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Politics of Memory in Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight*

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## Letter of Recommendation

It is my pleasure to certify that this dissertation entitled “Politics of Memory in Michael Ondaatje’s *Warlight*” was prepared by Bhumika Thapa under my guidance. She carried out this study from September 2021 to June 2023. I hereby recommend this dissertation for *viva voce*.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Politics of Memory in Michael Ondaatje’s *Warlight*”  
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## Abstract

*This thesis explores traumatic memories of an abandoned teenage boy during the World War II in Michael Ondaatje's Warlight. Nathaniel, the protagonist of this novel, represents the distressing life experience of Ondaatje. This study critically examines the politics of author's memory, which appears in the novel through the narratives of Nathaniel. As the survivor of the World War II, Ondaatje uses Nathaniel as his alter ego to deal with his traumatic experiences. Because the narrative or the memory of the survivor of the traumatic event is guided by the novelist's ideology, Warlight is mostly taken up by psychological observations that are clearly in the author's rather than the narrator's voice. While doing it, the researcher has incorporated the theoretical insights of 'working through' by Dominick LaCapra from the field of Trauma theory. This novel is characterized by death, loss, departure as well as lies that haunt him repeatedly at present, leading him to trauma. This enduring effects of trauma on the life of author, leads him to articulation. In order to get rid of the trauma, he engages himself in narrating his experiences through fictional character. In this regard, the temporal gap plays a significant role for narrating traumatic experiences of victim. This qualitative study claims that Warlight is actually the story of Ondaatje rather than Nathaniel. Ondaatje tries to release his atrocious experience with the help of temporal gaps.*

Key words: trauma, politics, memory, working through ,fictional character, Second World War

## Politics of Memory in Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight*

This study analyses the novel *Warlight* by Michael Ondaatje from the perspective of trauma theory. *Warlight* is memoir of a son, who has been abandoned by his parents. This thesis is the study of his memories and shows how some distant memories are shaped by politics of current time and place. It critically examines the hidden politics of author which appears in the novel along with temporal gaps. “In particular, as the memories of the Holocaust have been highlighted intensively internationally, it was considered that Holocaust memories were given a privileged status compared to other memories”. (Choi para.6-13) As the survivor of the World War II, Ondaatje uses Nathaniel as his alter ego to deal with his traumatic experiences. The narrative emphasizes on Nathaniel's review of his troubling past, including the abandonment by his parents after the end of World War II. Nathaniel's journey is narrated through flashback technique. His parents went away and left him under the care of two unknown men. Ondaatje reflects his own journey with the help of fictional character. Like Nathaniel, Ondaatje was also a survivor of World War II. Ondaatje, therefore, tries to release his traumatic memory along with temporal gaps and the use of Nathaniel as his alter ego.

In *Warlight*, Nathaniel's memory resembles the traumatic past life of Ondaatje and this past appears according to what is meaningful at his present time. The main politics of memory is to relate the traumatic past that is always similar to the present and leads a person into a traumatic situation once again. Ondaatje uses flashback technique to recall the traumatic memoir of past. In this novel, Nathaniel has undergone through different stages in his life since his teenage. Through this research,

I want to explore politics of author's memory and hidden meaning behind the act of memorizing the past in the text. In fact, *Warlight* is the real life experience of Ondaatje as reason almost seven decades later, he writes *Warlight* which depicting own suppressive traumatic experience of World War II. This novel captures the scenario of post-war, where many family members were separated and betrayed, Ondaatje was one of them who is the survivor of that time. Nathaniel is the other being of Ondaatje so that he wants to express his traumatic experience through other. As a result, it is the story of Ondaatje he compelling about abandonment, family and memory, following a young man's journey to discover the truth about his parents. Fundamentally, *Warlight* is the transition phase of Britain and how it moved from war to peace because that is a very interesting time for everyone. *Warlight* follows what comes afterward, remarkably Ondaatje writes this novel as a quest to discover his owns journey not for Nathaniel.

The title *Warlight* refers to a specific quality of muted light produced by blackouts and curfews during the war: especially that half-light in the last months of the war when the full blackout was replaced by a dim-out. *Warlight* presents a body of fragmented memories of its single narrator, Nathaniel, as well as several histories based on historic documents discovered by Nathaniel during his adult life. Traumatic memory is not always comprehensibly articulated and transmitted. The absence of words and fragments of the past capture certain emotions and sensations that result from horror, sadness, remorse, or a sense of irreparable loss. The former is concerned with Nathaniel's teenage years, while the latter focuses on the past through the eyes of an older Nathaniel, as well as the pasts of multiple other character- these histories are explicitly constructed by Nathaniel himself with memories. *Warlight*, has to explores the interest of author because Ondaatje had a horrified childhood, uncertain first from

his parents and then from his homeland, Sri Lanka. But he flourished as a writer in Canada, land of newcomers. Now, in his *Warlight*, he returns to the country lost to him more than 40 years ago. So that Ondaatje represents Nathaniel as archetypal character to deal his particular story in this novel. Thus, the untold stories, the silences, contaminate the survivors' daily lives.

Nathaniel's recollections begin in 1945, when his parents "went away," supposedly to Singapore, "and left [him and his sister] in the care of two men who may have been criminals" (*Warlight* 5). Nathaniel finds out that his mother actually never left for Singapore, and a numerous questions surrounding her activities arise. Part Two of the novel is narrated by Nathaniel, now in his twenties, who relates to the reader his attempts of discovering his mother's true identity as "a high-level spy who was involved in vague acts of espionage" (43) in Eastern Europe after World War II. He presents fragments from the past of his mother and a few of her colleagues based on files found during his work in the archives of the Foreign Office, having hence constructed narratives based on historical documents-much like real historiography.

