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THE MAKING OF A HEROINE: A FEMALE
CHARACTER AS PORTRAYED IN *THE ENGLISH
PATIENT* BY MICHAEL ONDAATJE

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how women have significant abilities to cope with the difficulties of war times. They are not the weak and vulnerable victims who are thought to be. On the contrary, they have the power to control over many-sided fronts, like participating in the battlefield as nurses or activists for peace, or even fighters, as well as through the tasks and responsibilities assigned to them to protect and support their families during wartime. The researcher will examine the impact of war upon women. Like men, women suffer during wartime. They are being injured, tortured and killed. Yet, they are able to give examples of love and courage even in the difficult times of war. Hana is one of those women who lived during wartimes, she is supposed to have a beautiful life at the age of twenty one, but she finds herself in Italy taking care of the English Patient leaving all the chances of happy life behind to dedicate herself for becoming a nurse. Michael Ondaatje in his novel *The English Patient* (1992) has chosen the medical field for Hana for it is an important step in healing and treating the mentality before the body. *The English Patient* shows the life of women though wartime and it succeeds in depicting how Hana insists on living strongly.

Keywords: *The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje, Hana, War, Women

The role of women have changed dramatically because of wars. All societies approve a great need for this change; women are able to support, to work and even to serve in the military field. Women strongly embrace their new roles and responsibilities and contribute to build a successful society. They work in all fields like farms and factories; they build, and drive without forgetting their jobs as the center of the house. They prove having the strength, skills and abilities to live in hard times. They are able to cope with wartime deficiencies, by becoming experts at doing more with less; they make the clothes for the family, and plant the gardens to supply for the food ("Veterans Affairs Canada | Anciens Combattants Canada", 2022).

Women are affected physically and morally by the chaos of war; they lose their dear ones, they are being injured, tortured, imprisoned, raped or even killed. However, these severe experiences will not stop women from being great mothers, wives, sisters or daughters. In fact, they become the best to identify the weaknesses of war and to tell how to overcome them. Hana is one of those women who live during wartimes. She is supposed to have a beautiful life at the age of twenty, but she leaves all the chances of a happy life behind and involves herself in war by becoming a nurse in *The English Patient* (1992) by Michael Ondaatje.

After the end of World War II and in a remote Italian villa, once an army hospital, Hana who is a young Canadian nurse continues to give aid to her final patient (Almasy), a pilot whose plane had crashed in the Libyan Desert, she knows nothing about him but calls him the English patient due to his accent. The place is unsafe for after the German retreat, they left many hidden bombs all around. All people left for a safer place except Hana who feels attached to her patient. To the villa come Caravaggio, a thief from Toronto and Kip, a young Sikh soldier in the British Army, a sapper whose business is to defuse bombs. As the ordered fragments of the novel accumulate their pasts, their present, and their possible futures intertwine in an intricate collage that can best be described as labyrinthine (Barbour, 1993, p. 207).

Hana has endured the great trauma of the Second World War, she is forced to grow up quickly, when she was eighteen; the milieu of the war have obliged her to be a nurse. Only three days of caring for dying soldiers without sleep lead her to cut off her hair, “[cutting] her hair, not concerned with shape or length, just cutting it away” (Ondaatje, 1993, p.49) she rejects the hair that distinguishes her as female. She acquires confidence out of experience, thus she has changed physically “her face became tougher and leaner ... She was thin, mostly from

tiredness” (50). Hana has had so much experience with the death of those unknown and those that she has loved that she has been deeply and traumatically affected. She has lost her father, and lost her lover (the father of her unborn child), he was a soldier, who died in the battlefield, she has also watched her friend Jan hit a land mine and died in the explosion.

At the beginning she thinks that she is too weak to face her trauma, so she tries to escape; she has had a nervous breakdown and a deep depression lead her to lose herself, her innocence, and her youth. Hana has aborted her child, thinking that she will not be able to care of her son alone: “I lost the child. I mean I had to lose it. The father was already dead. There was a war”(82). Trying to escape leads Hana to a process of shaping her real mature character. In *Trauma and Survival*, Elizabeth Waites states: “individuals who repeatedly experience alterations in self-experience, for example, sometimes [they] begin constructing their identity over and over until the pattern of their life resembles a patchwork mosaic” (Waites, 1993, p. 21).

