



Michael Ondaatje As an Immigrant Writer: A Study of His Select Works

Manjari Singh,

Associate Professor, Department of English, Keshav Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi.

Abstract

Michael Ondaatje is an immigrant, writer, hailing from Sri Lanka and settled in Canada. His works are clearly located within the post-modernist tradition, in their attempts to break down the definitions of genre resisting closure and any unified sense of personality or past. The paper seeks to study Michael Ondaatje as an immigrant writer through selected works namely, *There's A Trick With a Knife I'm learning to Do: Poems 1963-78*, *Running In the Family*, *The English Patient*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion*. Ondaatje unswervingly foregrounds the immigrant discourse in these works working out a reconstruction of an identity which transcends boundaries of nationality and ethnicity.

Keywords

Immigrant, Post Modernism, Ex-centric, Sonograph, Memory, Cartography.

Introduction

During certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that we have destroyed. So, our job becomes to keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with “the mercy of distance” write the histories (Ondaatje 1982 179).

Michael Ondaatje’s pre-occupation with origins, in a search for a personal identity, is encapsulated poignantly in the above quoted passage. In tandem with the post-modernist tradition, he writes with an awareness of the uncertainty, anxieties and break downs grounded in modern man's existence. Ondaatje rejects realistic mimetic modes of creation as in the post-modern world there is no consensus for reality. The foregrounding of history in the postmodernist text becomes problematized as history tends to superimpose a totalizing and final interpretation. As Linda Hutcheon points out post-modernism, in discourse as well as in artistic practice, becomes ambiguous and paradoxical, “in both, we find masterful denials of mastery, totalizing negations of totalization” (169). This problematic is exacerbated in the light of Ondaatje’s multigeneric texts. It becomes increasingly difficult to construct a definitive version of reality in the world of Ondaatje’s fiction where

photographs, poems, autobiographies, cartography, history all collapse, as well as, co-exist. Any attempt at a realistic frame or a linear narrative is destabilized by constant intertextuality, with cross-references to other writers as well as their works embedded.

Migrating from a Third World country to Canada, Ondaatje has managed to attain an important place in the canon of Canadian Literature. Ondaatje's immigrant status gains prominence as it ensures a divergent point of view, from the Eurocentric one. Commenting on the value of such perspectives Uma Parmeswaran in her essay proposes that the term 'expatriate sensibility' should be considered a literary term. Ondaatje, as a writer, is placed in an 'Ex-centric' (Linda Hutcheon gave the term 'Excentric' to minoritarian discourses) position in a dominant culture. He is outside the 'center' in terms of both race and nationality. The marginalization of the expatriate from history, bring about a sense of rootlessness and anguish. The quest for one's past, historical as well as personal, becomes essential in order to establish one's roots and identity. Ondaatje's efforts to come to terms with his marginalization takes the form of constructing his own sense of a historical past which he deliberately fabricates as apolitical. He imbues the events recollected through memory with a conscious reconstruction. He refers to this phenomenon in his poem 'Four Eyes', "in immobilized time/attempt to reconstruct" (1997 67). The past for him is imperative to 'construct' an idea of his own self. Simultaneously, it is also a backward glance full of nostalgia for the lost/ relinquished motherland. Despite having access to two or more cultures, the immigrant is necessarily a homeless entity. He is the displaced individual who, because of a severing from the mother country, faces the solipsistic reality of a fragmented self.

An examination of Michael Ondaatje's poetry reveals his preoccupation with the present moment. This is a self-constructed strategy to overcome his sense of a lost past. It is a conscious effort, not to "wear sentimentality like a curse" (16). The past comes to him in the tortured images of scars and a deliberate glossing over it as necessary to retain a sane and complete present. In 'The Time Around Scars' he says "We remember the time around scars,/ they freeze irrelevant emotions/ and divide us from present friends" (18). Ondaatje has been accused of being silent about his 'otherness' by critics like Arun Mukherjee. He attributes Ondaatje's success, as having been won through the sacrifice of his past and regionality. Mukherjee calls his poetry "poetry of the immediated present" (34), with no traces of history or memory. The past, as Hebele points out, brings with it pain and so is best obfuscated. However, Ondaatje transcends this ache to construct past as a formative background for the present. "The idea of the immaculate moment is now" (Ondaatje 1997 57). Though the present is foregrounded the past is explored as a rejuvenating or regenerating influence which will enable, "new myths/ to wind up the world" (14). In his poem 'Billboards' the poet's mind is imagined as a carefully empty diary. The word diary itself inheres a potential for recording past and history. Ondaatje deliberately 'reconstructs' history giving it new interpretations. In 'Four Eyes' history is transformed into the context which still shapes the present; "You were still being unfurled/ shaped by the scene." The past is not rendered realistically, rather in an allegorical, symbolic and mythical fashion. Ondaatje's sense of history is an 'apolitical' one. It is transformed into 'new myths', delineated in a personal manner, through fantasy which also entails exoticizing. In his poem, 'Letters and other worlds' he recaptures history by referring to marginal events. He attributes the turning point in the Home-rule movement to his father's stopping the parade of some

