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The Shades Behind the Warlight: Representation of Women in Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight*

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Abstract: This article explores the representation of female figures in Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight* through the metaphor of "female shades behind the warlight." The novel, set in post-World War II London, foregrounds secrecy, fractured memory, and the partial illumination of identity, situating women at the margins of historical visibility. Central to this analysis is Rose Williams, whose dual existence as mother and covert intelligence agent exemplifies the hidden agency of women whose contributions to wartime efforts remain obscured by patriarchal narratives. Rachel, marked by illness yet striving for autonomy, further illustrates the tension between vulnerability and resilience in the construction of female identity. Secondary female presences—often spectral, unnamed, or fleeting—reinforce the novel's aesthetic of dim illumination, where women's roles are glimpsed but rarely fully acknowledged. By interrogating these figures, the article argues that Ondaatje critiques the erasure of female agency in both personal and historical memory, positioning women as powerful yet obscured actors whose significance persists in shadow. Ultimately, *Warlight* demonstrates how the metaphor of warlight itself becomes a lens through which to read the silenced voices and hidden strengths of women in postwar society.

Keywords: *Michael Ondaatje, Warlight, Female representation, Gender identity, Post-World War II literature, Secrecy and memory*

Warlight (2018) is a haunting, atmospheric novel set in post–World War II London. Michel Ondaatje the famous Sri Lankan- Canadian writer who explores the shadowed terrain of postwar Europe, exploring the lingering psychological and moral aftermath of the Second World War. Set primarily in London in the years immediately following the war, the novel unfolds within a landscape still shaped by blackout regulations, damaged infrastructures, covert operations, and fractured identities. Yet *Warlight* is not a conventional historical novel concerned with battlefield heroics or national triumph. Instead, it operates within the dim glow of conflict — a space where secrecy persists, loyalties remain uncertain, and private lives continue to be shaped by public violence. The war in *Warlight* is technically over, but its invisible networks endure, penetrating domestic space and unsettling the stability of family life.

The novel follows Nathaniel and his sister Rachel after their parents leave postwar London in 1945, ostensibly for a year in Singapore. Left in the care of their lodger The Moth, and surrounded by shadowy figures such as the Darter, the siblings grow up amid criminality, secrecy, and unofficial war work that blurs moral boundaries. Nathaniel is drawn into smuggling and forms a relationship with Agnes Street, while Rachel struggles with epilepsy and emotional withdrawal. Gradually, Nathaniel suspects that his mother Rose Williams never truly left England and that her absence is tied to covert wartime responsibilities. A violent attack confirms the children are being watched, and Rose briefly reappears, suggesting their abandonment was a calculated act meant to protect them.

Years later, in 1959, Nathaniel—now an adult—works for the Foreign Office on “The Silent Correction,” censoring records of wartime espionage. Using this access, he secretly searches for traces of his mother’s hidden life and uncovers fragments of her intelligence work, her ties to figures such as Marsh Felon, and her eventual assassination, rooted in unresolved wartime violence in Europe. At the same time, Nathaniel learns that many figures he once believed criminal were, like his mother, serving unofficial war efforts. Revisiting the past leads him to discover that Agnes has married the Darter and that her child may be his own. Choosing not to disrupt their lives, Nathaniel accepts the limits of knowledge and reconciliation.

While critics have examined memory and postwar trauma in *Warlight*, little attention has been given to the gendered asymmetry and shadowing of the female characters. This paper argues that Ondaatje critiques the erasure of female agency in both personal and historical memory, positioning women as powerful yet obscured actors whose significance persists in shadow.

I. Narratological Structure and Maternal Invisibility

Warlight by Michael Ondaatje revolves around the lives of Nathaniel, his mother Rose Williams, and his sister Rachel, set against the shadowy backdrop of post–Second World War London. The narrative unfolds through Nathaniel’s retrospective reconstruction of his childhood, marked by secrecy, fragmented memory, and partial revelations.

