

ROUTES TO ROOTS: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY*

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ABSTRACT

*The paper examines themes related to transnational migration and the multiple problems migrants face such as loneliness, alienation, identity crisis, cultural assimilation, etc. They may be completely engrossed in their struggle to make a home of the new world, the connection with the native land however remains intact even if ignored, suppressed, trivialized and hidden. At the back of mind, the thought is always there about the kind of stories they would relate on returning to the native land. The paper follows Michael Ondaatje travelling along multiple routes to roots as recorded in his semi-autobiographical memoir *Running in The Family* (1982). The book is primarily about Ondaatje's quest to reconnect with the memory of his father. While doing so, he finds himself also grappling with issues related to identity in the process of becoming. The paper explores how telling of the story leads to a healing of self and a reconstituting of identity at home in the transnational, transcultural world.*

KEYWORDS: Hybridity, Transnationalism, Transcultural Identity, Negotiation, Multiculturalism

INTRODUCTION

Migration involves departure from one's native home, and also returning back, time and again. The returning migrants bring back unique stories to share with their people; stories of their struggle to make a home of the alien land. Even as they share their 'success stories' with most others, the truth of their journey made to reach that point remains mostly hidden deep within their hearts or at best shared with a few close ones only. The sentimental yearning for things familiar; the native land, people and culture however is freely expressed and shared with everybody. They are settled and assimilated into a comfortable life in the new nation and have assumed a new identity, yet they remember and yearn for their roots and take keen interest in the social as well as political happenings of their native homelands. Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan-Dutch, resident of Canada, himself as a migrant writer, explores and draws from his personal experiences to relate the struggles, the identity crisis and yearning for roots. The present paper attempts to trace the narrative of his balancing act between the two worlds as expressed in his autobiographical work *Running in the Family* (1982).

It is a forgone fact that most migrant literatures are autobiographical as writers provide their direct, personal accounts of migration to express the sense of displacement, nostalgia, changing identities, rootlessness, cultural dilemmas, etc. As Paul White rightly suggests, migrant writers simultaneously inhabit a number of worlds to recreate elements of former lives as well as to record: Attempts to integrate or assimilate completely (which may be blocked by a number of mechanisms within the 'host' society); or the creation of a new identity which is characterized by a feeling of independence from both the society of origin and the social structures of destination (White, 3).

Changes in identity do not involve a linear movement, rather these reflect multiple and continuous negotiations at personal as well as social level. Ondaatje also in his work attempts to explore his past, his bonds with the motherland, members of his childhood, his family relationships, in order to document the shift his identity has made due to migration. Ondaatje's personal accounts provide an understanding of the multiple challenges identity faces in today's transcultural world.

Running in the Family (1982) was the outcome of Ondaatje's two trips made back to Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, in 1978 and 1980. The book centers on his quest to understand his father, Mervyn Ondaatje, but in doing so, he grapples with issues surrounding his personal identity, his ancestry and his native country as well. Ondaatje himself acknowledges that the book is the result of '...a communal act...not a history but a portrait or 'gesture,' (Ondaatje, 231-232) an outcome of help received from many people. Ondaatje delves into the family past even as he occupies the space of an outsider looking at his motherland with a different perspective. The 'double vision' of an outsider/insider along with mixing of facts with fiction, personal with the historical, lends uniqueness to the narrative. As Linda Hutcheon rightly observes:

In *Running in The Family*, Ondaatje is not only the recorder, collector, organizer, and narrator of the past, but also the subject of it, both as an Ondaatje whose tale will be told and as the writer who will tell it. Only the initial prefatory section uses the third-person point of view for the narrator, from then on, the 'I' of the text is a constant presence, the one who is 'running.' (Hutcheon, 86).

The work thus provides a complex and multidimensional view of transcultural identity.

The book follows a personal chronology keeping track of the social and political background and the geographical landscapes. Through it all, Ondaatje attempts to reconstruct his own past. Since he left at a very young age (he was only eleven), the memory of his father is not very clear. This to him is like having an empty space in his heart that has haunted him throughout his life. Ondaatje thus sets out to gather information and clues to his past.

Ondaatje tells his tale dividing the work into seven chapters and forty two sections. From the first chapter containing second section 'Jaffna Afternoons', Ondaatje relates how he got hazy information about his father from his Aunt Phyllis. He is fond of Aunt Phyllis because she was always close to his father, Mervyn Ondaatje. Getting to know his father better is important to Ondaatje's own search for identity. He records, 'The morning has been spent with my sister and my Aunt Phyllis trying to trace the maze of our relationships in our ancestry.' (Ondaatje, 10). Again, he informs, '.... and all day my Aunt Phyllis presides over the history of good and bad Ondaatjes and the people they came in contact with.' (Ondaatje, 12). Aunt Phyllis thus guides Ondaatje to remember his past. He comes to know that his father was notorious for his extravagant lifestyle, eccentric behavior in public, love of alcohol and women. Joanne Saul aptly notes:

The text becomes the site of an exploration of self through familial connections, origins, and place; it becomes the site of Ondaatje's complex act of cultural recovery. Throughout the book he struggles to come to terms with a disconnected past through the acts of imagining and writing himself into a particular time and place. (Saul, 35).

