

War-time Autonomy: An Analysis of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

Michael Ondaatje's text, *The English Patient*, takes place in Italy in 1945 following the German retreat from the Italian countryside in World War II. This story focuses on four main characters, a young Canadian nurse Hana, her care for a burned man she calls the English patient, her old family friend Carravaggio, and a Sikh sapper, Kip, assigned to disarm the surrounding area from unexploded bombs. Through each of these characters' recollections of the events of the war and their own reflection on these events, Ondaatje illuminates the complicated, racialized nature of war and the damaging effects of war on its individual participants. In this essay, I will theorize about the autonomy of those acting within war-time circumstance through an analysis of Ondaatje's text, *The English Patient*. Looking to Elaine Scarry's text, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, her theorization regarding physical suffering in relation to war will provide the theoretical foundation of this essay. Scarry highlights the emphasis on reductive language in wartime rhetoric, shifting societal conception of wartime actions from individual to collective – making it easier to justify the individual devastations of war. Ondaatje's text counteracts wartime rhetoric's emphasis on collective action through descriptions of the individuals acting within the war which personalize the otherwise collective social narrative. Through descriptions of Hana as a nurse and the coping mechanisms she develops as a result of this position, Ondaatje's text emphasizes the futility of nursing during the war – highlighting the manner in which Hana is reduced to her gender rather than performing the role of a caretaker – ultimately marking Hana's wartime trauma unnecessary. Through descriptions of Kip as a sapper during the war, Ondaatje's text demonstrates the racism inherent in wartime actions through Kip's experiences, and the manner in which he is reduced to his skin colour.

Elaine Scarry's text, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, analyses and deconstructs physical suffering in relation to a number of different cultural contexts. Looking specifically to her theorization regarding physical suffering in relation to war, Scarry highlights the mechanisms through which wartime actions are societally justified through reductive language and an emphasis on collective over individual action. Focusing on language, Scarry writes, "the language of killing and injuring ceases to be a morally resonant one..." (67). This lack of moral resonance is produced through the reductive nature through which wartime actions are described, for example, through phrases such as, "producing results," "collateral effects," and "massive injury" (67). Language is considered equally as important as soldiers in war consider each other, as Scarry highlights, stating, "By describing the goal or purpose of war as "to disarm" and the method of this disarming as "injuring," we are then placing the injury as the subordinate activity. Injury then becomes an accidental effect of this disarming, rather than the main purpose, thus rendering the pain of the individual body in war "invisible"" (69). Reductive language is carefully utilized by wartime rhetoric in order to erase the individual implications of actions during wartime. Furthermore, as physical suffering is societally justified through a shift to a conception of wartime actions as collective rather than individual, the moral implications of war, "may be perceived as inevitable and perhaps even "necessary"" (67). The justification of physical suffering caused by war as "inevitable" or "necessary" ultimately diminishes the individual suffering of wartime actions – a diminishment which, I would argue, Ondaatje's novel works to reverse.

Through descriptions of Hana's experience in the war, Ondaatje uplifts the individual narrative of wartime trauma; though collective social narratives would deem the role of the nurse essential to the aid of wartime actions, thus the trauma of nurses as "necessary" (67), Hana's

narrative highlights the lack of justification for her role in the war. In describing her role as a nurse, Hana states, “Who the hell were we to be given this responsibility, expected to be wise as old priests, to know how to lead people towards something no one wanted and somehow make them feel comfortable” (Ondaatje 84). Through questioning, “Who the hell were we to be given this responsibility,” Hana highlights the lack of preparation she received to accurately execute her role. Furthermore, through comparing her role as a nurse to “wise [...] old priests,” Hana highlights the lack of nursing actually carried out in her job; although assuming the role of nurse during wartime would imply her job to be helping injured soldiers to heal, the comparison of her role to that of a priest emphasizes the impossibility of healing, and thus, the impossibility of Hana accurately executing her role. By emphasizing her lack of preparation and the impossibility of nursing during wartime, Hana highlights the futility of her role as a nurse, ultimately deeming this role and the trauma she encounters in this role unnecessary – counter to collective social narratives surrounding war.

The futility of her role as a nurse is further exemplified through the manner in which Hana is reduced to her gender through encounters with patients. On the manner in which she dealt with the trauma she experienced as a nurse, Hana emphasizes the manner in which she was reduced to her gender: “I was sick of the hunger. Or just being lusted at. So I stepped away, from the dates, the jeep rides, the courtship. The last dances before they died—I was considered a snob. I worked harder than others. Double shifts, under fire, did anything for them, emptied every bedpan” (85). Rather than aiding in the healing of soldiers, this quotation emphasizes her position as a nurse as inherently depended on her female identity – therefore, something to be “lusted at” by soldiers to help them cope with their trauma. Moreover, when Hana attempts to remove herself from the reduction to her gender by focusing primarily on executing her role as a

nurse, “[she] was considered a snob.” Although she goes above and beyond in nursing “work[ing] harder than others,” and “[doing] anything for them,” Hana is judged by her peers and patients for attempting to distance herself from the focus on her female identity. Therefore, as Hana’s immense work as a nurse is overlooked due to her lack of identification with being overtly sexualized by her patients, this dynamic exposes the futility in her position as a nurse due to the prioritization of and reduction to her gender holding more importance than the aid she performs.

