War Trauma in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*

V. Anandh,
PhD Research Scholar,
Department of English, Annamalai University.

Dr. G. Arputhavel Raja,
Assistant Professor,
Department of English, Annamalai University.

ABSTRACT

Philip Michael Ondaatje is a Canadian writer who won the Booker prize Award for *The English Patient* novel. The novel is based on the problems of the Second World War in Italy. The paper deals with the arrogance of war among the common people. It investigates the sufferings of different characters in the novel and how they overcome the problems of the war. Ondaatje exposes the dark side of Second World War through his characters in *The English Patient*. Throughout the novel, what is at matter is the quest for a rede?nition of the self: Hana, Kirpal Singh, Caravaggio, and Almasy were attempt to search their identity in the war time. They want to release themselves from the violence left over by the war. Every one in the villa want to live a peaceful life but the post war area where they stayed is filled with full of bombs and bloods. Thus, the novel problematizes the difficulties of human relations and the trauma faced in the war plot.

Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan born Canadian novelist, poet, author, screen play writer, and film maker. In 1962, Ondaatje moved to Canada frame his native because of the family problem. Doug Jones, one of his mentors, perceived Ondaatje’s ability and empowered him. His works generally have the particular subject of love, war, family, relocation and history. He was awarded with the Booker prize in 1992 for his novel *The English Patient*. His novels are investigating and testing non-specific structures which make him unique in relation to the other Sri Lankan writers. His books have the feeling of cosmopolitan and make him as the cosmopolitan writer in Canada.

Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Pierre Boulle’s *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, B. H. Liddell Hart's *Lawrence of Arabia*, Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and as of late Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* examine war and display how the politics behind in it. These war fictions uncover the misery of major characters that turn into the casualties, but it is not an account of the war, however, the miserable story of people trapped in war. War has been characterized from different points of view and from different circumsances. From Heraclitus, Pre-Socratic Greek scholars to Karl Von Clausewitz, a Persian military scholar are tend to at the same time in current and contemporary scholarly open deliberations about the war. They considered war as unsafe Id which originates from the brain of corrupt individuals. Srinivas Aravamudan in “Introduction: perpetual war” says that war is a universal human condition breeding the emergence of hierarchies, of status as such, and determining the masculinization of societies. Its pervasiveness transgresses societies and ages collocating with “the layered histories of the lives – and deaths – of individuals and collectives, states and sovereignties” (1505).

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* portrays not only the war encounter by the common people and also the soldiers in the battlefield. Such as Liam O Flaherty's short story "The Sniper" projects the sufferings of the Snipers in the war time, a Sniper shot an aggressor and later he comes to realize that he was none other than his own brother. Ondaatje includes the stunning dominance of war and its pictures in his novels, for example, Bombs, Military Weapons, Forensic Science, Demolished Buildings, Dead bodies, and Mining. The paper examines how Ondaatje’s characters viewed the consequences of war and how they were affected by the war. Ondaatje focused on the domineering outlooks, for example, brutality and death are unavoidable or interconnected to the war. The challenges faced by the common people in war influence them to misfortune everything and keep running towards their lives.

Michael Ondaatje in *The Globe and Mail* comments that the use of war theme in his fictions was started from the earlier writings as:
War from Homer to Richard III to the present, literature has based its imaginative stories on historical events. We read the epics and literary works to discover not the facts of the Trojan War... The English Patient is not a history lesson but an interpretation of human emotion-love, desire, betrayals in war and betrayals in peace... the histories of the War of the Roses or the Second World War written at the time and those written now and they still continue to be revise.(5)

The Second World War prompted drastic changes on social, political and cultural levels. It entailed unprecedented shifts in both private and public spheres through violent acts of invasion and genocide. During the war time, different countries used nuclear bombs through planes and in an exceedingly route by the mines. The English Patient centred on the issues, such as, the unclear mines in the villa, walk out of patients from hospitals, and searching new place to live in peace: Hana, Kirpal Singh, Almasy, and Caravaggio endeavour to free themselves from the results of war and want to live in a secured place. The four characters gathered in a villa represent a set of pairs to constitute the narrative structure of the novel: war and history, war and love, war and art.

Hana, a young nurse, seeing war is not a closure one, it continues after the completion of war. The unclear mines, absence of food and water in the war zones are the consequences of war. In this novel, a villa named San Girloma was a previous nunny later changed into an army hospital, demolished and exhausted by uncountable attacks during the war, condenses an unbiased region and a secure house for Hana, the Patient, Caravaggio, and Kip. Kip discovered mines within the villa, once he acknowledged, the villa was also an unsafe place for survival. The novel sets in the villa during the Second World War was over in central Italy. Hana gave treatment to the patients who were injured by the bomb blasts in the battlefield. A burned pilot was one among them got treatment by her and he was the last patient of that war. As a dedicated and sincere nurse she did restless service to save the life of several soldiers who were severely injured in the Battle of Arezzo and she was fainted on account of continuous work.