When their parents abruptly leave them in the care of two mysterious guardians—known as the Moth and the Darter—Nathaniel and Rachel are thrust into a liminal world shaped by uncertainty and moral ambiguity. As the novel progresses, Nathaniel slowly uncovers his mother’s concealed past as a covert intelligence operative, a revelation that destabilizes conventional notions of motherhood, domesticity, and female agency.

Critical approaches grounded in structural narratology have emphasized *Warlight*’s complex architecture of time, focalization, and retrospective narration. Drawing on Genette’s distinction between *histoire* (story), *récit* (discourse), and *narration*, the novel destabilizes linear chronology through analepsis and temporal fragmentation. Events emerge as reconstructed memories rather than stable truths, positioning narration itself as an act of uncertainty.

The novel’s dominant mode is internal focalization, with events filtered almost exclusively through Nathaniel’s retrospective consciousness. As Genette argues, focalization governs not only what is seen but what can be known. Consequently, Rose Williams exists primarily within the epistemic limits of her son’s perception. The reader is denied direct access to her interiority, producing a narrative effect in which Rose becomes less a subject than a construct shaped by conjecture, absence, and delayed revelation.

This structural restriction has ideological consequences. Rose’s opacity is not incidental but narratively engineered. In being known only through fragments, she is rendered morally suspect and emotionally inaccessible. The metaphor of “warlight”—partial, dim, and unstable illumination—aptly captures this epistemic condition, ensuring that Rose remains permanently shadowed.

Nathaniel’s recollection of childhood reveals how patriarchal assumptions shape the children’s understanding of parental roles: “We were used to partial stories... As for their departure, it was accepted that she had to go with him: there was no way, we thought, that she could exist apart from him—she was his wife” (Ondaatje 8). This passage exposes the ideological training that naturalizes paternal absence while rendering maternal absence unthinkable. The father’s disappearance is narrated with emotional neutrality, whereas the mother’s absence produces psychic rupture. Such asymmetry reflects a deeply internalized cultural logic that defines masculine identity as autonomous and feminine identity as relational.

Rose is presumed to be the emotional and moral anchor of the household. When she disappears, the children experience her absence not as circumstantial but as a betrayal. This reaction is not instinctual but culturally produced, revealing how patriarchal narratives pre-structure emotional judgment long before understanding is possible.

Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* dismantles the myth of "natural" motherhood that underwrites the children's judgment of Rose. Chodorow argues: "Mothering is not instinctual but socially reproduced" (7). This insight clarifies why paternal absence in *Warlight* is normalized while maternal absence is traumatic. Patriarchal culture trains children to expect emotional labor, constancy, and self-sacrifice from mothers alone. Chodorow further notes that: "Men's mothering is a social structure, not a biological inevitability" (39). In a particular conversation of Nathaniel with his mother, as she says she was in touch with them he becomes furious.

"I kept in touch."

"Wonderful. You kept in touch. For your sake! I am so glad. You left us without a word. Both of you."

"I had work to do. I had responsibilities."

"Not to us! Rachel hates you so much she will not even talk to me. Because I'm here with you, she hates me too."

"Yes, I have been damned, by my daughter." (*Warlight*, 165)

This exchange powerfully crystallizes the emotional asymmetry between Nathaniel and his Rose Williams. Nathaniel's fury—"Wonderful. You kept in touch. For your sake!"—exposes not merely anger at abandonment but a moral indictment: the children position themselves as the wronged, while Rose is cast as culpable for choosing "work" and "responsibilities" over maternal presence.

