

The Conundrums of Family Reunification in *Divisadero* and *Warlight* by Michael Ondaatje

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Abstract: *Family is a feeling, an abode of growth. As anthropological beings, families shape the lives of individuals, a human being cannot be void of the lineage and roots one is born into. Whether we have a choice to be or not to be within the warmth of families, it is what makes the foundation of the society. Lifestyle changes and connections both virtually and in person has redefined the connotations of the term family. Family is the substratum for individuals of a society to grow upon. A space where differences, similarities and identities are reflected. Family groups is a private and separate dwelling, along with parameters and frameworks is fashioned. The whole way the familial groups work is quite unique in every level and experience. Each family has dissimilar ways to finagle situations and ways of life. In the whole process of metamorphosis within the groups, the end result may end in trauma within individuals of the familial groups. This paper highlights the theory of trauma within the novels - *Divisadero* and *Warlight* by Michael Ondaatje. It draws focus on how familial bonds can become dystopian spaces for biological, emotional and interpersonal perspectives of growth. This paper is a dependable example of conundrums that bloom within families.*

Keywords: Trauma theory, family, psychoanalytical conundrum

1. The Conundrums of Family Reunification in *Divisadero* and *Warlight* by Michael Ondaatje

Life is a celebration of the art called human life. Individuals are compartmentalised within the structures of familial bonds. Family is considered as a fundamental space for individuals to grow, along with imitations and unconscious character formation, harboured over one's lifetime. With the negations in every theme, family can also be a space for individuals where growth is crippled due to various conscious and unconscious actions. It is not always neurotic conflicts and inhibitions that push persons into trauma and hysteria. Beyond the warmth of the family and love that encompasses all, an undeniable truth lies, family serves as a base for regress and as a reason for trauma, conflicts and breakdowns.

Michael Ondaatje, A Srilankan born Canadian writer voices the characterization of persons in diverse situations. His novels reflect lives of people from every age group, they are placed in unnatural situations and positions in life. The novels have memories and layers of luminous pasts hovering over the characters within the play. As a writer, Ondaatje sketches the estuaries of life in a vivid and unique manner. Canadian literature is a conglomeration of brilliant minds, from Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Yann Martel, to Lawrence Hill, Rawi Hage, Emma Donoghue, Miriam Toews and more, excellence is disseminated in various levels, perspectives and depths.

Ondaatje entertains the minds of his readers with exceptional reflecting qualities and incredible thought processes. Along with the invisible thread of family and its ties, Ondaatje weaves stories in the pages, etched on topographic spaces. Familial bonds according to Ondaatje, is not just those bonded by blood, it includes all those who foster and stay as strong pillars to an individual's growth and experience.

Michael Ondaatje had presented his view on the story – *Warlight* through his interview with ABC Radio National Book Show, for which the transcript is available. He stated that he was noticing how robust this nuclear family is, although not related by blood or lineage, and how "they have to kind of deal with the rest of their lives with this one moment of trauma".

Along with the individuals dispersed from family in most of the novels, they get together in various spaces at various times for various reasons. Reunifications within the novels, have been portrayed as a liminal episode than a juncture for celebration. The familial gatherings are liminal spaces where many individuals silently despise the occasion, rather than accepting it as a chance of meeting one's kindred.

According to Leo Tolstoy "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Anna Karenina 3), the lines clearly portray the silent pains of families and how every family is different in innumerable perspectives and how conundrums are cleared in numerous and disparate ways. As Tolstoy states, Ondaatje has sketched every character with contrasting thought processes with layers of experiences embossed on their lives. With most of the families in the modern world dysfunctional and the rest in denial, it is normal to find families with issues pertaining to overall regress along with a long list of reasons on why certain relationships ended with no sense of meaning to it.

Happy families are more of a utopian idea, every family; every individual within the family works to find peace that is permanent than happiness that is temporary. Yet another reference can be cited from the words of Friedrich Nietzsche - "Madness", he wrote, "is rare in individuals, but in groups it is the norm." (Zaretsky), meaning to state that an individual is fine in one's space and that it is the family that pushes them and drives them crazy. In the modern world it is normal to force families into counselling sessions and therapies, when all it takes is to look back to ages where families where the therapy and counselling centres.