The word 'trauma' comes from Greek word 'trauma' which means serious injury or shock to the body as a form of violence or an accident. The entomological meaning of trauma is related with emotional wound or shock that creates substantial, lasting damage often leading to neurosis. Furthermore the concept of trauma refers to the individual's loneliness, haunting memory and estrangement in relation to his own actions. In this regard, Cathy Caruth defines the trauma in her "Unclaimed Experience" as:

[...] trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled receptive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive



phenomena. The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is central and requiring image of trauma in our century. (181)

Caruth makes it clear that trauma involves the overwhelming experience associated with events of serious magnitude. “To be traumatized”, according to Caruth, “is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). Neither is trauma a distortion of reality nor is a way to reach the repressed or unconscious reality. Therefore, it is useless to lay emphasis on the real events or experiences in dealing with trauma. Rather than being a symptom of the unconscious, trauma “is a symptom of history” (5). Furthermore, Caruth remarks, “Through the notion of trauma, we can understand that a rethinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but as resituating it in an understanding, that is, of precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understating may not” (182). The credit for development of the trauma theory goes to Sigmund Freud who defines traumatic experiences as “any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break the [mind’s] protective shield” (607). Trauma was recognized quite earlier but was not acknowledged as trauma until 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association finally officially acknowledged it as “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD), which includes the symptoms of what had previously been called shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis and referred to responses to both human and natural catastrophes” (3)

In the novel Ondaatje successfully raises the issue of memory drawing upon the character Nathaniel, a mentally challenged man of England who happens to narrate his past life through remembering. He says, “The truth was, I missed that

remarkable full of strangers who had altered Rachel and me more than our disappeared parents” (*Warlight* 144). When his mother abandoned him, Nathaniel grew up with the care of stranger so it is mournful for him. Nathaniel own parents stay away with him, whereas unknown person care him and his sister properly. The story depicts protagonist’s journey from teenage to adulthood which is collapse with painful experience. Therefore, Nathaniel, throughout the novel re-invents his personal past with his memories and remembrances that remain highly influenced by the political situation of the time of England. In the novel, memory resembles the traumatic past life of Nathaniel that appears according to what is meaningful at his present time. The remembrances grips his intensely which politicizes on trauma memoir of the past. The main politics of memory is to relate to the traumatic past that is always similar to the present and leads a person into a traumatic situation once again. Nathaniel uses flashback techniques to recall the traumatic memoir of past. When the narrator meets his mother, he remembers his childhood which was full of traumatic experiences. The recollections of end of World War II and departure with his parents fill his mind that constantly haunts him.

Known as the narrator of real stories, Ondaatje’s earlier writings are also based on factual events. Essentially, he tries to discover the realistic life of character, Nathaniel is a few years older than Mynah, the narrator of Ondaatje’s last novel *The Cat’s Table* (2011), but the voice and quality of perception are familiar. Both books in turn look back to what remains, for me, Ondaatje’s masterpiece, the exquisite, semi-fictional memoir *Running in the Family* (1982), in which the author endeavors, through writing, to recover a childhood that has been lost to him. “It was a time of true and false recollections,” says Nathaniel, he is referring to the years immediately following World War II, a decade that occupies almost the entire book, his words

seem a fitting description for how the story of *Warlight* is told (*Warlight* 11). Here is yet another tale that dangles between history and fiction, truth and secrecy a condition that has come to be associated with Ondaatje's work; from the outset, we know we cannot trust what we read because memory has its blind spots, and even the characters whose stories we are reading can get their own story wrong. Above given lines highlight the subject matter of the novel which covers the aftermath situation of England.

*Warlight* is not essentially the expedition of Nathaniel rather that of Ondaatje so that he creates the fictional character who can reveal the traumatic experience of survivor. Michael Ondaatje has perceived trauma as personal rather political, as being a witnesses of World War II. LaCapra explains working through as the reengagement of life. It means, life has been destroyed by traumatic experiences but it can be recovered by articulating traumatic past in the public forum. He further writes 'working through' relive the pain and sufferings as he writes "in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying the those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past" (22). It means to say that sharing your personal pain and sufferings to the audience gives relief. One can go with the deep sufferings which overwhelmed the traumatic past but with the articulation in different forms give the power to survive.

Thus, one can clearly understand the reason behind writing *Warlight* afterward many decades. Ondaatje was nearly seventy years old, when he wrote *Warlight* undoubtedly he wants to reliefs his repressive experience in this novel. It justified that Ondaatje was brutally traumatized with World War II and it haunts him frequently in his life. Cathy Caruth, famaous for her ideas about trauma, in her

criticism focuses on the part of latency, the temporary delay. Caruth focusing on trauma opines that “we cannot experience traumatic events at the time of occurrence” (231). Hence, Ondaatje tries to get free from those traumatic memory discharges with Nathaniel. The traumatic memory of the past is reproduced in the novel on the basis of politics of memory.

This thesis tends to excavate the politics of memory inherent in the novel and claims that there is politics behind the use of memory. The memories have significance role to play in the human life. Memories are complicatedly associated to the life of human beings from which one cannot escape. Ondaatje is also known as the player of memory so that many text he wrote with the help of his past memories. We can see this selective use of memory in Nathaniel’s case. He was frightened and unsecured with his strange guardian while his parents disconnected: “No, we did not feel safe around him. It was clear he was just putting up with us and would have preferred we had remained at ‘Walters’s house’ which was how he referred to our parents’ home” (*Warlight* 48). Basically past memories leave people to the stage of nostalgia or trauma. This research assumes to work on how the Ondaatje’s past memories get incorporated in the mind of himself and become the source of trauma. With same idea it also tries to assure that the people who experiences traumatic events in their life can never escape from the past rather past experiences act as the source of mental unrest to them. What does an individual do to get rid of such trauma cause by the past experiences?