local dignitaries. He also talks about the ‘determined histories of glass’ (84) as it is a frozen movement. In a bid to arrive at one’s own identity or possible identities “Mirrors, self-reflexive and reversible” (98), are explored as alter-egos. The utter chaos evident in Ondaatje’s poems is hallmarked by man being isolated from his surroundings, driving him "to that perfect edge/ where there is no social fuel"(68). It is reflective of the author's own sense of urgency to return to his origins for the ‘social fuel’.

Michael Ondaatje’s third world affiliations provide him with a past of shared values and strong communal and filial ties. These are purposely juxtaposed with the materialistic, mechanical systems of the western world. The ‘polymorphic’ world of the native country becomes a nostalgic past which is discovered by Ondaatje as another mode of existence. The search for ethnic roots is an attempt for recovering identity and relevance within the divergent, dominating and marginalizing host culture. The discovery of the ethnic roots becomes a psychological imperative as one’s identity is embedded within racial memories. This is mostly done in most immigrant writings through the journey motif. As Uma Parmeswaran posits, the immigrant writers lead their readers on ‘conducted tours’ of the motherland and write self-consciously about it. One such fiction is Michael Ondaatje's *Running In the Family*. It is an autobiographical fiction, depicting Ondaatje’s literal and metaphorical journey to Ceylon in order to salvage his past. It is “mainly a quest for his father, an attempt to exorcise feelings of guilt, of betrayal” (Kanaganayakam 40). The immigrant’s sense of guilt, at having abandoned his country for a better existence outside, is the germinating point of the novel. Dreams or nightmares, expressions of the subconscious, confront the author with his need to discover his past. Talking to Eleanor Wachtel about migration Ondaatje's comments “They were a traumatic move for me,” (259). To discover once again his heritage, is another traumatic experience, “I had been weeping and my shoulders and face were exhausted” (Ondaatje 1982 21). The evocation of past is always a painful experience for Ondaatje, but necessary one for his own sense of identity. “I realized I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood” (22). The author searches all possible routes to Ceylon in order to understand that past.

Ondaatje recovers lost history by reconstructing it in his own terms. In a sense he is retelling history by telling stories that hadn't been told. He records in the novel the oral narratives of many of his various relatives and acquaintances. However, the margin between fact and fiction is a blurred one in his works. As Linda Hutcheon points out, “In postmodernist fiction, facts are made to seem fictional and fictions are made to seem factual” (182) and that “postmodernism is a ‘word eater’, but it eats its own words” (182). Her comments bring to focus the significant shifts in perspectives of the Ondaatje as he searches for a historical past, yet manages to merge it with fiction. He confesses to having a wish to capture in his writings “the constant exaggeration, the convincing lie” (Bush 239). He undermines history and fact even as he evokes it. Writing in the 'Acknowledgement' Section of *Running in The Family*:

While all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait of ‘gesture’. And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well told lie is worth a thousand facts.

Language itself is a mode of deconstruction and ‘form is content’. The word ‘Asia’ is a whisper which is then further broken down into vowels and alphabets. Verbal as well as national barriers are transcended through a shattering of language. Language is projected as a medium which can change reality. A constant breakdown is evident in Ondaatje’s linguistic usages, which is reconstruct again in a poetic mythical construction. Asia, in its linguistic deconstruction, ‘sprawls’ into the universality of the alphabets or the whisper of the or the human voice. The gap between the signified and the signifier allows Ondaatje the space for interplay of “variousness of things” (248). “No story is ever told just once ... In this way history is organised” (Ondaatje 1982 26). History is reclaimed by the author in the telling of the untold stories. He chooses marginal events and characters like his grandmother, his father's stopping of the train, which allows him a reinterpretation/ a reimagining of history through them.

The narrator’s stance is ambivalent, as he himself distrusts narrative. “Truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships” (53). Ondaatje is not interested in the political past, but a personal historical one. He wishes to talk to someone, “with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover” (54). he wishes to use language have as a means to communicate and recapture history. The first stage of development in handling the past for past for Ondaatje, is to separate it from a national past, making individual human feelings and growth a chart of history; “fore-grounding the ‘narrative’ at the expense of the ‘national’ ” (Kanaganayakam 40) The image of false maps in his brother’s room and the varying significations of Ceylon as tear and a pendant indicate the misrepresentation inherent in cartographical delineations. It is also a cogent statement of the postmodernist discourse of destabilizing ontological enterprise. Through the Sinhalese script, Ondaatje shows language in a bilateral relationship with cultural ideologies, constructing them and in turn being determined by them. Ondaatje’s journey to his past is delineated through a subversive non-linear narrative. “The sense of memory and how we reveal ourselves to each other - none of that is chronological” (Watchel 259). The author assumes an active role as a story teller, negating the aesthetic conception of art for arts sake. He deploys it as an instrument to enable him to come to terms with his own past and identity. His attitude towards Ceylon is defined by his dilemma, “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (Ondaatje 1982 79). He realizes that “we own the country we grow up in, or we are alien and invaders” (81). His writing is a bid to reconcile with his past. The estranged and deconstructed self of the immigrant expresses itself in an abstract language moving towards a desire for a perfect silence. Yet in Ondaatje's writings, words and sound emerge as a powerful medium of communication and meaning. These formulations merge, in documentation and recorded sounds of the cassette, towards the novels end.

