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TRAUMATIC MEMORIES IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S WARLIGHT

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ABSTRACT

Michael Ondaatje is best known as a novelist; his artistic range encompasses many genres. Ondaatje through his prose delineates the inner world of his characters; Warlight is not an exception though its subject matter is slightly different from his other novels. Invasive and fragmented in nature, traumatic memories manifest themselves particularly in the form of visual flashbacks, extreme stress and diseases of the mind. They are involuntarily triggered whenever a person passes through the context related to original trauma. Warlight exposes fragmented memories of its narrator, Nathaniel; depressed life of her sister Rachel; and stressed life of their mother, Rose. The readers can peep through the past of Nathaniel as well as other characters from the narrator's point of view. Alex Preston, in The Guardian, comments, "Michael Ondaatje is at the peak of his powers with the story of a man piecing together his troublesome adolescence".

KEYWORDS: Traumatic, Memories, Unconscious, Recall, Stress

INTRODUCTION

Michael Ondaatje has formed a niche not only in Canada but he is an internationally acclaimed poet and novelist. Michael Ondaatje is one of the world's leading writers who reveal a passion for resisting conservative form. Steven Barclay Agency extols him with these words, "his artistry and aesthetic have influenced an entire generation of writers and readers". Although he is best known as a novelist, his artistic range also encompasses poetry, memoir, and film. Michael Ondaatje has a big pack of prizes for his literary competence that includes The Booker Prize for Fiction, The Irish Times International Prize for Fiction, the Prix Medicis, the Governor-General's Award, and the Giller Prize and many more. Hirsh Sawhney states in The Times Literary Supplement: "Ondaatje's stylistic and thematic choices have made him a bestselling author, while also earning him the ire of literary critics."

Warlight is Ondaatje's latest novel that was published in May 2018. Ondaatje through his prose delineates the inner world of his characters; Warlight is not an exception though its subject matter is slightly different from his other novels. Alex Preston hails Ondaatje "a memory artist" and praises him that the author "summons images with an acuity that makes the reader experience them with the force of something familiar, intimate and truthful". Breuer and Freud avowed that the traumatic memories are significantly different from other types of autobiographical memories. These memories are never completely abolished as they remain in the unconscious mind. Invasive and fragmented in nature, these memories manifest themselves particularly in the form of visual flashbacks. They are involuntarily triggered whenever a person passes through the context related to original trauma. According to B.A. van der "...traumatic memories take on their extreme character only after a person has been exposed to overwhelming stress". (765)

Warlight manifests fragmented memories of its narrator, Nathaniel. The readers can peep through the past of Nathaniel as well as other characters from the narrator's point of view. First part of the novel describes Nathaniel's teenage years while the second one constructs the past of various characters including Nathaniel from his own point of view as an adult. Alex Preston, in The Guardian, comments, "Michael Ondaatje is at the peak of his powers with the story of a man piecing together his troublesome adolescence". The story paves a way for Nathaniel's memories when his parents left him along with her sister, Rachel, under the care of two guardians Pilmico Darter and Walter, a taciturn personality dubbed as "The Moth" by them.

Nathaniel's traumatic memories born out of his estrangement not only from his London surroundings but also his parents particularly his mother and his caretakers during his teenage years after his

parents' supposed departure to Singapore. Nathaniel reflects on his young age how unaware he and his sister were about the personal histories of their parents: "They had rarely spoken to us about their lives. We were used to partial stories. Our father had been involved in the last stages of the earlier war, and I don't think he felt he really belonged to us." (Ondaatje, Warlight 8)

When Nathaniel's guardian Moth asks him about having a cat in his younger years, Nathaniel does not remember anything of it. Nathaniel is absolutely speechless by both the abrupt revelation of having had a cat, and the shock of not recalling anything of it. He never liked cats and he could not even imagine that he can have a cat as a pet. The Moth, as if, consoles him by saying: "One doesn't remember everything" (29). There are instances where Nathaniel clearly exposes the unreliability of his narrative when attempting to recall specific events: "I don't know. I don't know. What does a boy know?" (59), or later: "Where were we that night? Which house? What part of London? It could have been anywhere". (106) Nathaniel himself is aware that memories are not always trustworthy. His remark is quote worthy that it was "a time of true and false recollections" (11)