What is especially striking is Rose's response: she neither defends herself nor reframes her choices. Her quiet admission—"Yes, I have been damned, by my daughter"—signals an internalization of blame rather than resistance to it. The passive construction ("I have been damned") underscores her acceptance of judgment as something imposed upon her, almost fated. In this moment, maternal agency is paradoxically rendered as maternal guilt. Fatherhood is not culturally defined through presence or nurture; motherhood is. Rose's later revelation as a covert intelligence agent violates this expectation. This scene exemplifies how women who step outside normative motherhood—especially into public, political, or covert labour—are retroactively punished within private memory. As Chodorow argues, mothers become the primary site onto which children project anxiety, dependency, and blame. Rose's silence is not emptiness but endurance; it reflects how women's sacrifices, when

illegible to domestic narratives, are translated into accusations of neglect. The children's resentment, articulated with clarity and moral certainty, contrasts sharply with Rose's muted acceptance, reinforcing her position as a "shadowed" figure—present, accountable, yet denied the authority to narrate her own justification.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection explains why Rose's maternal identity becomes disturbing once it exceeds domestic containment. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines the abject as: "What disturbs identity, system, order" (4). She further asserts: "The maternal body is the abject par excellence" (77). Rose's covert intelligence work places her outside the symbolic economy of "motherhood as care." Her skills in secrecy, guerrilla warfare, and political violence align her with what must be excluded in order to preserve cultural meaning. Necessary to the state yet intolerable within familial memory, Rose becomes an abjected maternal figure.

Nathaniel's fragmented narration reinforces this abjection. Because the maternal must be named, contained, and justified to be culturally acceptable, Rose's refusal to explain herself renders her unintelligible. Her mystery is not psychological but structural—produced by a symbolic order that cannot accommodate a mother who belongs to war rather than home.

Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as *experience* and motherhood as *institution* provides the most incisive framework for Rose Williams. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich writes: "The institution of motherhood aims at ensuring that women shall remain dependent and powerless" (13).

Rose's tragedy lies in her refusal—or inability—to conform to motherhood as institution. While she may experience love, responsibility, and guilt, she rejects the demand that motherhood must supersede all other forms of identity. Rich further observes: "A woman who refuses to confine herself to motherhood alone is perceived as dangerous" (275). Rose is precisely this dangerous woman. Her violent, abrupt death symbolically enacts the punishment reserved for women who exceed maternal boundaries. That she is killed by another woman underscores the internalization of patriarchal violence within female subjectivity itself.

Rose's death offers no narrative reconciliation. The collapse of her protective network leaves her exposed within a world governed by political violence rather than domestic bonds. Her refusal to justify her choices is crucial. Rose silently accepts blame, suggesting an ethical awareness that necessity does not erase the pain inflicted on her children. This silence reinforces her portrayal as less a traditional mother than a clandestine, elemental force operating beyond domestic comprehension. Her legacy is tarnished not by failure in duty to the state but by perceived failure as a mother.

II. Silence and the speaking Body

Rachel Williams, the elder sibling of Nathaniel, the daughter of Rose, emerges as a profoundly shadowed female figure in *Warlight*, her identity shaped by absence, secrecy, and gendered silencing. While Nathaniel serves as the primary focalizer and retrospective narrator, Rachel functions as a counterpoint to his obsessive reconstruction of the past, embodying an alternative mode of survival shaped by silence, emotional withdrawal, and pragmatic detachment. Her epilepsy operates as both a psychosomatic defence against and a regression toward her mother's departure, embodying her unresolved yearning for maternal protection. Yet this longing is conflicted, as Rose is simultaneously constructed as the culpable figure who abandoned her children. "The mother becomes the primary object onto which children displace unresolved dependency and rage." (Chodorow 80)

Rachel's notion of motherhood is thus fractured—defined by loss rather than care—while her strong resemblance to her mother deepens her internal conflict, turning resentment into self-fragility. The Moth assumes the role of a surrogate father, offering stability in a world emptied of paternal presence; his death marks a second traumatic rupture. Rachel's belief that Rose is responsible for the Moth's death reveals a displacement of grief onto the maternal figure, reinforcing a patriarchal tendency to hold women accountable for the consequences of male violence and state secrecy. Psychoanalytically, Rachel's aggression toward the mother, intensified by the father's absence and the mother's refusal—or inability—to replace him, suggests an Electra-complex inflection, where attachment to the paternal surrogate sharpens hostility toward the maternal figure. Marginalized within the narrative and deprived of authoritative voice, Rachel internalizes war's indirect violence, becoming a shadowed embodiment of how female suffering in postwar contexts is rendered private, pathological, and largely invisible.