As a result of the trauma of experiencing death so closely and in such a futile manner, Hana develops the coping mechanism of distancing herself from other human beings to maneuver her trauma. On this topic, the text reads, “Throughout the war, with all of her worst patients, she survived by keeping a coldness hidden in her role as nurse. I will survive this. I won’t fall apart” (48). By treating her patients with “coldness,” Hana denies herself the opportunity to create emotional connections with her patients as an attempt to “survive” the trauma these connections bring following the death of her patients. However, this coldness extends to Hana’s conception of herself and her peers – her coping mechanism of distance forcing her to have a lack of human connection entirely. On her relationship with herself, the novel reads, “She grew harsh with herself [...] Reason was the only thing that might save them, and there was no reason” (50). This quotation demonstrates Hana’s internalization of the lack of “reason” behind the violence of war, and therefore, the futility of her nursing; the internalization of this futility forces Hana to ultimately blame herself – being “harsh with herself.” On the relationship with her peers, the novel reads, “Even among those she worked closely with she hardly talked during the war” (85). The internalization of the violence she witnesses in the war forces Hana to deny all human connection in her attempt to “survive” (48) the war. However,

this unhealthy coping mechanism resulting from the wartime trauma she experiences leads to Hana's lack an understanding of human connection entirely.

Upon hearing about the death of her father and experiencing a miscarriage, Hana reverses her lack of human connection, developing an overtly unhealthy attachment to the English patient. When Carravaggio enters the text, he continually notes that Hana "has chained herself to the dying man upstairs" (40). The description as having "chained herself" to the English patient demonstrates her lack of agency in her care for the patient. Following Carravaggio questioning Hana's care for the English patient, Hana states, "'He is a saint. I think. A despairing saint. Are there such things? Our desire is to protect them'" (45). By likening the identity of the English patient to a saint, Hana ultimately marks his existence as beyond earthly conception – demonstrating the unhealthy nature of her attachment to the English patient. Hana's unhealthy attachment to the English patient as well as her lack of agency in his caretaking is explicated through Hana's description of her conception of the English patient. On this topic, Hana states, "There was something about him she wanted to learn, grow into, and hide in, where she could turn away from being an adult" (52). In their patient to caretaker relationship, Hana's lack of agency is seen through her conception of the English patient as something she could "hide in" rather than someone to care for. Hana alters the role of the patient in her relationship with the English patient, denying typical patient to caretaker power dynamics through "turn[ing] away from being an adult" and allowing her patient to assume the "adult" role; Hana is the one who requires care, a fact the English patient observes, stating he "knew she was more patient than nurse" (94-95). Hana's lack of agency in her relational dynamic with the English patient, and her unhealthy attachment to him, are a direct result of the trauma she has experienced in the war. Through representing the futility of her nursing position, the reduction to her gender, and the

unhealthy coping mechanisms Hana develops to deal with the wartime trauma she experiences, Ondaatje depicts the individual devastations of war as a counternarrative to collective social justification of wartime trauma.

Through Ondaatje's representation of Kip as a Sikh sapper for the English during the war, he emphasizes the manner in which the reductive language used in wartime rhetoric is utilized to reduce human life to instruments of war – denying the individual humanity war's participants. As Kip is a sapper in the war, an individual trained to disarm bombs, his wartime experience constantly places him in the face of danger. In a situation in which Kip must disarm a massive bomb which proves to be an intense puzzle, Kip reflects on the situation, stating, "I wasn't even frightened down there. I was just angry—with my mistake" (216). Due to the constant presence of danger in his wartime role, Kip has become desensitized to the violence he experiences. His desensitization is highlighted through his lack of fear in the face of this bomb, stating "I wasn't even frightened"; through focusing on the puzzling nature of this bomb, Kip reflects on his anger "with [his] mistake," demonstrating the lack of space for Kip to be imperfect, and therefore, human, in navigating his wartime experiences. Kip's dehumanization is further emphasized through the reductive treatment he experiences in wartime – likening his body to an instrument of war. Reflecting on his acceptance of the position of sapper, Kip states "“There is always yellow chalk scribbled on the side of bombs. [...] Just as there was yellow chalk scribbled onto our bodies when we lined up in the Lahore courtyard. [...] Those accepted filled up the courtyard. The coded results written onto our skin with yellow chalk”" (199-200). Scarry identifies the reductive language of war as fueling a lack of moral resonance with the violent actions of war; through Kip being "written [on] with yellow chalk" just as bombs are, his physical body is reduced to an instrument of war. In reducing Kip's body to an instrument of

war, his position as a sapper and the violence encountered in this position lacks a moral resonance as he has been reduced to a dehumanized state. Kip's dehumanization through his position in the war demonstrates the dangers of reductive language in wartime rhetoric – fueling reductive actions of dehumanization.

