going through. The secluded villa in Italy where the characters take refuge seems to have the otherworldly quality of pausing time as all of them somewhat lose the consciousness of the outside world and subconsciously escape to, in order to hide from the cruelty of the outside world. The villa can be considered the physical manifestation of that box in their hearts where almost all of them lock away their emotions, be it for only a few moments or for a long period of time. This is done consciously by the characters.

Kip's appearance stirs something in Hana which restarts her time to a certain point. However, it is the news of the Hiroshima Nagasaki Bombings that brings all of them back to the reality (Ondaatje, 162-173). If the villa is a snow globe, that news shakes it and makes the snowflakes dance. This act of losing the sense of reality is a form of escapism and coping mechanism against trauma. Kip's utter faith in the British is argued to be a sweet-lemon coping mechanism according to the Colonial discourse where the victims put on a blindfold in order to deny the harsh reality. That is to say, the ruthless and atrocious oppression of the British which made the people of the Indian Subcontinent lose their self-confidence, forced them to abhor and reject their own culture, and manipulated them to develop a kind of masochistic defense mechanism which made them believe that British colonizers, dictated by their morals, are only doing well for the colonized. Kip's family, especially his brother kept on trying to show the cruel side of the British colonizers and accept it but he kept on denying this until the Hiroshima Nagasaki Bombing incident. It is imperative to understand that somewhere within, he has always known the truth but just refused to accept it. If betrayal comes from the people whom we put our faith in by disregarding all warnings from the others, we end up reacting even more intensely than we might have done otherwise. So, news also finally makes Kip accept the truth which he had been denying all his life. Understanding and reacting to trauma is called Deferred Action and Afterwardsness, be it in terms of moving on like Hana or feeling repulsed and running away from whatever one may associate with the source of that trauma like Kip, as the moment Kip realizes this, he leaves the villa and his "Western" friends behind to settle with the people of his colour. Almasy and Kip from *The English Patient* and Nathaniel, the narrator of *Warlight* have the habit of detaching themselves from the outside world. Almasy, perhaps due to his occupation as an explorer, has become so self-sufficient that his lover Katherine has difficulty entering his world. Almasy is fascinated with deserts because it seems to be a place beyond human confines. He does not believe in the concept of nationality and the desert is a place which frees him of all that. Travelling also lets him to not have a deeper connection with anyone in particular. Perhaps, the contemporary crisis, the World War II which can be considered to be the outcome of hyper-nationality has traumatized him enough to reject the whole idea of nationality in general. As a means of escaping the perils of human life in a society, he prefers staying away from it. This has unconsciously made him build up such high walls around him that Katherine is compelled to leave him. As Kip remembers in the 8th chapter of the novel, the trauma of the war turned him into a person who does not feel any kind of fear of death even if he is in a pit with a bomb. He has been trained to defuse bombs as a sapper for the British and continuously investing himself in this line of work has made him to develop the ability to temporarily lock away