Ondaatje thus attempts to reconstruct self by filling in the gaps caused due to his abrupt migration at an early age.

Ondaatje's raw material comes from the stories gathered from family members and friends as he travelled around and visited many places on the small island. While recollecting and retrieving his memories, Ondaatje adds fictional element to the episodes. Facts are blended with imagination in order to fill the missing gaps to record the more intense

truths of the time and the people. While distancing himself, he nevertheless wants to reclaim his lost identity and his roots. Though Ondaatje wants to rebuild his past and struggles to grasp his sense of belonging, he still feels as if he is the exile. Salman Rushdie also refers to this marginal and ambivalent position of writers in his *Imaginary Homelands* (2010):

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or immigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, But even if we look back, we must also do so in knowledge-- which gives rise to profound uncertainties-- that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or village, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.(Rushdie, 10).

Ondaatje's writing reflects a similar tendency. He seems to be reclaiming as well as reinventing multiple images of his past. The book as memoir while trying to recapture the past ends up instead as also reconstructing it, remembering the bits and pieces, modified, "imagined" and retrieved through collective familial memories. The work thus may be taken as an example of what Michel Riffaterre's terms as 'anti-memoir'. According to Riffaterre, 'Memoirs can follow the chronology, or the logic, of events; they are narrative. The Anti-Memoirs rest on analogy (the superimposition method is identical with metaphor); therefore they are poetry.'(qtd. in Beaujour, 3) (Italics in the text itself). On the basis of the above statement, Michel Beaujour concludes, his memoir is a separate genre that:

attempts to create coherence through a system of cross-references, anaphoras, superimpositions, or correspondences among homologous and substitutable elements, in such a way as to give the appearance of discontinuity, of anachronistic juxtaposition, or montage, as opposed to the syntagmatics of a narration, no matter how scrambled, since the scrambling of a narrative always tempts the reader to "reconstruct" its chronology.(Beaujour, 3).

Ondaatje's work easily falls into this category as he positions himself on the boundary, in between the past and the present, the factual and the fictional, the remembered and the forgotten, the historical and the literary, the personal and the impersonal while narrating his story.

As Ondaatje writes about his family's past, he ends up narrating history of the nation as well. He establishes his ancestry while taking notice of the historical circumstances that have shaped the diverse character of the modern Sri Lanka. Ondaatje further describes how Sri Lanka, a hybridized society located strategically has been courted by various nations-- 'The Portuguese, The Dutch, The English.'(Ondaatje, 60). Ondaatje deploys two recurring metaphors - marriage and the theatre to elaborate:

Ceylon - the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language. This pendant, once its shape stood still, became a mirror. It pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities, some of whom stayed and intermarried - my own ancestor arriving in 1600, a doctor who cured the residing governor's daughter with a strange herb and was rewarded with land, a foreign wife, and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language. (Ondaatje, 60)

Here the narrator establishes an intertwining of the personal and national ancestry. He narrates how "burghers," a very privileged social class, came into being from the descendants of the Sinhalese and the Dutch. The introduction of tea, coffee, and rubber plantations brought them fortune and privileges. The 'burghers' were favored by the English and they

occupied positions in the government and in the history of the country. Lee Spinks aptly argues, ‘from the beginning the name ‘Ondaatje’ is a parody of the ruling language: mixed within it are two languages, two histories, two different experiences of culture and place.’(Spinks, 117). By simultaneously linking self to mixed heritage, Ondaatje chooses to occupy the space of hybridity, thus resisting attempts to confine him to an essentialist notion of identity.

Sri Lanka itself is projected as a multicultural nation consisting of people of various cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds. Ondaatje thus questions the notion of a pure and stable Sri Lankan identity and instead assumes the space of hybridity. As Homi Bhabha eloquently puts it in ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the “pure” and original identity of authority)...It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination (Bhabha, 112).

Such a racial mix complicates Ondaatje’s status as a Sri Lankan born Canadian writer who explores the colonial past from his postcolonial present. Ondaatje’s multicultural inheritance makes his status hybrid and hyphenated ‘Sri Lankan-Canadian’. Ondaatje highlights and treats his family’s aristocracy ironically and thereby undermines and heightens it:

Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations. There was a large social gap between this circle and the Europeans and English who were never part of the Ceylonese community... Emil Daniels summed up the situation for most of them when he was asked by one of the British governors what his nationality was-- ‘God alone knows, your Excellency’” (RF, 31-32).