Emerging from the shadows of comparison with her mother, she stands out as antithesis to Nathaniel. Rachel's childhood is marked by parental absence, secrecy, and instability. Abandoned along with Nathaniel in post-war London, she grows up under the care of shadowy guardians, learning early to normalize uncertainty. Rachel and Nathaniel embody opposing responses to the same fractured upbringing. Nathaniel's identity is shaped by memory work—piecing together fragments to create coherence—whereas Rachel's identity is rooted in continuity and forward movement. Unlike Nathaniel, who becomes fixated on uncovering hidden truths—particularly regarding their mother—Rachel adapts by limiting emotional investment. Her reserve is not mere passivity but a self-protective response to a world where adults are unreliable and truths are fragmentary.

Rachel's defining trait is her silence. She resists probing questions about the past and shows little interest in reconstructing family history. This contrasts sharply with Nathaniel's archival impulse. Rachel's refusal to remember becomes a deliberate strategy: forgetting allows her to avoid re-traumatization. In this sense, Rachel represents an ethics of restraint, suggesting that not all histories

demand recovery and that survival may depend on selective amnesia. Rachel's quiet withdrawal underscores how women and girls often negotiate trauma privately rather than narratively. Her later life choices—marked by conventional stability—reflect a desire for normalcy rather than revelation. Unlike their mother Rose, whose agency is exercised covertly within state structures, Rachel's agency lies in refusal: she chooses not to participate in the economy of secrets.

Read through feminist literary theory, Rachel emerges as a figure who resists patriarchal narrative structures through silence, emotional autonomy, and refusal of retrospective coherence.

Feminist critics have long challenged the assumption that speech and confession are the only routes to agency. Rachel's silence functions as an alternative form of resistance. Unlike Nathaniel, whose masculine subjectivity is affirmed through narration, investigation, and mastery of memory, Rachel refuses to participate in what feminist theorists identify as the patriarchal compulsion to explain, recover, and dominate the past. Her withdrawal disrupts the authority of the male narrator and exposes narration itself as a gendered act.

This resistance aligns with *Adrienne Rich's* critique of compulsory disclosure, where women are often forced to translate lived experience into socially acceptable narratives. Rachel's refusal to narrate becomes a feminist assertion of bodily and psychological autonomy.

Narrative Shadowing of Minor Female Figures

Is this how we discover the truth, evolve? By gathering together such unconfirmed fragments? Not only of my mother, but of Agnes, Rachel, Mr. Nkoma....." (*Warlight*, 114).

The study of the novel remains incomplete without casting light on those characters who function passively and silently within the shadows of Nathaniel's narration. Figures such as Mrs. Rafferty, Agnes and Olive are not granted sustained narrative authority; instead, they surface intermittently, shaped by memory rather than by direct self-representation. Like silhouettes, these characters appear and recede throughout the narrative—momentarily illuminated before fading back into obscurity. Although they exert a significant influence on Nathaniel's emotional and ethical formation, they later become peripheral, almost forgettable within the larger narrative economy. In foregrounding these shadowed figures, the novel exposes how personal development and historical understanding are built upon the quiet, often unacknowledged labor of those who remain unnamed, unheard, and only partially remembered.