Spending time with family was a therapy than reflections and revisitations of traumatic episodes. The world in the recent times has embraced every activity geared up in a fast pace, including family bonding time as a part of the daily agenda than a natural act. Mostly because many individuals in the modern society have considered self - love as an act that lacks empathy towards fellow human beings.

Modern families have defined reunification as a time where the individuals of the family group will be gauged in value according to their level of achievement, level of obliging nature and their contribution towards following the set rules of the lineage. It has transformed the whole purpose of get - together, that those belonging to the family group in the recent times try to Bun burying in reunifying set ups and schedules.

Michael Ondaatje has mirrored the aversive attitude of the youngsters towards familial reunifications. In an article on Attachment disorders of children it is stated that

“Attachment disorders are conditions that can develop in young children who have issues establishing a deep emotional connection—known as the attachment bond—with their parent or primary caregiver”. Adding to that, “...types of attachment disorder are common in young children who have been traumatized, abused, bounced around in foster care, lived in orphanages, or separated from their primary caregiver after establishing a bond. These children may have difficulty relating to others and are often developmentally delayed. ” (“Attachment Disorders in Children: Causes, Symptoms, And Treatment - Helpline. Org”)

In the novel *Divisadero*, the main characters reflect attachment disorders with their father for similar reasons, the characters Anna and Coop, are carried away by the frail infatuations of teenage and they do not accept the silent strict and stern ways of Father. And according to these two characters, they find Father to be a man who lacks emotional bond with his children. The relationships reflect how Anna, the biological daughter and Coop, the adopted one, both feel aloof from familial bonds and ties. The very first chapter titled – Orphan highlights the differences in bond between the children of the family, a family that has no motherly guidance and one that is built on the silent conversations of the father.

In the commencing chapter, Coop’s biological family and their devastating death is set in a horrific situation, on how the little boy was adopted by the person who is referred to as father, who considers him as a helping hand than a son. “A father, his eleven - year - old daughters, and Coop the hired hand, a few years older than us. ” (*Divisadero* 8). These lines narrated in the voice of Claire reflects how Coop was trained to do duties in the farm and his knowledge was more focused on manual jobs than on knowledge of the aesthetics.

Coop can be identified as the stereotyped boy, who has no choice but toil for his family without a purpose, later in life, Coop turns out to become a reckless gambler who denies the invitation of returning home, even at his worst. This probably can be because he never found himself accustomed

to the idea of a family and the importance of familial reunifications ever since he was a young boy.

Paskett, McKenzie in the Undergraduate Honors from the Utah State University has submitted a project on "How Children Describe Negative Adoption Experiences" (2018). The limitations and negative adoption experiences is collectively presented. The following are the lines that are recorded within the research from one of the voices -

“The rejection and perceived inferiority category was created to contain the posts where someone rejected the adoptee resulting in hurt and trauma or when the adoptee felt like they were second rate to those who wanted or lived with their biological families”. Paskett, McKenzie, "How Children Describe Negative Adoption Experiences" (2018).

This study is similar to that of Coop’s life as portrayed in the novel. Claire on the other hand is a character that speaks for children who take extra efforts and take extreme measures in trying to hold the links of the family together. “She wanted to fold the two halves of her life like a map” (170), the two halves here signify the father who has grown old and the brother Coop who is way beyond the idea of himself as a non - orphan. It is quite difficult for adults to reaccept familial bonds both biological and fostered. Claire is personified as an obliging daughter who tries her best to bring back a broken family.