his emotions so as to not be affected by them during work. Although it is a remarkable talent which mostly everyone attains after living a life where they are only one step away from knocking at the death's door, it is devastatingly harmful to human minds. Therefore, he feels that he has lost his human quality and only through people like Hana can he feel "human" again. Hana is the link between his inner safe world and the outside world. The moment of Kip's late realization when he has already attained the ability of abandoning his human quality to a great extent and what comes after the epiphany, are what we are implying here while talking about Deferred Action and Afterwardsness. The same kind of numbness to the outside world can also be noticed in Nathaniel of *Warlight* through the distant and detached tone in which he narrates the story. He himself admits that he "buries things", which is obviously an outcome of being abandoned by his parents at a young age. He definitely has many guardian figures in his life but he dubs them as "strangers" and this fact may be implying that although having them in his life, he was never able to form a deep bond with them which can support him emotionally. By calling them so, he is maintaining a distance from them so as to not be emotionally involved enough to feel the same pain he felt when he came to know that his parents have actually abandoned them. Thus, he protects his heart from the world by being so detached and closed-off. The only time we notice some sort of spark in the usually impassive narration of Nathaniel is when he is with his lover Agnes just like how it is for Hana when she is with Kip and Almasy with Katherine. It makes one wonder if the author is suggesting that an external stimulus is always necessary to start the process of moving on. Another form of coping mechanism against trauma is reflected in Nathaniel forgetting the memory of the sight of his father killing his cat and therefore having no recollection of the memory which caused him to hate cats later. When someone encounters something too appalling, ghastly, dreadful and macabre like what he experienced and the brain fails to even comprehend it to be able to accept it, it ends up shutting the memory away and the emotions which are the results of that incident are made to be justified in one way or the other. Thus, Nathaniel cannot remember the memory of his cat because he subconsciously simply does not want to remember that memory to begin with and he ends up reasoning his antipathy towards cats as an act of simple disliking. Various things like the narrative structure, Anna's statement "I don't know if this is what I am doing, from this distance, imagining the life of my sister, and imagining the future of Coop" (Ondaatje, 137), the similarities in the story of Anna, Coop and her sister Claire with that of the life of the author Lucien Segura on whom Anna is researching in *Divisadero*, the readers are often made to question if the whole story is a result of Anna's imagination or not. The lines such as "We have art... so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth" (Ondaatje, 75) and "if you do not plunder the past, the absence feeds you" (Ondaatje, 141) make one even more curious if Anna is making up these stories to deal with the hollowness inside of her caused by her numerous losses. It is to be noted that Anna loses her mother before even understanding the concept of loss, yet the fact that she feels that something is missing is reflected on how Coop ends up taking the role of her mother in a way. Afterwards she is compelled to separate from both her sister, Coop and also her father. She falls in a pit of loneliness and it is plausible for people to take refuge in a world of imagination to escape from the pain of reality. Lucien in literature, Rafael in music, and Coop in the art of gambling have all ended up taking refuge in some form of art just like how Anna does. As she says "So I find the lives of Coop and my sister and my father everywhere (I draw portraits of them everywhere)..." (Ondaatje, 268) and we see numerous parallels between the story of Claire and Coop with that of Lucien, it is difficult to comprehend if Anna has mixed the facts with imagination to create the tales of this novel as a way of fighting against her own loneliness. I have already stated how people consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously replace or shut away their traumatic memories as a way of protecting themselves, but they also sometimes make up stories to fight against the hollowness left by that traumatic incident. One may be reminded of how Arthur Fleck in *Joker*(2019) deals with his own reality by imagining incidents which have never occurred to begin with. Anna is, perhaps consciously, doing so as a means of dealing with her own past and the depths of loneliness caused by it. Trauma often transforms the cry for help into silence, which is visible in all of the novels which we are dealing with. In the run-down villa of *The English Patient* there's a veil of silence, a false sense of tranquility which seems to be muffling the cries within the people residing there and not letting the sound of the time ticking enter the almost ethereal place. The sound of the bomb, an external stimulus triggers the silent screams of Kip to break through this veil and shatter that world of theirs. The same silent screams are present in *Divisadero* as well. Both Coop's reaction to the death of his parents and Anna's reaction to the loss of her family and Coop is silence. Nathaniel's act of burying his emotions and his sister, Rachel's estrangement also remind us of a silence. While Nathaniel's silence ushers some sort of resignation while that of Rachel seems to be of anger. Her silence seems to be questioning Nathaniel about how he could choose to stay with their mother even though she had abandoned them as this feels like a betrayal to her. An eerie silence follows when their father murders their cat too. Silence as a predominant character also finds its role in *Anil's Ghost*, perhaps, assuming an even louder form than ever before. Ong comments that "Anil's Ghost exemplifies the way in which contemporary trauma fiction invents and imagines new ways to think and speak about trauma. But the novel also illustrates how literature can be respectful of the deep struggle that is involved in working through one's trauma." (Ong, 50) Keerthana and Pandimeena write that "Anil's Ghost produces a treatment of trauma that is deeply rooted in human perception, understanding and experience allows for new way of attempting to understand trauma and new paths for empathy, and enables personal and communal regeneration." (Pandimeena and Keerthana

J, 146)