Later, she trims her hair without concerning the shape and length. This shows the image of dismissing the war. She does not want anything that connects to the transient. Thus she trims the hair and finds a way from every one of the passing and also the blood she had seen during the war. She indicated the effects of war in detail as:

It is still terrible out there. Dead cattle. Horses shot dead, half eaten. People hanging upside down from bridges. The last vices of war. Completely unsafe. The sappers haven’t gone in there yet to clear it. The Germans retreated burying and installing mines as they went. A terrible place for a hospital. The smell of the dead is the worst. We need a good snowfall to clean up this country. We need ravens. (23)

A burned pilot was found by the aborigines of the desert, then taken over by the German allies to the hospital. The pilot is aware of Tuscany and the Italian territory as well as the North African desert, and queries the presence of the Germans and also the Allies in the hospital. The pilot brings out the image of the enemies by anchoring himself in each present reality and a delineated past. The Bedouins are no longer the desert’s natives nomads however complicated figures, the carriers of a culture that is frozen in pre-dynastic times, before streams and rivers were replaced by sand mud. Geographical landmarks are replaced by cultural references that travel similar to the caravans toward the present:

So I knew their place before I crashed among them, knew when Alexander had traversed it in an earlier age, for this cause or that greed. I knew the customs of nomads besotted by silk or wells. One tribe dyed a whole valley floor, blackening it to increase convection and thereby the possibility of rainfall, and built high structures to pierce the belly of a cloud. (18)

His memories take the shape of the stories that he tells Hana. They are disrupted by his reflections and questions on the war: “What did most of us know of such parts of Africa? The armies of the Nile moved back and forth – a battlefield eight hundred miles deep into the desert. Whippet tanks, Blenheim medium-range bombers. Gladiator biplane fighters” (19). When the patient questions the reason why the Allies are in the desert, he reflects on the very idea of enemy: “But who was the enemy? Who were the allies of this place – the fertile lands of Cyrenaica, the salt marshes of El Agheila? All of Europe were fighting their wars in North Africa, in SidiRezegh, in Baguoh” (19). The word “enemy” has an ambiguous referent: the Nazis or the Allies. Europe moves its borders and implicitly its wars onto the desert areas apparently empty. The war turns in the desert into a battlefield where former scientific discoveries turn into dangerous weapons, while those who have them become potential enemies. It disrupts the idea of enemy, blurring the opposites and obscuring the targets one has to attain. Once the combatants withdraw, the desert is reclaimed by the Nomads, the caravans crossing the banks being its legitimate inhabitants.

The patient’s lost identity, rendered irretrievable by his burnt body, epitomizes the innumerable losses that may occur during wars, the fact that neither the colour of the skin nor the name may be reference points for understanding, judging or validating the other. Nonetheless, in a conversation with Caravaggio, Hana talks about him with profound respect and an attitude of devoted reverence: “He is a saint. A despairing saint. Are there such things? Our desire is to protect them” (45). The burned body of the patient reminds her dead father, thus suggesting another layer of identification. At the end of the war and after leaving the Villa, she states in a letter about the strange coincidence of his death:

And how was my father burned? He who could swerve like an eel, or like your canoe, as if charmed, from the real world. In his sweet and complicated innocence. He was the most unverbal of men, and I am always surprised women liked him. We tend to like a verbal man around us. (296)

Kirpal Singh, a Sikh enrolled in the British army as a sapper, has a crucial role in articulating the multiple stories the other characters have to put together in order to understand the complicated puzzle of war and its tremendous consequences on
their lives. Kip epitomizes the portrait of the colonized, the perfect servant in a foreign army, going through the inevitable hardships of war, being far from home, in a nomadic search for and fight against death.

Was it a sapper or was it a civilian? The smell of flower and herb along the road wall, the beginning stitch at his side. An accident or wrong choice? The sappers kept to themselves for the most part. They were an odd group as far as character went, somewhat like people who worked with jewels or stone, they had a hardness and clarity within them, their decisions frightening even to others in the same trade. Kip had recognized that quality among gem-cutters but never in himself, though he knew others saw it there. The sappers never became familiar with each other. (110)

He has also associate innate ability to penetrate reality intuitively and takes pleasure within the thoughtful observation of the Italian renaissance. In his case the experience of bomb disposal or a Bailey bridge erection is let alone associate uncommon experience of European culture. Except for rendering safe explosive devices, so rescuing human lives, and before falling in love with Hana, he falls in love with the illustration of a painted image in Hebrew tradition, the Queen of Sheba, in the Gothic church of Arezzo. Once, whereas making an attempt to disarm a bomb in a very river, he remembers Hana’s face as:

The texture of her skin. There was no comfort in this river except for his desire for her, which somehow kept him warm. He would pull the veil off her hair. He would put his right hand between her neck and olive blouse. He too was tired and sad, as the wise king and guilty queen he had seen in Arezzo two weeks earlier. (70)

In the end of the novel, Kirpal Singh, angered by the fall of the atom bomb, identifies the irreversible harm that injures a whole world, anticipating each it’s falling apart and also the starting of a brand new world order. What is at stake here is his definition of Englishness as a source of conflicts: “When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman... You all learned it from the English” (286). He lost his identity in an exceedingly world organized by the nation system of values looking out to redefine the landmarks he needs to follow:

He feels all the winds of the world have been sucked into Asia. He steps away from the many small bombs of his career towards a bomb of the size, it seems of a city, and so vast it lets the living witness the death of the population around them. He knows nothing about the weapon. (287).

The English Patient reflects upon the paradigm shift occurring within the colonial world after the Second World War. The war encapsulates an irony of history and contains a repetitive nature: “The last medieval war was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944. Fortress towns on great promontories which had been battled over since the eighth century had the armies of new kings flung carelessly against them” (69). Albert Memmi in The Colonizer and The Colonized says, “‘Histories and the printing presses’ leads them to regard themselves as ‘custodian[s] of the values of civilisation and history, [with the mission of] bringing light to the colonised’s ignominious darkness’” (74). Where Almasy stated this statements in his answers to the queries of an officer. Thus, war is associated with health, nutrition, history, administration, and culture nursing expertise that demystifies and revalue the past.

Works Cited