Ondaatje occupies a central position in canon of Canadian literature. He is at the same time a part of the repertoire of marginalized immigrant writers accentuating their ethnicities. He records the juxtaposition of their shifting voices with the dominant social and ideological structures. The epigraph to his novel *In the Skin of A Lion* describes the metafictional mimesis of writing and interpreting, “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one”. Ondaatje challenges the dominant social ideologies, giving voice to the immigrant experience, lending voice to their ‘story’. If *Running in the Family* was a search for

an identity, *In the Skin of the Lion* hammers out the problematics of placing this identity within the polemics of 'Expatriate sensibility'. Assuming consciously the role of a story teller, Ondaatje begins by asserting the fictionality of his narrative and posits that this is a story a young girl 'gathers' in a car. The word 'gathers' implies a conscious effort to piece together meaning from a dispersed narrative. Sound becomes an important element in this novel, "a voice, something to leap with over the wall of the place" (10), a mode of transcending present reality, as well as the barriers attached to it.

Sound and language are the vehicles of argumentation as well as articulation. Daniel Stoyanoff tempts the migrants to north America with his tales of success. Language operates as a political strategy which is deployed to overcome marginalization in terms of race, "North America is still without language, gestures and work and bloodline are the only currency" (43). It is important to learn the language for the expatriate in order to negotiate power. The author, speaking for Nicholas, says "If he did not learn the language he would be lost" (46). Sound is often highlighted with a deliberate abnegation of the sense of sight. Ondaatje's attitude to discriminate on the basis of color in Canada is ambivalent. He is aware of the racist discourse of color discrimination, yet he chooses to gloss over the issue. In the cow milking scene towards the beginning of the novel, he says, "They put their thin-gloved hands on these black and white creatures, who are barely discernible in the last of the nights darkness" (7). Color difference is always obfuscated in the indiscernible dark of the night. Ondaatje is aware of practices of color discrimination around him, but being subsumed into the dominant culture, not painfully so. What interests him is the argument, the language, the discourse, and not the visual mappings of color and countries. Sound will transcend walls, where sight fails. Metaphors of destruction and construction are explored in the two ideal jobs forwarded by Hazen Luis: the dynamiter who breaks down everything to fragments and the cook who gathers various fragments into a unity.

Ondaatje directly foregrounds the immigrant discourse in this novel through the puppet dance which is placed at the center his fiction. The life size puppet is a caricature of the immigrant who feels isolated in his marginalization. The other puppets, representing the central ideological discourses, gesture him down with laws. Unable to speak their language, he is insulted (116). The author advances, in this as well as other works, a tension between the host country and the immigrants. His efforts are to project an overarching and unified identity, transcending all barriers of race and nationality. Images of characters delving, digging below the surface, excavating, define a quest for identity. A conscious destruction of the self, to whatever extent possible, was explored as a means to come to terms with it and to reconstruct it. The process of reconstruction of self, can be seen in terms of the bridge building activity in the novel. Not only is this construction a filling up, but an outwardly projected feature which also bridges and unifies isolated spaces. The self that emerges in Ondaatje's novels isn't an egoistic self, but rather one which tries to 'leap' beyond the prescribed boundaries of creed and nation. He proposes deeper ties with human beings and emphasizes the universal binds of family and community as a plea for them. As Patrick says: "The trouble with ideology, Alice, is that it hates the private. You must make it human" (135).

At the beginning of *Coming Through Slaughter* is a Sonograph “liberally, sound writing, a method of transcribing sound into a readable visual text” (Jones 18). The metaphor of sound again attains importance as Billy is a jazz artist. The novel itself is called a jazz mode of detection; the author is trying to tell Bolden’s story as well as delineate history. Bolden defies any attempt to record him, ‘broke the path’ of ‘electronic history’. There is a constant shift, in the narrative, between the past and the present. Combining modes of documentation and reportage, Ondaatje concludes with disjointed reels. The novel applies a twist of the detective plot when it is revealed that Bolden is the living victim of a locked room mystery. The biographer returns to the biographical scene in order to reread and rewrite the texts of memory as signs of a life (Jones 24). Talking about Bolden’s character to Catherine Bush, Ondaatje states “In a way these are all self portraits and possible fictional portraits” (Bush 240) and says of the novel “The book is a kind of mental landscape, but at the same time I want to make it real, believable tactile” (243).

