



Construction of Family in the Select Novels of Michael Ondaatje

DR. ASEDA FATIMA R

Assistant Professor & Head

Department of English

Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore.

Abstract

Family is considered as a basic group of individuals who are related by blood, ancestry, and by bond. It is a space where individuals find reasons to stay or leave in order to grow and find their individual qualities. To define a family cannot be constrained and narrowed. Family is like a sanctuary and it differs in layers for every individual. It can sometimes be a comfort or a discomfort. Similar to the substratum for organisms and plants to grow, family is considered as a space where individuals find their similarities, differences and identities. Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan born Canadian writer, poet, and renowned literary figure has giving life to lives and spaces through his works most importantly his novels. His works that include many novels, poems, memoirs that reflect human life in varied circumstances are set in war-torn landscapes or places pertaining to pre or post war period, this not only portrays vulnerable situations that human beings go through but also reflects the effects of war on lives especially families.

Michael Ondaatje has experienced quite a lot of familial bonds and familial situations. He has voiced out his views through characters and how they grow with familial relationships and how it helps them realise their own selves. This paper draws focus on how family and parenthood play its part in genetic, emotive, and interpersonal dimensions. The novels taken for study are *Divisadero* and *Warlight*.

Construction of Family in the Select Novels of Michael Ondaatje

Literature encompasses every detail within the array of life, it is ever-changing, assorted and dense in every sense, be it theoretical, practical or in any form of expression. This blue planet has seen that the homo sapiens species which is considered to be intelligent has been advancing over the years, this advancement is greatly and significantly been recorded by human beings in various forms. One of the prodigious forms of recording is called literature, it not only consists of recordings of life but also replicates the composite details of the human mind and its infinite perspectives.

Literature has found its estuaries of life all over the world in the most diverse of forms in every land and takes its name from lands named by man. Like every other land Canadian Literature has a unique past and has continued its uniqueness through various creators of art especially through stories. Canadian Literature is basically influenced by the English, French, Gaelic and most importantly immigrants from all over the world with multifaceted roots and ethnicity. Multiculturalism is an aspect that is celebrated as the maple leaves, syrup and hockey pucks of Canada. The writers who have laid the foundation of literature for this widely topographic land, have made a remarkable ripple through words through out the world, with a plethora of magical works. From Atwood, Munro, Martel, Ondaatje to Lawrence Hill, Rawi Hage, Emma Donoghue, Miriam Toews and more, Canadian literature is a masterpiece through bricolage art.

Canadian poets, writers and literary creators have been expanding the limitations of consciousness by laying them on imaginary lands and situations that reminds every reader about numerous utopian and dystopian lands and scenarios. It is a matter of awe to learn that this land has been a fertile ground for works that have left the world in surprise, by kindling every cell of emotion. Words and imagination are set free in the literature of this land, be it comforting or contradicting, it has something to show the world and continues to do so. With freedom to write and express, Canadian literature mirrors the richness of literature as an embodiment of liberal one.

Some of the writers who have stunned the world with their imagination, words and perspectives are Margaret Atwood, who stands as a personification of a master creator void of purple language, yet simple and clear with stories that can make us cringe as we live in places and lives set in her works, any writer would pray to fit every word in its apt space like she does. Alice Munro who is a charming person echoes strong

humanistic values in her works, and reminds us of all that has been happening around us and how we affect each other in spaces of our existence. With her stories set as a base with bridges of the past, present and future, she has always been a master in this very style. Yann Martel has created a fictional masterpiece through his work, *The Life of Pi*, which was later adapted as a film and was greatly acclaimed for the same, has given the world a glimpse of his enchanted inventiveness. Carol Shields, who was an acclaimed literary figure of the Canadian family, had created a lovely representation of lives and its shades through her novels, poems and other works. Rohinton Mistry has been considered as a daring writer who could portray the rawness of ethnic lives through the sharp falls of political blunders. He is nostalgic in nature by representing his roots and knowledge of land in a very bold and powerful style.

Many are such influential literary figures who belong to this land, one of the writers who uses the rawness of life is Michael Ondaatje. He has crafted stories that remind us something that every life will need like a journal to ponder and reflect through any situation and at any point of time in life. His stories hold characters from a little boy who looks up to the wonders of the world, to an old man and his reflections.

Michael Ondaatje is greatly acclaimed as a poet, novelist and as a creative genius, with stories that take form from his personal life and experiences, from what he has felt in every sense. He being a Sri Lankan born Canadian writer, poet, essayist, editor and filmmaker, has been recognised by several literary associations, and has garnered several acclaimed awards over the years. Ondaatje's works include memoirs, fiction, poetry and film.

Ondaatje's works have been researched on due to the richness of context and depth of perspectives. Many topics such as multiculturalism, postmodernism, cultural identities, thematic study and many other have been produced on the works of Ondaatje. This article focuses on the characterisation of families in the select novels of Ondaatje. Most of his characters have a voice of their familial experience at some point of the novel, it is set to the reader in order to learn about the differences of opinion on the conceptualisation of family.