Among options, the act of narrating the past experiences can be taken as the act of getting rid of such trauma. Ondaatje also ruins with his childhood experience and he was haunted by his traumatic memory in present time. Through the explorations he wants to get rid with trauma that’s why he uses Nathaniel as his alter

ego. According to Kate Schick, “Acting out involves a compulsive and repetitive re-living of the trauma; individuals who act out have difficulty distinguishing between the past and the present and struggle with notion of future. They are haunted by their experience and trapped in the past that wounded them” (Schick 6). Thus, this thesis inclines towards the issues of memory, the trauma caused by memory and the process of getting through the trauma; the act of narrating the past experiences. Here, Ondaatje’s politics behind the use of memory and the act of narrating the memory turns towards getting relief with mental unrest caused by the past events.

Regarding his writing process, Ondaatje says. “I knew nothing more than that when I began the book. Even the post-WWII era came later. I sort of discovered that was the time. I wasn’t setting out to write a war novel or a postwar novel; that became the landscape” (*Warlight* 1). He adds, “I don’t really know the characters before the book is written- they’re not fully formed yet,” he explains, saying that he needs to “live with the possibilities of characters for a period of time” (1). In fact, Ondaatje further continues, “I really begin a book not knowing what it is going to be about, to be honest, though it sounds rather foolish, but that’s the way I’ve worked in the past” (1). These lines show that *Warlight* is the unplanned writing, he was not sure what to do write, even he cannot consider about post-World War era. Instead, his memory of traumatic past resorts to time travel and thus glides to future. However, he finally includes his painful experiences because Ondaatje was the witness of those times. Therefore, they try to pay more attention to memory. Maurice Halbwachs, in his write up “Social Frameworks of Memory,” claims that “past is not preserved, but is reconstructed on the basis of the present” (40). Furthermore Ondaatje says it usually takes him about five years to write a novel, and he handwrites most drafts. “I don’t really know the characters before the book is written, they’re not fully formed yet”

(4). It means that Nathaniel is the only representative character who carries the real story of Ondaatje, in where author dig out and explores his owns life experiences.

The study mainly concentrates on the backdrop of post war London, which foregrounds the issues such as horrific experience, psychological trauma that the survivors undergo. "Rachel's rough judgment of our mother would never abate.

Rachel closed the door on her. She went instead to another boarding school that she disliked in order to be away from her. She fiercely says, "I hate my mother"

(*Warlight*148). It focuses on the study of memory especially focusing on the

psychological effects of the traumatic, dark events. It also explores the relation

between literature and memory to explores that the characters in the novel are re-

invented the past traumatic memories and disturbance in relationship. To move

beyond seeing the history of memory as how the past is represented and instead

search for why certain pasts are accepted or rejected. Roberto Roccu and Sarah Salem

echo the same: "Every society sets up images of the past" (219). Additionally, the

politics of memory is not simply about political ideologies and their contestation but

rather about how memory is social and cultural.

Dominick LaCapra analyzes how an individual becomes the victim of trauma

due to the repetition of past events. He further states that individual finds themselves

in miserable condition due to the continuous haunts of past scene and when this past

scenes are recollected in present life also have impact in the future of an individual.

He states:

I would agree, or at least suggest that undesirability and unregulated

difference, threatening to disarticulations relations, confuse self and other, and

collapse all distinctions, including that between present and past, are related to

transference and prevail in trauma and in post-traumatic acting out in which

one is haunted or possessed by past and caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes. (21)

Thus, trauma is the outcome of past haunting memory in the mind of an individual. Thus historic memory and trauma are interrelated to each other. When one meditates on memory, it becomes the source of trauma. The concept of memory as the source of trauma and the act of narrating as the means getting rid from trauma caused by memories is the key theme of this thesis based on Ondaatje' novel *Warlight*. Mainly this thesis evokes the issues of memory and explores how memory is politicized by the traumatized individual who has become a victim of past memories. Regarding such nature of memory, BalBahadurThapa argues, "Actually, traumatic remembrance is not the real past experience. Trauma has nothing to do with the real experience or event. It is guided by a person's ideology" (Thapa 7). This study also shows how the memory is guided by the writer's ideology in this novel. It tries to show that human beings past memories are closely related to the life of the individual from which one cannot discharge rather it becomes the source of mental unrest to them. How do they actually manage the trauma then? It is through the process of narrating the trauma is released and is in the process of getting through. Thus, this research tends to incline towards the memories of the character and the politics of such memory on the character.

Therefore, the politics behind the use of memory in this novel lies in the fact that Ondaatje happens to go back to his past time again and again. It means he cannot escape from his experiences. These past event create mental unrest in him. Therefore, he is interested in narrating his past memories in order to get free through the trauma caused by past experiences. This is the hidden politics of Ondaatje uses of memory in this novel. As a survivor of World War Second, his childhood experience stock in his

memory as permanently narration of Nathaniel's reflect past memory of British children who were suffering from the post war trauma in London. Through the critical analysis of flashbacks technique of memory the traumatic events like abandoned by parents, identifying mother's absence expressed in the form of re-inventing the past through the help of memory.

This narrative experiment that text the availability of historical memory when one has only flickers. Overall plot of the novel assumes that remembering the traumatic, horrible past through the help of memory is a way for Nathaniel to process his emotion over his parent's departure. Nathaniel evokes that how to his family belongs with nicknames, mainly remember his mother who called them by nicknames: "We never surprised her. 'Come here, Stitch. Come here, Wren' she would murmur, her personal nicknames for us. I suspect that was the time Rachel and I felt we had a real mother" (*Warlight* 14). The memories of other characters including Nathaniel can be managed through transmitting them rather than repressing. Re-inventing the past in the form of memory becomes the healing process for the characters in the novel. Some forms of memory don't ignore the horror of what happened but rather using memory tried to promote change and challenge the political system that produced the violence of war. By recollecting his past traumatic experience Nathaniel somehow reconciles with his past that justifies that the title of the novel *Warlight*.