Mrs. Rafferty functions as a representative of women whose lives are shaped—and constrained—by postwar patriarchy, class hierarchy, and male-dominated power structures. She occupies a socially vulnerable position as a working-class woman in post–World War II London. The novel's central world—espionage, surveillance, and covert operations—is overwhelmingly male. She exists on the

periphery of this world, affected by its decisions but excluded from its authority. she is remembered through others' fragmented recollections. Adrienne Rich argues that women's lives are marginalized not due to any inherent lack of importance, but because cultural value and meaning are historically constructed through male-centered standards (*Of Woman Born*). Mrs. Raffety's marginality reflects precisely this "systematic silencing." She is present within the domestic and moral architecture of the novel, yet excluded from narrative authority. Her role underscores how patriarchal storytelling privileges action, secrecy, and mobility—traits associated with male characters—while transferring care and observation to the background. Mrs. Raffety's association with domestic supervision aligns with feminist materialist critiques of unpaid and feminized labor. Rich further notes: "Women have been made invisible in the very structures they sustain." (104) She sustains the children's fragile stability, yet this labour remains narratively unacknowledged. Her shadowed status thus critiques the gendered hierarchy of value that defines what counts as history within the novel.

From a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, Mrs. Raffety exemplifies the internalized discipline imposed upon women within patriarchal structures. As Nancy Chodorow argues in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, "Women are trained to define themselves through responsibility for others" (42). Mrs. Raffety's identity is shaped almost entirely by responsibility rather than self-expression. Unlike Rose, whose secrecy intersects with structures of state power, Mrs. Raffety's silence is socially produced, revealing how ordinary women are disciplined into forms of invisibility.

Her partial visibility also suggests what Adrienne Rich calls a "politics of location"—a position from which women experience history without authoring it. Her presence reminds readers that history is constructed not only through what is illuminated but also through what remains deliberately obscured. However, her silence can be further interpreted through Julia Kristeva's distinction between the symbolic (structured language, law, narration) and the semiotic (affect, silence, pre-linguistic experience). As Kristeva writes in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, "What cannot be said remains active at the level of affect" (25).

Mrs. Raffety occupies this semiotic space. Her significance lies not in speech or overt agency but in ethical presence. She witnesses rather than narrates, embodying a form of feminine knowledge that resists incorporation into linear, masculine historiography. Her character demonstrates that silence is not absence or passivity but an affective presence that resists narrative capture. Her unspoken knowledge operates at the level of the semiotic—felt, intuited, and emotionally charged—rather than within the symbolic order dominated by Nathaniel's retrospective, male-authored narration. Silence, therefore, becomes a form of meaning that exceeds language rather than a failure of speech.

Another striking yet unnamed figure is the woman associated with Agnes Street, who seduces Nathaniel and becomes his sexual partner while remaining largely unknowable as a subject. Their relationship reinforces *Warlight's* central concerns with secrecy, power, memory, and the lingering emotional damage carried from childhood into adult intimacy. As Chodorow observes, "Women are

more often experienced relationally, as extensions of others' needs, rather than as autonomous selves" (*The Reproduction of Mothering*, 53). This unnamed woman exemplifies precisely such relational positioning: she exists primarily within Nathaniel's memory and desire rather than as a fully articulated narrative presence.

From a feminist perspective, Agnes Street is a shadowed female figure whose identity is erased and overwritten by male memory. Agnes does not speak for herself; her existence is mediated entirely through male narration. This silence is not a personal choice but a narrative condition. The novel urges us to read such silences: Agnes's absence from discourse exposes the power structures governing who is allowed narrative voice. Her story remains untold not because it lacks meaning, but because the narrative apparatus is not oriented toward preserving it. She exists less as a fully realized subject than as a site onto which Nathaniel maps desire, loss, and nostalgia—mirroring how women in the novel are frequently known only through fragments. However, Agnes's near-erasure quietly destabilizes Nathaniel's authority as a retrospective narrator. His attempt to assemble a coherent past is undermined by figures like Agnes, whose lives resist narrative recovery. This resistance thus becomes a challenge to masculine epistemology—the belief that truth can be fully retrieved through memory, investigation, or narration.