The reductive manner in which Kip is treated also highlights the intrinsic racism in wartime actions – racism which has damaging effects on Kip's humanity. Throughout his experience in the war, Kip highlights a number of occasions in which he experiences racism – the first occurring in his initial application to become a sapper: “He sensed he would be admitted easily if it were not for his race. He had come from a country where mathematics and mechanics were natural traits” (188). Though Kip excels in the skills required to become a sapper due to the fact that “mathematics and mechanics were natural traits” in his country, this positive attribute of his country is used against him – “his race” providing greater difficulty obtaining a position within which he would otherwise excel. Moreover, Kip reflects on the individual racism he experiences as a result of the physical symbol of his culture he wears: a turban. When applying for the sapper position, Kip reflects on the woman at the front desk and the dirty looks she gives him, stating, “She had probably never seen a turban before. The English! They expect you to fight for them but won't talk to you” (188). This quotation highlights the hypocrisy of his position in the war; though he is fighting in the war on behalf of England, he is reduced to his race marking his sacrifice for the English as obsolete in their eyes. Ultimately, within the structure of nationalism and its deep ties to wartime action, Kip's reduction to his race in the eyes of the English is a further reflection of his ultimate dehumanization within the war.

Through representing Kip's individual interactions with racism in wartime, Ondaatje highlights racism many people of colour likely experienced during this time period; however,

through the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the war, Ondaatje demonstrates how individual wartime contributions like Kip's, were ultimately erased due to the intrinsic racialized motivations for wartime actions. In a conversation with Hana and Kip, Carravaggio highlights the manner in which Kip's individual contributions will be erased from future wartime narratives, "Kip will probably get blown up one of these days. Why? For whose sake? He's twenty-six years old. The British army teaches him the skills and the Americans teach him further skills and the team of sappers are given lectures, are decorated and sent off into the rich hills. You are being used, boyo" (121). In this quotation, Carravaggio highlights the manner in which the "British army" and then "Americans" teach the sappers skills so that the actions of the sappers are seen as a product of these white nations – despite the individual people of colour who assume the roles of sappers. Through questioning "For whose sake?" Kip might die, as well as by stating "You are being used, boyo," Carravaggio highlights the injustice in the sacrifice Kip is making for a country that will not value his contribution – rendering Kip's individual contribution to the war "invisible" (Scarry 69) as a result of his race. The lack of value in Kip's contribution is ultimately reinforced through the bombing of the Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Following this bombing and Kip's outrage in response to the bombing, Carravaggio agrees with Kip's outrage, the novel stating, "He knows the young soldier is right. They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation" (Ondaatje 286). The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marks America's ultimate devaluation and dehumanization of people of colour as this bombing "would never have [... occurred] on a white nation" – marking the lives of those who died as a result of this bombing worthless.

Ondaatje's novel, *The English Patient* is a historical fiction depicting the experiences of individuals during World War II. Scarry's research emphasizes the reductive language and

collective action war narratives utilized to create societal moral justification for the violent actions of war in war rhetoric; however, counter to this collective and ultimately dehumanizing war rhetoric, Ondaatje's text arises, uplifting the individual experiences of those acting within wartime in his depiction. Through representing Hana's experience as a nurse, Ondaatje counteracts the collective war narrative deeming war trauma "necessary" (Scarry 67) by emphasizing the futility of the role of the nurse in both function and in its connection to gender – thus, the trauma imposed on Hana is deemed unnecessary. As well, through demonstrating the coping mechanisms Hana develops in response to her trauma, Ondaatje emphasizes the consequences of the individual devastations of war – forcing the reader to conceptualize the literal effects of war trauma on individuals. Moreover, through depictions of Kip's experience in the war as a sapper, just as reductive language utilized in wartime rhetoric places the individual "injur[ies]" of war as subordinate to the "purpose of war" (69), Kip is dehumanized through reductive war rhetoric – reducing him to an instrument of war. Kip's dehumanization is further exemplified through the racialized nature of war, in which, his individual contributions to the war on behalf of white nations are erased – deeming his resulting trauma "invisible" (69) as a person of colour. Ultimately, through fictional depictions of individual wartime devastations, in particular through his representations of Hana and Kip, Ondaatje emphasizes the realities of war trauma and the dangerously reductive nature of war rhetoric.

Works Cited

Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1985.