Memory is not only useful as a way of keeping the attention of the reader and varying the storyline, but also as a means of collecting the mood of the novel.

Memory is a very useful and interesting device when writing a story. It is difficult to even imagine a story without any memories, but making full use of the characteristics of memory can certainly enhance the quality of a story. The first person narrative and



Nathaniel's effort to reshape memories reveal the tension between individual consciousness and the historical circumstances. The dread from the past reappears because of his desire to forget the shame associated with the past events. Ondaatje's madness is subtly linked to the madness of Nathaniel.

*Warlight* is known as the story of mother and son. In the plotline of the novel, Nathaniel is more attached to his mother. What does Nathaniel frequently remember is mother in novel? Why he was close with her? Jenny Adkins claims, "Remembering is intensely political..." (54) Consequently it is the politics of author, Ondaatje who reinvents Nathaniel as his alter ego to deal with his traumatic past. He reflects "When you attempt a memoir, you need to be in an orphan state" (135). It shows that *Warlight* is Ondaatje's narrative rather than Nathaniel's for the reason that he tries to rejoin his horrific childhood experience with a fictional character. So the author discovers his own story in this novel, and there is hidden politics of Ondaatje in using flashback technique to observe his childhood. As a result, one can clearly hear the author's voice rather than the narrator's. Undoubtedly "trauma is not experienced at the time; it is belated" (Edkins 40). After long time, Ondaatje writes this novel based on his past experience because his traumatic memory haunts him in the present time.

Nathaniel forgets his father. He has a very few memorable interactions with his father as a young boy and never really knows him because Ondaatje was a quite young while his parents had divorced and he moved to London with his mother. Ondaatje leaves Ceylon for England and later Canada, he largely forgets his father. All the circumstances represent the Ondaatje childhood experience in *Warlight* through the help of a fictitious character. Since Nathaniel spends about 300 pages decoding events in his mother's life, it is disappointing that he seems to let go

of father's story. As being the abandoned child, Ondaatje uses Nathaniel as his alter ego to deal with his traumatic experience.

Memories is a dominant element in Ondaatje's storytelling style in *Warlight* and other works as the reader sees the novel develop from Nathaniel's British perspective in London to one that is more global. AarthiVadde argues, "The globalist sutures collective memory to the universal category of the human, while the locality brings it back into an enclosed narrative of the nation" (267). In Ondaatje's previous works, *Running in the Family* (1982) and *The Cat's Table* (2011), he relies on the memories of his young characters to tell their story, in both the past and the present, and uses similar types of memories in *Warlight*. Ondaatje's eccentric characters often include younger people interacting with adults who guide them from their teenage past to their future as adults, a collaboration which is found in *Warlight* as well. Nathaniel feels abandoned by his father and holds an angry bitterness towards his mother, as she lied about them going to Singapore, where his father would manage the Unilever operations there. These memories of his parents abandoning him as a teenager in London foreshadow an uncertain future for Nathaniel as he justifies his parents' decision by saying, "The arrangement appeared strange, but life still was haphazard and confusing during that period after the war, so what had been suggested did not feel unusual" (6).

The characters in the novel reveal traumatic memory of past. Though the novel's main protagonist do not seem to be injured by the bomb nevertheless, the aftermath of the incident runs through their lives. He says that "If my mother existed in this building, I would discover her" (147). After the abandoned by his parents, Nathaniel has been traumatized, mainly he remember his mother. He feels guilty and senses a massive loss in his life which triggers him to take some solace by gone

memories on Suffolk. With help of memory he tries to resolve his past life.

Nathaniel's past life brings out the traumatic memoir of England in the aftermath of WWII. "Departures of that kind were not unusual in wartime" (Leigh Anne Williams), Ondaatje says. But one of the children's guardians, a man they call the Moth, later admits to Nathaniel that his mother, Rose, didn't go to Singapore. Nathaniel's efforts to solve the mystery of where his mother has gone, as well as why she left, drive much of the novel.

The politics of memory appears in the novel when Nathaniel recollects past memory on the basis of present circumstances. His memory seems to be a collective public memory of British society that refers to widely shared perception of the past. It shapes the groups of people telling about themselves linking past, present and future in simplified narratives. It is what keeps the past or at least a highly selective image of it- alive in the present. In this regard Avishai Margalit clarifies the nature of memory and says, "Memory...is a knowledge from past. It is not necessarily knowledge about the past" (14). Therefore, the history of collective memory is unlike proper history. In the novel Nathaniel's memory is intimately linked with the concept of trauma. In examining the trauma, Mieke Bal highlights three types of individual memory which are habitual, narratives and traumatic and further observes:

Habitual memory is unreflective body memory carried through gestures and routine movements, and present in muscles, bodily marks or pains and expression. Narrative memory comes from individual's conception of the past, communicated through language and storytelling. Traumatic memory is marked by the failure to be able to contemplate the past in narrative form. Instead, traumatic experience painfully resists integration into coherent memory. (24)

Personal memory plays vital role to recollect the history which appears as the form of narrative.

Michael Ondaatje also follows the same techniques to project the painful memoir of England by using Nathaniel's personal experiences. Nathaniel's narratives are full of tragic events which appear in the fragmented form. Nathaniel reflects:

In 1945 our parents went away and left us in the care of two men who may have been criminals. We were living on a street in London called Rugigny Gardens, and one morning either our mother or our father suggested that after breakfast the family have a talk, and they told us that they would be leaving us and going to Singapore for a year. Not too long, they said, but it would not be a brief trip either. We would of course be well cared for in their absence. (5)

Ondaatje, here in the novel, attempts to explore the sorrowful past experience through the depiction of the Nathaniel. And the memories are truly selected as he narrates the people and events that are closely associated to him. He does not relate all the accounts at time but selects as per the situation relating it to the present context.