Anna, on the other hand, reflects those who abhor familial relationships as a result of ego, guilt and reckless actions. The teenagers often understand the stern ways of parents as an act of cutting down their wings of freedom. “Both shame and guilt have been described as dispositions or proneness that may influence individuals’ ethical behaviour. ” (Cohen et al., 2011). In the novel, it is an undeniable fact that Father and his way of expressing anger was pretty brutal, whereas, one must understand that any father would be enraged seeing the adopted son and biological daughter in an uncompromisable position, lost in the infatuations of teenage and understanding the sense of freedom as a licence to find pleasures in the most immoral ways. She finds her family through her research on the life of Lucien Segura. She finds comfort in the words of Rafael, whom she befriends in the new place, where she resides after her escape from the clasp of the father’s palm. She finds her space in a new land. This character reflects how, many living souls find strangers turn family, friends who become family, breaking the basic concepts and synonyms of family.

Layering over these characters of the novel, minor characters also have their share of defining family during war. The relationship between Lucien Segura and Maria - Neige is an example of families losing their need to long for each other and wait no matter what it takes. It projects how those in war long to be home and how those safe on land look out for better options to move on in life.

In the second novel, *Warlight* - a complex familial set up that clearly portrays the conundrums of familial reunions is reflected. This novel echoes the shadows of modern families. Commencing in a post war age, the parents of the central characters Nathaniel and Rachel, abandon their

children in the hands of strange men, due to over powering responsibilities and job profiles. Throughout the novel, the parents hide the truth and the protagonist i. e., Nathaniel is in constant search that is driven by his curiosity in finding the truth behind his parents' excuses and absence in their lives. Though Nathaniel finds the reasons and settles his personal queries and conundrums, the void within him is left unfed.

In a well - researched blog, it is stated that - "Teenage trauma is something that can be impactful to overall well - being and mental health into adulthood. During the adolescent years, teenage brains are going through extreme changes during the adolescent years, making emotional trauma a higher - level threat to mental health than for adults. " ("The Teenage Brain Is More Vulnerable to Emotional Trauma")

In the opening lines of the novel, "In 1945, our parents went away and left us in the care of two men who may have been criminals" (Warlight 5) reflect how the children are left in a state of fear and that makes the siblings look out for each other in fear and utmost strength. That kind of a torture is more than it can be handled. Over and over, the protagonist is hurt by the past and his relationships in the past. Teenage trauma is at its extreme when children in the phase of transition have to take up additional responsibilities and burdens of life on their parents' / caretaker's behalf. This can also lead to traumatic adults in the future.

In the perspective of parents in the modern families, parents try to convince their children that all their actions are for the good of the children. Whereas, every generation sorts out problems differently. Moreover, the children of the modern world, are tuned to questioning as a result of understanding that finding questions is a basic right and necessity. In the perspective of a parent, all the toil is for their children and that is one reason why choices on children's' growth is given more significance than personal growth.

Rachel finds her way out in spite of all the trauma and hardships she had faced in the past. She finds her home and channelizes her life as a gentle mother, cutting away the negative cycles of the past. She breaks the framed notions that broken families will never have children understand the value of families.

In this novel, the family is where parents value their profession than children, the kids are the ones taking the pressures and risks of their parents' profession. The guardians neglect to react to the requirements of the teens, their parental demanding leaves them in circumstances where they are compelled to adjust into the sudden shifts and spaces. Instead of direction, they offer requests and order them to accept ruinous changes. They end up being restless, sad, mentally withdrawn and furthermore show delinquency and silent rebelliousness.

Though, trauma is defined as a single person's hardships and experiences, in reality it is not so. "trauma is never simply one's own, " and that "we are implicated in each other's trauma" (Caruth 24). It is an inter - connected invisible thread that binds us all in the knots called stereotypes of the society. Though it appears that another living souls trauma is

not an issue to be focused and rectified upon, the fact is that it is connected, rather say that every individual would be affected by the same.

Family is fundamentally considered as people who are connected by relationship or love. It is additionally considered as a position of sustaining, development and an emotionally supportive network in a social point of view. With a wide scope of fundamental ideas of family, it is characterized and named in different ways in any event, when people have been developing with lifeless advancements. This paper addresses the dull impacts of uninvolved parenting and broken families that are a typical phenomenon of post conflict periods and modern life. Through the books of Ondaatje, the concept of how families should be a psychologically and emotionally supportive network to the relevant age of development is often repeated. This paper likewise features the manner in which the idea of family is developed through the two novels.

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