The English Patient portrays complex narrative and thematic patterns. The narrative constantly hovers between the present and the past wherein memory and fantasy all are intertwined. The problematics of the past is once again explored in this novel and a desire to reclaim it is essential to the authors sense of wholeness. History is a palpable presence with the book of *The Histories* by Herodotus physically present there. History is consciously reconstructed and reinterpreted by the additions by the English patient, of other books along with his own observations, to Herodotus’s works. The English patient reunites, different genres, divergent spaces and disparate time zones into a cohesive whole. Inhabiting a “full named world” (Ondaatje 1992 21) this is his effort to bring meaning to it, rather renaming it. In his captivity he draws for the ‘tribes’ “maps that go beyond their own boundaries” (22). Resolving his own dilemma as an immigrant and coming to terms with his own marginality, Ondaatje through his characters wishes always to transcend the barriers of “rumors of topography” (Ondaatje 1982 79). His cartographical structures are constantly leaping beyond prescribed limits, otherwise, being ‘false maps’. The patient’s recollections of the past are his efforts to restore a past and identity which got lost due to the war. His remembrance is an intermeshing of memory and fantasy. This preoccupation with past is highlighted in the other characters as well. It takes different forms in various characters, reluctance to speak about the past in Hana, or a desire to annihilate identity in Caravaggio. Ondaatje places his characters in a desert landscape, which is a place of shifting borders, “In the desert it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation” (Ondaatje 1992 18). It is this landscape of uncertainties and fluid constructions where nationalities become irrelevant, that provides his characters access to alternate histories. It becomes a space for rejection of the dominant political ideologies. The characters develop, is an inclusive ideology. Talking about the book Ondaatje comments, “It is a book about very tentative healing among a group of people. I think it that” (Wachtel 255). The relationship between Hana and Kip in one that is established beyond discourses of race, minority or marginalization. “In terms of even a book like *The English Patient* or *In The Skin*, the nuclear family is replaced by a kind of extended family” (259). For this purpose, Ondaatje provides them with a de-contextualized setting. The English Patient and through him the author wishes, “All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps” (Ondaatje 1992 261).

The immigrant writer becomes a guide and a teacher, forging out of his own traumatic experiences a philosophy of love and oneness of the human race. Positions of the outsider and the exile are negotiated in this mode of a reaching out towards an all-encompassing identity. Ondaatje's writings mark an advanced state in Canadian writing. The earlier writers search for a national Canadian identity. Margaret Atwood's *Survival* is a hallmark in Canadian writing, is a thematic guide to a typical Canadian literature. Marginalized as the border country of America, Canadians felt a need to assert their own unique national identity. Ondaatje has however transcended this need for asserting a Canadian identity. His immigrant status does not sever him from the mainstream. He tells Eleanor Wachtel in an interview, "I feel Canadian. As a writer I feel very Canadian". Confident in his position as a Canadian writer, he moves beyond it towards a universal and international identity. History and language are deliberately broken down to be reconstructed in a more meaningful and empowering way. In his novels Ondaatje depicts migration not only as an inevitable process, but a desirable one. All barriers and boundaries of nationality and ethnicity are merged and Canada emerges as land with, "pebbled cover and its colored dyes which creates a map of Canada" (Ondaatje 1996 9). Ondaatje dislocates accepted national boundaries and ideologies merely to assimilate them in universal ones, subverting structures of context to re-establish them in a more meaningful text. His titles themselves can be broken down to create a polyphony of meaning. The title *Running in the family* contains the paradox of running which is always away from something but, here he is running into his past. *Coming Through Slaughter* contains the potential of a reconstruction after the destruction of 'slaughter'. *In the Skin of a Lion* is a title that is explicit in forwarding 'skin' as a medium for assuming different identities and points of view. *The English Patient* contains in its phrase the potential of both the national 'English', and universal 'Patient' categorizations and begets a merging of the two. Michael Ondaatje projects a reaching out, a dream, towards an international, humanitarian, universal identity.

Having reconciled to his immigrant status Ondaatje moves from the margins to the center. Standing confident in his full human stature amidst the puppets of the dominant cultural discourse, he refuses to adhere their codes of language. Acclaimed as a distinguished linguist, having learnt and mastered their language, Ondaatje goes beyond the demarcations of cultural and national zones. As if curating different instruments to create an orchestra, he explores speech and musical harmony as possible modes of an international language. Though yet to realize his goal of brotherhood in the wholeness of an international identity, he invariably rallies towards it and lends new dimensions to Canadian writing.

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