Nathaniel's narrative is dominated by postwar situation of London.

Nathaniel and his sister Rachel in teenage were living with his parents. It is 1945, the war has just ended, and the parents announce they are heading to Singapore, where the father will take a new position as head of marketing for Unilever Asia. The siblings are distressed at being left in the care of a very odd friend, who was introduced by his mother as guardian. They suffer from the fractured self and unstable identity. Everyone hides his/her identity or assumes another like Moth. Ondaatje frequently includes eccentric characters and younger people interacting with adults who guide them from their teenage past to their future as adults. Nathaniel reflects:

I was fourteen at the time, and Rachel nearly sixteen, and they told us we would be looked after in the holidays by a guardian as our mother called him. They referred to him as a colleague. We had already met him- we used to call him “The Moth” a name we had invented. Ours was a family with a habit for nicknames, which meant it was also a family of disguises. (6)

Nathaniel feels abandoned by his father and holds an angry resentment towards his mother, as she lied about them going to Singapore, where his father would manage the Unilever operations there. These memories of his parents abandoning him as a teenager saying, “The arrangement appeared strange, but life still was haphazard and confusing during that period after the war, so what had been suggested did not feel unusual” (6). In effect, this is the beginning of Nathaniel’s *bildungsroman*, which will be an extremely independent one where he will have to make many of his own decisions about his future as an adult. Nathaniel observes:

There were further hidden locations along the Thames where we paused to meet seagoing vessels that unloaded their surprising cargo, then walked the several animals that had hesitatingly disembarked, all of them attached to one long rope. Our involvement with these river activities had begun the afternoon The Darter overheard us talking about the approaching weekend. Casually, speaking as if Rachel and I were not in the room, he asked The Moth if we might happen to be free to help him out with something or other. (74)

Here, in this part Nathaniel while recalling about his memories along Thames with a Darter, how to he own self and his sister Rachel involved in those illegal activities.

He could only remember the striking moment of his life that has something meaningful in his life. Moth observes the following regarding Nathaniel’s past:

There is something I do want to say to you, Nathaniel.... When your mother left the Service, she did so eliminating every trail behind her for one reason only. It was so that no one could come after you and Rachel again. And there were guardian around you, always. I essentially began arriving at RuvignyGardens a couple of times a week to keep an eye on you. I was the one who brought your mother when she was briefly in England- to watch you dance at that club in Bromley so she might see you, from a distance at least. “She stayed away from the two of you because she was fearful you might be linked to her, they would use her to somehow strike at you. Turned out she was right. She was rarely in London, but she’s just been recalled. (155)

Nathaniel’s mother Rose is a spy in anxious need for a safe haven. Due to the antagonistic nature of her work, she has had to endure and escape many a violent encounter. Nathaniel’s observation of “a row of livid scars like those cut into the bark of a tree by some mechanical gardening tool- ending suddenly, as if innocently, in the rubber gloves she was wearing to protect her hands form dish soap” (*Warlight*129) serves as a reminder of one of such violent encounters. At a certain point, Rose’s Children and a few of the guardians she installed to protect them are attacked by “a group from Yugoslavia perhaps Italians” wanting “revenge” for the questionable actions she played a crucial role in (116-7). Arthur McCash is severely wounded during his attempts to protect Rose’s children, while The Moth does not survive the bloody encounter. Kate Schick makes the following observation regarding such a situation: “Psychological trauma and political humiliation brought into being a revenge-seeking political solipsism. As well as prompting ‘acting out’ behaviors, such as the pursuit of revenge, trauma can also prompt ‘acting in’ behaviors, such as political withdrawal” (Schick 1838). The attack demonstrates to be a crucial event in

the lives of the Williams, as it triggers major changes to the lives of each family member. In addition, the violence aimed against the Williams seems part of another characteristic of spy fiction. Michael Denning calls it “the experience of violence which is graphically described, [...] the intrusion of melodrama into ordinary life” (Denning 71). As Nathaniel reflects: “Someone covered my sister’s head and mine with coats so we were anonymous as we were led out onto the street. I could hear Rachel’s muffled crying as we were bundled into separate vans, to be delivered to separate destinations. Where were we going? Into another life” (118). Nathaniel’s sister Rachel is deeply affected by The Moth’s death, severing ties with her mother to the extent of not attending her funeral- and naming her eventual son Walter, after The Moth’s real name. As Nathaniel tells his mother: “Rachel hates you so much she will not even talk to me. Because I’m here with you she hates me too” (167).

In the novel, the narrator memorizes his past life as he recalls Moth’s death and regrets to this events. Memories reassemble the past events as people try to make link between past, present and the probable future. Memories of fear refract the world through a lens altered by fear and by physical and emotional pain. Traumatized people always try to escape from the traumatic past, they wish to forget their pain and suffering of the past as Rachel in this novel practices. Indeed, *Warlight* is a novel, in which a young man tries to understand his strange childhood. In the days following the World War II, Nathaniel and his sister are abandoned by their parents in their London home and left in the care of two devoted men. It’s story that traces the journey of a son attempting to understand war and his family’s involvement in it. Nathaniel’s narration of postwar England is dominated by the unreliability of memory. It is evident in the unexplained gaps and lapses.

Ondaatje's earlier deeds as in the *Skin of a Lion*, *Warlight* features a protagonist set on discovering the past of those around him because of his position as an outsider. Nathaniel finds himself alienated not from his London surrounding, but from his 'family,' that is, his parents particularly his mother and the "table of full of strangers" that took care of him during his teenage years after his parents' supposed departure to Singapore (*Warlight* 3). This obsession with the past is what drives both characters to search for historic evidence. Trauma is described as the response to an unexpected violent events that are not fully grasped when they occur, but return later in reoccurring flashback, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena. After several violent episodes bring Nathaniel's childhood to an abrupt end, he too becomes unable to let down his guard. And, Nathaniel has to declare that "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" (86). Ondaatje gives us another reminder of the long dark shadow cast by war. "Wars don't end," Nathaniel says, "They never remain in the past" (88).