Alone with her patient, Hana inhabits the villa which was an army retreat. She decides to go on a process of healing, growing and then rebuilding. She rejects

the fear because she has “seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to [her]” (Fraser, 2016). Hana confronts herself with the devastating loss of her father, who dies in the war. Therefore, she decides to commit herself toward her patient, risking her life to take care of him. She knows that the villa is filled with mines, but she suppresses her fears and tries to do the house jobs, by cleaning the place up and planting the garden with some vegetables. Hana feels that the English patient is like her father, and she wants to save him for two reasons: First of all, he is a human being, and secondly, she wants to make a compromise with herself for not being near her father and could not help him while dying. Thus, she hopes that she can save him, and help him not to have the same end of her father; dying alone, in pain. At the same time, she establishes a mother-like relationship with her patient, taking care of him, washing his wounds: “she would read to him and bathe him and give him his doses of morphine” (14) Reading books is a peaceful private activity which is opposed to war and post-war reality in Ondaatje’s novel (Enescu, 2012). The war and its chaos expose the maternal side of Hana’s character, she sacrifices everything just to care of her patient, “she was always hungry and found it a furious exhaustion to feed a patient who couldn’t eat or didn’t want to,

watching the bread crumbles away, the soup cool, which she desired to swallow fast.” (50) In taking care of her patient, Hana finds the affection she has lost with her father and unborn child. It is true that Hana comes to the villa “half child and half adult” (14) and is transformed into a woman. Yet still has some of child innocence as she plays hopscotch. Although she has passed hard conditions but they did not turn her to be cruel, she still has innocent and child dreams. She thinks that Almsy is a noble soldier who has suffered because of war. Nevertheless, the fact is that he is a spy for the German and he has carried on an affair with another man’s wife.

Hana and her patient are joined by Caravaggio who is an Italian-Canadian thief, once the friend of Hana’s father. Caravaggio enters the villa with the intention of saving Hana from her surroundings because he has been like an uncle to her, and now she is without a father to protect her. Hana and Caravaggio’s relationship has grown from an uncle/child relationship to a more equal and respected connection. Protecting Hana also gives Caravaggio a reason after he has sunk into sadness and silence in a Roman hospital where he was recovering from cutting his thumbs by the German who have tortured him for being a spy. In time Caravaggio is losing confidence, Hana is

gaining independence as an adult; they become aid for each other, like friends, they support and complete each other. Caravaggio searches for Hana to provide him with purpose to live, while Hana searches for the friend she has lost in the war. Caravaggio thinks that he is protecting Hana, while she helps him to find his character after War.

Later, Kip the Indian minesweeper, who has joined the British army because he is taken by the idea of the great west. His real name is Kirpal, but he prefers to be Kip like his English friends call him. Kip arrives at the Italian villa to clear it out of the mines. Kip's job prevents him from leading a personal life; he becomes too cautious for bombs. Hana falls in love with him. Kip is unable to get into a relationship with Hana because he is always afraid of another bomb, he does not want to be hurt by losing her, while she develops her admiration toward him into a real love. So she rethinks in "never looked at herself in mirrors again." (50) She does not let the war to get in the way of forming relationships with people, she is able to love and be loved, and she does not detach herself as Kip has done. She loves Kip because she needs him and she finds many things in common between them; both have experienced war, and both are dedicated to saving lives (Sztehlo, 2010). The relationship between Kip and Hana is

not limited to sexual desire. They experience the tender intimacy between people that they lacked during the war and that they have come to need.

When Kip hears the news of Heroshima's bombing; he believes that he is betrayed by the West. The act of the bomb of Heroshima has destroyed his previous idealization of the West. Therefore, he decides to exit from both the villa and Hana's life. For him Hana as a Canadian represents the Western culture, which is, regarded as having violent and racist policies against non-western cultures.

Hana returns to Canada at the end of the novel, but not without being altered by her experiences. She is no longer the youthful girl who left for war. Hana has particularly been stricken with grief over her father's lonely death and her own experience with death as she writes a letter home announcing her desire to return (Bussi, n.d.). Ondaatje puts Hana alone with three men; she helps them to create their characters after war. She proves that she is able to adjust to the war and its aftermath. All male characters choose to escape their realities into new ones after the war. Caravaggio does not mention his first name. The English patient chooses his new name, and kip is not kirpal. Except Hana she does not want new identity, but

she develops her character and grew mature (Hilger, 2004).

It is pointed out that our understanding of women's roles in post-war societies and of their contributions to post-war reconstruction must go beyond the universalistic narrative of women's experience of war. In *The English Patient* Michael Ondaatje presents, the character of Hana who suggests that involvement in the battlefield can bring people together as well as separating them. Hana searches for new definition of the self, as a woman in crisis, she is setting the fundamental mechanism that shapes her character.

Through the relationship of Hana and three male characters Michael Ondaatje presents an interesting view of the strong female character. Hana works on changing the notion that says that woman are weak and victims into a new ideal that is women demonstrate remarkable abilities and skills to cope with situation. She is worth of love and respect.

Hana does not let the chaos of war to destroy her life, but on the contrary she proves a brave character who is able to survive and support and help others to survive confidently. She has lost a father and unborn son but gained the English patient, she has lost her friend Jan, but gained Cavaraggio and also she has lost a lover, but gained Kip's love. Finally she

has lost her childhood but gained maturity. At the end of the novel, Kip imagines Hana as a queen, "She will, he realizes now, always have a serious face. She has moved from being a young woman into having the angular look of a queen" (300). In conclusion the queen is a very mature person. In that maturity lies adulthood, and so this means that, in Kip's view, Hana has achieved mature personality.

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