Generally, family is considered as a space with individuals who are related by blood, relationships and by bond, it is believed that most of our actions are imitations of the circle around us, that we evolve physically, mentally and emotionally by the ones around us at every point of life. For some, it is considered as a sanctum bond that has been the source of their overall growth, for some it is a substratum of their own selves, more like the fire to the candle, and for many it is a bond that teaches them what to accept and what to deny.

Ondaatje has subtly used the importance of family and the significance of having someone during the happy and sad moments of one's life. In the novel, *Divisadero* and *Warlight*, the two novels focused on this paper, it is a clear depiction of how Ondaatje represents family and its construction, followed by the impact of the same on every character. This paper is a dependable example on the concept of family.

The novel *Divisadero*, depicts varied layers of family, rewriting the basic concepts of family and by defining it as those individuals who stay in your life and let you grow in spite of differences such as biological bond, foster care and family that one sets up as they form their own spaces. Michael Ondaatje had presented his view on this story through his interview with ABC Radio National Book Show, for which the transcript is available. He stated that he was discovering how sturdy 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".

In this story, the readers are introduced to a farm in Northern California, where a single father has his children both biological and adopted ones. Anna is the biological daughter, Coop and Claire are adopted by father. The father's parenting type is very uninvolved and as a parent he has his focus on his farm turning the children into workers in the farm, especially Coop, since he was a boy. The psychological perspective of the father can be easily understood by his nature and the bond that he shares with the kids, unlike stories where the father brings in warmth and joy with celebrations, this setting is sober and silent. The novel also depicts how every character considers the family to be. As the three grow up, they have their own distractions, as for Anna, she has a sensual connect with Coop and that leads to harsh incidents between the children and father, soon shattering the family.

After the family falls apart, each character finds their way and the father remains uninvolved. The novel details every character and their separate journeys yet how they are inter-connected through experiences. The story then moves to a place where Anna escapes to and finds her space which seems to be her home. She moves to a house where the poet Lucien Segura lived in France, whom she researches on. Meanwhile, Claire who considers family to be a go to for warmth, believes that she has the responsibility to bring back the broken family, she works for a law firm in San Francisco, she makes sure to visit her father on weekends. Coop turns out to be a professional gambler and spends his life in West Coast of the United States. The story then moves to the life of the French poet who has parallel situations with the previous part of the story.

This novel represents the fate of children who are born in unimaginable circumstances and how they are left on their own with a single parent whose lack of responsiveness give the children no person to look up to in time of their need. This novel signifies how a parent who is indifferent, neglectful and dismissive can be one of the main reasons for negative growth and behavioural patterns in children who later grow into troubled individuals.

On the other hand, a much complex situation of family is depicted in the novel *Warlight* by Ondaatje. This novel is an example of the negative shades of modern families. This novel commences in a post war set up where the parents of the central character Nathaniel and his sister Rachel are left under the care of their lodger who is named as the Moth, the teenagers who are left under the care of suspicious men, are confused on the reliability of the ones around them and aren't completely convinced of their parents' decision of leaving them in England and settling in Singapore.

The teenagers soon find these strange men to be family and also play a part in their lives and they also return favours to the two. Even as a year lapsed, the parents never returned, soon Nathaniel grows suspicious about the situation and feels like they are being followed to be attacked. Soon they are safe, though they lose many in the attack, they finally get to meet their mom who gets them separated and rehomed for safety reasons. Nathaniel as an adult is been recruited by the Foreign Office, it is also understood that his choice of career was also an aid to get him the details of his mother. His relationship with Rachel turns to be tense and understands that she has found home in her nuclear family.

Nathaniel is seen as a character who embraces his solitude, in spite of learning about his parents' secretive past, he accepts every other character and the situation they are in and leaves them undisturbed.

In this novel, the family set up is where the parents are focused on their profession, the children in turn are the ones affected by the dangers of their profession. The parents fail to respond to the needs of the teenagers, their parental demandingness leaves them in situations where they are forced to adapt into the swift spaces. In stead of guidance they offer demands and command them to embrace destructive changes. They turn out to be anxious, hopeless, emotionally withdrawn and also display more delinquency.

Family is basically considered as a group of individuals who are related by consanguinity or affinity. It is also considered as a place of nurturing, growth and support system in a social perspective. With a wide range of basic concepts of family, it is defined and termed in various ways even when humans have been evolving with technological advancements. This paper represents the dark effects of uninvolved parenting and broken families that are a common phenomenon of post war periods and modern life. Through the novels of Ondaatje, the idea of how families need to be a pillar and support system to the generation of growth is echoed. This paper also highlights the way the concept of family is constructed through the two novels.

Works Cited

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