In the novel, people are involved in illegal business, everyone has been out of recognition. Without guidance of parents, they are out of destinations, even rootlessness it all happened as an effect of post-war. There have the cycling of abandoned child by their parents, shows departure with family and involving in illegal work in post war time. There have no proper guidance by parents to their children, even they abandoned them and being irresponsible to themselves purposely or accidentally. Nathaniel says, "It's your damn relatives! Ignore them! Find out who can be a valuable father. It's important to disturb rare bloodlines with changelings" (89).



Ondaatje understands that his family's dissolution was the result of their mother's departure that is why he is trying to explore these incidents in this novel. In there, Rose Nathaniel mother's espionage work fractured his family. Nathaniel gets a job, for archives in the government office, there he attempts to trace the story of his mother's secret life in the hope that he may finally discover the truth about his own life. Rose abandoned is one of the traumatic events for Rachel which triggered her and presents her emotions in the following lines:

I said nothing about my new knowledge, except to telephone Rachel to tell her of my discoveries. But she had no desire to reenter our youth. Rachel in her own way had abandoned us, did not wish to go back to what was for her a dangerous and unreliable time. Rachel later would say nothing but "I hate my mother"! In any case, when The Darter had risen with her in his arms, and attempted to hand her over to my mother, my sister had begun to weep as if in close proximity to a demon. (147)

Above lines show Rachel's trauma. Regarding this Cathy Caruth says people who go through extremely traumatic experience often have certain symptoms and problem afterwards. Reaction to symptoms of trauma can be wide and varied and differ from person to person. Therefore, trauma is subjective phenomenon so events are not traumatic, they are only potentially traumatic. Rachel hates her mother and even cannot talk to about herself because she was afraid with her past life. A seizure had been activated in her which is happening during the kidnapping time. Conversation with her mother and about her mother is kind of recalls the traumatic past that makes the situation unclear and forces herself in to the deep sense of loss.

Postwar circumstance makes prolonged frightened to every characters in the novel. They are haunted by their experience and trapped in the past that wounded

them. The Moth is a hotel manager and classical music lover who slips away at odd hours of the day and plays Schumann's melancholia *Mein Herz ist schwer* late night. It means that my heart is heavy. The Moth is ruined along with his traumatic memory and therefore isolates himself with this emotional song. It happened because of anxiety and depression which hurts oneself and even others people. Acting out involves a compulsive and repetitive re-living of the trauma; individuals who act out have difficulty distinguishing between the past and the present and struggle with notions of future. The moth spends the nights listening to Schumann's *Mein Herz ist schwer* on their parents' gramophone, and tells Nathaniel and Rachel of Mahler's *schwer* as a kind of warning; they need to prepare for sudden emergence of the *schwer* in their lives, for "those times exist for all of us," and they must "accept that nothing was safe anymore" (32). *Schwer* is Moth's language for the postwar condition of instability, and his lesson instructs in Nathaniel a continuous awareness of possible danger. Trauma of past is still rushing in their mind everyone now and then which they cannot escape. Trauma of the loss lies at the heart of the characters. Loss is a solitary thing, most of the characters in the novel bear unpleasant past experience. Their repetitive shock of the past leads them to trauma. Their memory, in present, forces them towards the traumatic past since it is the politics of the memory.

These indications often relate to his memory, which is called into question numerous times, for example with regard to The Darter, one of Nathaniel's guardians in his teenage years:

Those who once mocked the traditions they fought against with laughter now only provide the laughter, not the mockery. Was this what I came to believe about The Darter the last time I saw him? After I had become an adult? I am

still not sure [...] [M]y memory of The Darter, which I admit may have become exaggerated over the years, was of a man around whom things got lost or fell to pieces. (169-70)

Here, Nathaniel admits his memory of The Darter to be uncertain, and his account of him possibly unreliable. This is by no means the only instance in which Nathaniel's memory proves faulty, as its shortcomings are also exposed on other occasions, as in the following example: "[S]uch a curious dream . . . I cannot remember now which one of us said that, which one of us murmured it into the arms of the other. I heard Arthur McCash stand up" (117). Already near the beginning of the novel, Nathaniel's memory has been established as unreliable.

When one of Nathaniel's guardians mentions Nathaniel having a cat in his younger years, Nathaniel does not remember does not remember anything about it. Responding to The Moth's question if he had a cat, Nathaniel says, "I was silent, out of politeness. I never had a cat. I don't like cats. 'I avoid them,' I said" (*Warlight*29). Then The Moth says, "Why is that, do you think?" (29). When Nathaniel is clearly dumbfounded by both the sudden revelation of having had a cat, and the shock of not remembering anything of it, The Moth's response serves as an overarching theme in *Warlight*: "One doesn't remember everything" (29). There are instances where Nathaniel clearly exposes the unreliability of his narrative when attempting to recall specific events.

Fragmented and recursive plot structure enforce narrator to recall the past without any sense and proper context that captures the novel in the form of unclaimed experiences of the narrator. In this context Nathaniel says, "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). In addition,

Nathaniel muses, “There’s no trustworthy recording of ages when seen through the eyes of youth” (102). Considering that the main part of *Warlight* is based on Nathaniel’s youth-time memories, Nathaniel’s comment undermines the reliability of the narrative. When Nathaniel buys the Suffolk house from MrsMalakite, she does not remember him despite the fact that her husband was a close friend of his. Even on a short term, memory cannot be trusted. Nathaniel says, “I returned a few days later and once again I could see she barely remembered me” (124). The fact that, while not remembering a man who visited her just a few days earlier, MrsMalakite does remember “where certain seeds of plants and vegetables were now buried” (124).