The trauma and panic faced by Nathaniel is implicit when he asks consecutive questions to Moth when the latter told him about his father's instability due to war. He tries to remember but finally accepts, "I don't know". (31) Stephen Porter writes, "According to one widespread perspective known as the traumatic memory argument, stressful and traumatic experiences lead to memory impairment because they are processed by cognitive mechanisms that render them difficult to retrieve as coherent verbal narratives." (Porter, 101)

Both the siblings, Nathaniel and Rachel, are very much shocked to find the trunk which their mother packed before leaving for Singapore as it was ample proof of her betrayal to her children. Rachel was very much depressed as she "had after all been the one to discover the trunk." She "appeared unconcerned", "looked exhausted", and talked neither to her brother nor to her caretaker. (Ondaatje, Warlight31) The Moth warned them for the hard time which was expected to come and tried to prepare them for it. They needed "to accept that nothing was safe anymore." " 'Schwer' ", he'd say, with his fingers gesturing the inverted commas" (32) Schwer meant for difficult time and both of them "got used to parroting the word back to each other – "schwer"(32)

Nathaniel was very much curious to know where his mother was and he could remember how his eyes went on rolling in the empty streets. His traumatic memories take him into his past. He asserts, "It was a time of war ghosts, the grey buildings unlit, even at night.... The city still felt wounded, uncertain of itself." (34) He dived so deep in his memories that he had to ask himself, "Everything had already happened. Hadn't it?" (34) Such visual flashbacks are scattered throughout the novel. At one occasion he "imagined a woman had joined in, someone I believed was my mother." He further narrates, "It was what I waited for, and somewhere during that I fell asleep." (36)

According to Freudian theory of *Nachträglichkeit*, original traumatic memories are revived when a person passes through sorrow of similar kind. After the death of Rose Williams, Nathaniel feels surprised that instead of feeling the loss at his mother's death he is rather suffering the trauma of prior loss i.e., when his mother left for Singapore to join her husband and both Nathaniel and Rachel had to live with caretakers. At that time both the siblings "had lost so much more." (187) Dr. Amrik Singh elucidates in this context, "The victims of trauma refresh their original wounds through the process of *Nachträglichkeit* which is often activated by a subsequent encounter." (Singh 49)

Nathaniel tries to reconstruct the life of her mother, Rose Williams, as he discovers unofficial, confidential documents in the Foreign Office. His job in the foreign office gives Nathaniel a chance to reflect his mother's past: "We knew only the stories of her radio broadcasts from the Bird's Nest [...] Perhaps there was now a chance of discovering that missing sequence in her life. (Ondaatje, Warlight131) Nathaniel wished to share his "discoveries" with his sister, Rachel but she was so much depressed that she "did not wish to go back to what was for her a dangerous and unreliable time." (147)

For Rachel, past memories are so traumatic that she suffered with seizure and as an outcome of it she had to go through fits that took time to recover. Nathaniel, very effectively, narrates not only her condition during the fits of seizure but describes her fear of a seizure too. She is so much disturbed

with her childhood memories that she “turned away from her mother” to such an extent that she hated her. As a result of trauma, “A seizure had been activated in her and she was probably never clear about the details of what had happened.” (147)

CONCLUSION

Nathaniel compares his life events with “an old film revived in a cinema” (277). Many of the memories revived throughout the novel are traumatic. While living in the house he used to share with his mother, Nathaniel feels the silence and invisibility that becomes a part of his later life too. He is not free from the feelings of isolation and anonymity even when he moves to his mother’s old house in The Saints, Suffolk. The Saints region, rather itself, reflects the constant theme of intricate memory: “The region was made up of a cluster of small villages, a few miles from one another. The roads between them were often unnamed, causing confusion to travellers, not helped by the fact that the villages were similarly named – St. John, St. Margaret, St. Cross” (136-7). As if the “sign less” region where Nathaniel moves to is a reflection of his own self and the unnamed lanes replicates his anonymity. His trauma is clearly indicated: “I think it was becoming clear that it was not just my mother’s past that had become buried and anonymous. I felt I too had disappeared. I had lost my youth”. (145)

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