Olive Lawrence, a stronger but minor character, first appears as a woman who seems different from the other female characters. She is emotionally open, honest, and clear in her relationships. Through Olive, Nathaniel experiences a sense of normal life that is not shaped by secrecy or war. However, as the novel progresses, her relationship with Nathaniel fails because he is unable to free himself from the secrecy and emotional distance created by his past. When Olive becomes pregnant, her narrative trajectory shifts decisively. As Adrienne Rich argues, in *Of Woman Born*, "The institution of motherhood enforces conformity at the very moment when a woman's vulnerability is greatest." (13) Her subsequent marriage to the Darter is not an act of romantic fulfilment but a pragmatic social arrangement, shaped by the stigmatization of unmarried motherhood in postwar Britain. The marriage functions as a patriarchal mechanism of "resolution," offering protection at the cost of autonomy. Olive's independence is thus reduced, and she is placed within the traditional roles of wife and mother. Olive's silence is structurally imposed rather than personally chosen. As Adrienne Rich argues, women are frequently positioned as "the unremembered," their stories absorbed into larger historical movements without acknowledgment.

Olive's later absence from direct narration further shadows her character. The Darter does not mention her when he later meets Nathaniel, and Nathaniel learns the truth only afterwards. This silence removes Olive from the centre of the narrative and reflects the novel's pattern of keeping women's lives partially hidden.

In Rose Williams's recollection, Olive emerges as *more than an ethnographer*, a revelation articulated through a moment of accidental disclosure and sudden silence. During her conversation with Nathaniel, Rose inadvertently exposes the depth of her association with Olive:

I complained about our abandonment, she responded too quickly, 'Well, Olive was around you for a while. She kept me up-to-date.'

'Wait a minute—Olive? You knew Olive Lawrence?'

She drew back, as if she'd revealed too much.

'The eth-nog-ra-pher? You knew her?'

'She was not just an ethnographer, Stitch!'

'What else was she?'

She said nothing. (Ondaatje 165)

The abrupt cessation of speech is as significant as the revelation itself. Rose's withdrawal—"as if she'd revealed too much"—signals the limits of permissible memory and underscores the secrecy surrounding Olive's true identity. The silence that follows functions not as narrative absence but as narrative culmination: it confirms that Olive's role exceeds the professional label assigned to her. Within the shadowed world of postwar intelligence and fragmented remembrance in *Warlight*, Olive's identity remains deliberately unfinished, accessible only through slips, pauses, and refusals to speak. Thus, the silence itself becomes the strongest evidence of Olive Lawrence's position as "*more than an ethnographer*", situating her firmly within the covert networks that structure the novel's hidden histories crafted by Michael Ondaatje.

Taken together, the 'minor' characters like Mrs. Raffety, Olive Lawrence, and Agnes Street form a feminist counter-archive within *Warlight*. Their silence, ordinariness, and marginality reveal how women's lives are foundational yet unrecorded, present yet historically displaced. Ondaatje's novel, when read through feminist theory, thus affirms a crucial insight: what remains in shadow is not empty, but ethically and structurally essential to understanding history itself.

Conclusion

This study has shown that *Warlight* constructs its female characters as figures who exist within partial visibility, illuminated only intermittently by the dim glow of warlight. Through the experiences of Rose Williams, Rachel, and other marginal female presences, Ondaatje exposes how women's agency operates in shadow, shaped by secrecy, sacrifice, and historical erasure. Although these women are

frequently positioned at the edges of the narrative, their actions and endurance significantly influence both private lives and broader historical outcomes.

By foregrounding maternal absence, bodily vulnerability, and silenced labour, the novel challenges patriarchal frameworks that privilege male-centered narratives of war and recovery. The metaphor of warlight thus becomes more than a stylistic device; it functions as a critical lens through which the reader is invited to recognize the incomplete illumination of women's histories. Ondaatje suggests that what remains unseen or unnamed is not insignificant, but deliberately obscured.

Warlight calls for a reconsideration of how postwar memory is constructed and whose experiences are preserved within it. In recovering the shadowed presence of women, the novel resists historical closure and affirms the enduring power of female agency—even when it exists beyond full recognition. The women behind the warlight remain essential to the narrative, reminding readers that history is shaped as much by what is hidden as by what is revealed.

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