*Warlight*’s protagonist is certainly democratic; however, the novel, unlike previous English coming-of-age stories, features the imploding of the British Empire. This sheds a light on the political ideology of memory in the United Kingdom. It shows the post-war atmosphere of London as the British Empire begins to collapse. Although Nathaniel has a public-school education, once his parents abandon him to go overseas, he is left with two surrogate fathers and other cockney types who provide him with a lifetime of experiences and memories while entering manhood at an early age. Nathaniel as a parentless protagonist reinforces Ondaatje’s use of memories in *Warlight*. The painful feeling of the memories of abandonment by his parent’s leads to Nathaniel’s feeling somewhat lost in life.

Nathaniel’s mother, Rose work as spies for England, Nathaniel’s continuous conspiracy his mother’s identity remains misty. In the anonymous and hidden past of his mother he felt that he too has vanished, and his youth is lost too. Rose’s espionage works both during and after World War II and Marsh Felon, her shadowy associate from childhood remains as a mystery for Nathaniel. Though Rose herself discloses that her “sins are various” (225), Nathaniel struggles to decipher the truth until at

White Paint, in his mother's room, resting on her narrow sheetless bed, he remembers the story she told about the boy who lived on the roof of her family home. He steps into fragments of their story' and identifies Marsh Felon, his mother's mysterious friend, a 'thatcher, naturalist, an authority on battle sites' and the one whom he met on the day of his mother's funeral.

Dominick LaCapra analyzes the trauma theory as a way of living with the past. The people betrayed by the past have melancholic life. The people living in past memories are driven by unconscious desire to remain within trauma. LaCapra argues, "One's bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with the value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration of memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound. This situation may create more or less unconscious desire to remain within trauma" (23). Rose, mother of Nathaniel in *Warlight* displays an unexpected attachment for the house she had inherited. Even though she had signaled her wish for disinheritance and exile, years back when she separated herself from her parents and later from her children, it was the old house at white paint that she wanted to spend the rest of her life. Nathaniel further says, "I've always been comforted by the security of a walled garden, ever since my teens" (125). Nathaniel and Rose both are nostalgic with their countryside home.

The novel as it portrays world war scenes illustrates how construction and study of maps of geographical areas aided in keeping an eye on invasions. Rose and Felon are found engaged in creating detailed maps of places that belonged to their lists. Map was a tool of analysis and understanding of spaces. The spies of the war enter each street and as they leave they create a map of the street in their head. Nathaniel says, "She leaves the street of the small daggers and recovers the map in her head" (246). Nathaniel adds, "What was it that allowed us to be so seemingly

unconcerned about the absence of our parents? My father, whom we had seen board the Avro Tudor for Singapore, I'd barley known. But where was my mother?" (34).

Nathaniel has been concerned with his parents 'secret work. Father had works the Avro Tudor for Singapore, though mother was spy character who work for British secretive work. What the reason is memorizing mother by Nathaniel in the text.

As such, *Warlight* is presented as Nathaniel's memoir of his sudden discharge from childhood. But it is one written from the perspective of the protagonist as an old man, the novel's tragic conceit; Nathaniel cannot hold why his mother abandoned him or discover who she really was because his earliest memories are blurred at best, lending themselves to metafictional manipulation. Furthermore, Nathaniel discovers the The Moth with his covered face. He was also spies' character who seems to have various faces. His multiple identities can be observed in the passage below:

Let me admit there were times I thought The moth was dangerous. There was an unevenness to him. It was not that he was unkind to us, but he did not know, as a single man, how to speak the truth to children- and that is what it often felt like, The Moth breaking apart an order that should have existed safely in our house. You witness it when a child hears a joke that should be told only to an adult. This man we had thought of as being quiet and shy now seemed dangerous with secrets. (34)

Everyone wore the mask and reclined the people. Moth was also one of the spies. In the starting phase, while Nathaniel and Rachel met him, they found that Moth was as a being quiet and shy person. However, along with the time they discovered he was seemed dangerous with secrets. Ondaatje compares his writing method to archaeology. He says he finds the story as he researches and writes like an

archaeologist carefully brushing dust and grit from an artifact. On His work usually begin with a fragment or an image, which he uses to slowly uncover the story.

Nathaniel is an unreliable narrator in the sense that the story he tell, is not the story he wants or need to tell. The essence of his story is quite different from what lies on the surface. The self- deception lies in the fact that by not talking about Rose's murder, Nathaniel thinks that she has dealt with it that he gives the impressions he has dealt it. The story is also presented as a simple reflection on a short period long ago, but it carries deeper meaning due to its psychological relevance. The more Nathaniel reveals about the past, the more incongruities come to the surface, which leads the reader to question the reliability of this narrator:

So many unlabeled splinters in my memory. In my grandparents' bedroom, I had been shown formal pictures of my mother as a student but there was not one of my father. Even after her death, when I scurried around White paint to discover whatever clues I could find of her life and death, I came across no photographic evidence of him. All I knew was that the political maps of his era were vast and coastal and I would never know if he was close to us or had disappeared into one of those distances forever, a person who, as the line went, would live in many places and die everywhere. (180)

Memory can be about a forgotten past, strengthening a lost identity and it can develop a sense of nostalgia to legitimize a lost heritage. Different versions of the past are communicated to an individual through landscapes and emotions underlying it and there is sometimes a struggle to create or subvert the past. The affective ties between people and place may vary in its strength and expression but these bonds are primarily established as aesthetic and tactile, as Yi-FuTuan, in "Landscapes of Fear," writes, "More permanent and less easy to express are feelings that one has toward a

place because it is home, the locus of memories, and the means of gaining a living” (Tuan 93). It is difficult to express one’s feelings about one’s home. Nathaniel remembers:

In any case, a couple of years after Mr. Malakite died. I bought and moved into their small timbered house protected by that walled garden. It had been a long time since I’d visited it regularly, but almost immediately a past that felt completely erased began returning. And there was a hunger towards it I never had when days had slipped past me at the speed of a blink. (127)

Nathaniel’s narrative is dominated by nostalgic memory of his childhood in Suffolk countryside. Memories do have significant role in the human life as they are intricately related to the life of human being from which one cannot escape. Nathaniel is filled with the burden of his past life. Most of the characters are haunted by their traumatic past and trying to come out of it, but they can’t, even they wish to.