Anil Tissera, the protagonist of the novel is met with silence from everyone when she visits Sri Lanka to investigate the situation that caused the mysterious disappearance of many civilians. As a forensic pathologist from Canada, working for UNO, absolutely unaware of the political scenario of Sri Lanka attempts to apply the methods of interrogation that she has had always used in her investigations to unravel various mysteries, she gradually becomes aware that she needs a different approach in here to find even one clue. Her time with the artist Ananda with whom she can only communicate through gestures or a translator, she learns to understand silences and also realizes the fact that more than often simple observation helps to understand many things which cannot be communicated through normal human languages. Acquisition of this skill finally enables her to get to the truth. She realizes how the years of torture have silenced the civilians. During the British rule, Tamils were the privileged ones and due to the discrimination, Sinhalese bore immense hatred towards the Tamil. As soon as they were liberated from the British rule, the Sinhalese Sri Lankan government started oppressing and discriminating against Tamils which ultimately culminated into anti-Tamil riots in the early 1980s. Innumerable Tamils were slaughtered. If they protested, there would be even more death and violence. Therefore, they chose to remain silent. But in no way does that silence equate with defeat. It is their way of fighting for survival. However, this silence is like a double edged sword which also harms the one wielding it. Ananda is therefore required to go through creating and taking apart the clay mould on the skeleton's face to be able to come to terms with his own harsh reality. Although it is apparent that his wife is dead, he is shown to be living in denial of that by drowning himself in alcohol. The fact that he has not even been able to find the dead body of his wife leaves him incapable of getting the closure that he desperately needs. In the process of making the face of the skeleton named Sailor, he ends up having the hope that it might be of his wife. But after its completion, that hope shatters and he breaks down. Nevertheless, this aids to heal him. By making the mould every day after breaking it down, he is made to face reality, the reality of his wife's disappearance. The more he does so, the more he is able to come to terms with the fact that the skull is not that of his wife and she is in fact, beyond his reach. This realization drives him to attempt suicide. (Ondaatje, 195) The scene in which he attempts to do it is remarkable because it shows how one loses the sight of everything and ends up in a trance before choosing suicide. Surviving it with the help of Anil liberates him from his trauma and he is able to slowly move on. It is important to be stated that moving on doesn't mean forgetting the past but accepting it and gaining the ability to live with it. The character of Gamini Diyasena in *Anil's Ghost* can remind one of *The English Patient's* Hana. Gamini being an emergency doctor in Sri Lanka is also struggling to save the lives of the civil war victims. His wife's abandonment adds up to his trauma and he becomes even more detached just like Hana after the loss of her partner and child and Nathaniel after being left behind by his parents. His story also makes one wonder if Hana ends up becoming like him after Kip's departure. Another predominant feature present in all the novels is the denial of an imposed identity. Anil desperately attained her own name "Anil" from her brother and the fact that her previous name is never mentioned exemplifies the extent to which she must abhor being defined by any such impositions. This aids her in escaping her disastrous marriage with an overly possessive tyrant of a husband. Her acquisition of a masculine name is instrumental in her resistance against the patriarchy which almost never stops haunting her. Even as a child it is implied that she was sexually assaulted by even her own brother and her husband forces himself on her. Almasy is clearly and evidently rejecting being labeled as a citizen of any particular nation because he does not believe in the idea of nation. In *Warlight* we notice that the strangers, who become extremely important to Nathaniel as guardian figures, prefer being called by nicknames. These nicknames help them to put on a façade. In *Divisadero*, both Anna and Coop refuse to reveal their real names to their respective partners and they do not hesitate to take up new identities. The fact that even Lucien is able to become Roman further emphasizes how meaningless identities can be. One needs to associate any discussion about trauma with the concept of identity as this aids us in being able to comprehend certain factors. Taking into consideration that almost everything in this world is a social construct and hence almost nothing has definite, unchangeable meanings, we must think about how these novels have depicted the way in which the trauma of wars destroy any sense of belongingness. Identity and the sense of belongingness are connected because one needs to feel connected to that identity to belong to it and accept it. Traumas destroy the self to the point that people lose the ability to connect with or belong to anywhere. Moreover, one may also feel that by denying, and abandoning one's previous identity to adopt a new one can help them escape the trauma, the situations and the people who have given them that trauma.

Michael Ondaatje, while exploring trauma through the characters of his novels portrays how trauma leads to 'Deferred Action' and 'Afterwardsness' as almost all of the characters, go through the process of realizing, understanding and accepting their own darkness to move forward at some point no matter how long it takes.

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