The protagonist of this novel is the most traumatized character, who repeatedly memorizes his past life. This novel represents memories and their particular characteristics. Memories are not complete, detailed copies of earlier events but fragmented and shadowy parts that come back to you of which it is sometime hard to say what is accurate or distorted. One cannot forget the experiences which have traumatic effects in their life. Rather these events repeatedly haunt them through memorizing. As result people are obliged to go back to their miserable past trauma and the people who traumatized are in relation to their past. In other words, people who experienced traumatic experiences have as they cannot escape from the repetitive past rather past becomes the source of mental unrest for them. At this point memories become the source of trauma.



Rose, mother of Nathaniel in *Warlight*, displays an unanticipated attachment for the house she had inherited. Even though she had foreshadowed her wish for disinheritance and exile, years back when she separated herself from her parents and later from her children, it was the old house at White point that she wanted to spend the rest of her life. She knew each minor incline of that house and memories of her childhood, her associate with marsh felon and her entire biography were engraved on those walls. Rose, the most anonymous person throughout the novel displays a strange affinity towards spaces. Wallace Stegner also echoes this sentiment: “I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from” (17). Rose, though with a confused identity, is certain about the spaces which she belonged to. Nathaniel says, “She [Rose] ought to have chosen a different landscape, she said . . . . But it was an old house. She knew each slight incline of hall, every stiff window casing, the noise of winds during different seasons. She could have walked blind folded through its rooms into the garden . . . . It was her biography since her birth, her biology. I think it drove her mad” (253).

The white house initiates a nostalgic and melancholic longing for a forgotten past in Rose that in turn generate conscious strategies of memorializing. She intellectually theorizes a landscape built around the strategies of contestation and resistance. It can be clearly traced from the narration of Nathaniel that separation and loss have become common in post-war time. The theme of loss is at heart of every character and it is the loss and absence which is making them traumatic. After being failure in getting the love in return from Agnes, death of his strange guardian The Moth made him grief stricken. This type of situation is followed with the death of his mother. Events repeatedly haunts him at present because he cannot avoid the past

traumatic events. Therefore the politics of memory is to bring the traumatic experience closer.

In this way, this study has tried to answer the question to what extent Ondaatje uses memory as a traumatic framework in which to deal with his own consequences from a post-war approach in his novel *Warlight*. Having outlined four key tenets of traumatic experience- loss, departure, solitude and lies- Ondaatje may have used these aspects to give voice to himself. Working through is taken to be a post-traumatic response of painful experiences of the past in which victim tries to detach themselves from the extremely overwhelming past experiences. Victims go through the process of articulation and expression of their past experiences in different ways and forms. For Ondaatje, the temporal gap is the key tool to reveal his traumatic past, because trauma is a response, sometime it became delayed. One can see how he is expressing his traumatic experiences in emotional way and the politics behind is that. Traumatic experience focuses on the lack of meaning and purpose in life and solitude of human trauma. This phenomenon makes it clear that traumatic impression does not have direct connection to reality at all. That is why the narrative or the memory of the survivor of the traumatic event is guided by her/his ideology.

This novel deals with traumatic experiences of Ondaatje through creating fictional world based on the personal experiences of Nathaniel. All of the characters in the *Warlight* are filled with the burden of their past life. Most of them are haunted by their traumatic past and trying to come out of it, but they cannot, even they wish too. Ondaatje relates himself to protagonist of this novel who is most traumatic character, his memories are not complete, detailed copies of earlier events but fragmented and blurry part that come back. In this way, Ondaatje is fully preoccupied with his effort to get himself released from haunting memory and solve the haunting

memory about his past life by *Warlight*. In this manner, he erases the traumatic past by using Nathaniel as his alter ego deals with his case in narrating way. Therefore, with this setting, the voice of the Ondaatje constructs historiography of victimized people, ignoring the real hurtful events.

The narrative captures the relationship between memory and trauma which presents psychological disorder of the character. Memory becomes problematic when it is reflected in the repetitive action and it has been transfer into trauma when one cannot go beyond the evil past. He scripted his memories in the form of narrative to heal himself from traumatic past with ‘working through’. He suffered from unimaginable torture in World War II and he wanted to cope with the suffering to make her future better. The whole novel is about the Nathaniel’s past life, traumatic consequences were acquired in order when he was abandoned by his parents. He was killed by secrecy rather than abandoned and he devotes his time to investigate about secret work of his mother, for example by this way it exposes the liar and post war activities of Britain. It make clear that unofficial war still remain in present time and this sort of environment influence many people.

Michael Ondaatje’s *Warlight* is the memory of past life of the characters on the surface level. However, Nathaniel, as an alter ego of Ondaatje, deals with novelist's own experiences. After all, this memory leads to the traumatic experience and thereby focuses upon loss, departure, solitude and guilt of the protagonist. Narrating the traumatic past life of the protagonist, Ondaatje tries to release his own traumatic experiences through protagonist’s reminiscences. Therefore, this research argues that the author’s politics of memory is to release his own traumatic past. Actually, traumatic remembrance is not the remembrance of the real past experience. Trauma has nothing to do with the real experience or event. It is guided by author’s ideology

for specific purpose- the release of Ondaatje's traumatic experience in the present case.

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