This ambiguous status prompts Ondaatje to investigate his lost part of the hyphen in order to negotiate and balance his identity. As Ondaatje projects, the Sri Lankan identity also comes across as a multicultural hybrid one dealing with constant process of domination and discrimination. Since Ondaatje’s family belonged to the Dutch burgher’s class, they enjoyed all the privileges. The burghers were a mixed native upper-class that lived a life separate from the rest of the population, more like the British masters. They were not exactly English but behaved like them. The English were the dominant class; the burghers were the second in the rank, followed by the rest of the population. All through the book, the narrator leads the reader to perceive that being “hybrid” made their lives miserable and empty. By showing their extravagant life style, Ondaatje highlights the dark side of being in-between: the unconscious unhappiness of his parents, the lack of identity that led his father to death through drunkenness, the ambivalence of being at the same time powerful and powerless, native and foreigner i.e. Anglicized Ceylonese. The anxiety inherent due to racial ambiguity and trauma is evident in the self of Mervyn Ondaatje. Ondaatje records, ‘My father always claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, though that was probably more valid about three centuries earlier’ (RF, 32). Mervyn Ondaatje dangles amidst multiple cultures. Salman Rushdie in another context points out the pitfalls in having an identity which is, ‘...at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools’.(Rushdie,15). Here Mervyn is portrayed as struggling between spaces. The pressure to adhere to a ‘superior’ identity is exemplified in Bampa's (Ondaatje's grandfather's) obsessive imitation of the manners and habits of the English. This had a detrimental effect on his marriage as well as his personality, ‘Bampa had a weakness for pretending to be ‘English’ and, in starched collars and grey suits, was determined in his customs... Every two years he would visit England, buy crystal, and learn the latest dances...Bampa's excessive dominance was in the familial domain where ‘the whole family lived in terror of him. Even his

strong-- willed wife could not blossom till after his death.'(Ondaatje, 50) Lee Spinks aptly observes:

The riven image of the colonial subject appears in Bampa's vacillation between an enthusiastic embrace of English imperial style and an abiding attachment to native customs and habits. He is uncomfortably aware of inhabiting a persona that is neither 'white' nor Ceylonese.(Spinks, 120).

Only his death liberates them, particularly his wife, from the shackles of English decorum. The portrait of Bampa is an example of so many others in the colonial space constantly trying but failing to assimilate into the colonizers' fold. As outsiders the Burghers are not like the natives, nor do they enjoy a position similar to the whites--even though privileged, they can never be considered their equal.

Gililes Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe as three characteristics of literature of immigrant/ marginal/minority writers, 'A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language' (16). So like other marginal writers, Ondaatje does not use native language i.e. Sinhalese to describe landscapes and people of Ceylon. Ondaatje, writing in English language about those traditionally confined to the marginal spaces is an act of resistance, a reversal of order. Secondly, Deleuze and Guattari point out about minor literature that because of the marginal status of minor literature, 'everything in them is political' (17). As Ondaatje discusses the individual stories, embedded within them are issues pertaining to the political status of the minority group. Ondaatje draws attention to ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils and insurgency that took place in 1971. He registers this turmoil of colonial and postcolonial history of Sri Lanka in the background; forefront is the social decline of his own family, the divorce of his parents, his migration to England with his mother when he was 11 years old, his father's death by alcohol poisoning. Thus Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* may be seen as a transcultural novel presenting images of multicultural heritage as also voicing his plea for recognition in the society.

Thirdly Deleuze and Guattari explain, '...If the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility'(17). Ondaatje's individual search for his lost father and his own self are shared by the other members of his family, friends, relatives, the minority community, etc. Ondaatje as an outsider/insider is able to provide a double perspective. While reacting emotionally to his familial history, he at the same time distances himself to view from multiple spaces. It also becomes a familial/communal Endeavour.

Ondaatje's desires to justify his father's character, his tendency for excessive drinking, love of stories and extravagant imagination. Ondaatje in the narrative also confesses how for years he had felt embarrassed by and had tried to disown his roots. For many years, back in London, Ondaatje had felt ashamed of his family. He confesses how when his London friends, tennis players visiting Ceylon to participate in a tournament called him up, he never returned their calls, for he believed his friends had found out 'what a disgraceful family I had come from.'(Ondaatje, 197) The people talked about his father's frequent drunken bouts and how he created havoc in the family and his professional life which led to his banishment from Ceylon railways after 1943. His Uncle Noel, a naval officer was usually called to remove Ondaatje's father from the train. About his father, the narrator says:

So people usually knew when Mervyn Ondaatje boarded the train, with or without his army revolver...When my father removed all his clothes and leapt from the train, rushing into the Kadugannawa tunnel, the Navy finally refused to follow and my mother was sent for... (Ondaatje, 161)

Ondaatje thus attempts to underplay his alarm and sense of shame, rather as Elisabeth Corradi Carvalho points out, 'The narrator also seems to minimize the wild behavior of his parents' generation by providing them with an aura of unexplainable charisma and by telling their stories in a humorous tone.' (Corradi Carvalho, 35). Use of humour becomes a safety device for Ondaatje to be able to deal with the eccentricity of his father. He also tries to be sympathetic towards his father in order to be able to acknowledge his own connection to him.

In the section 'The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society' Ondaatje attempts to trace his father's life after his parents' separation. The section starts in the third-person narrative style, however Ondaatje shifts back to first person account on page 188 when he writes from Mervyn's perspective in the line 'The bottle top in my mouth as I sit on the bed like a lost ship on a white sea.' (Ondaatje, 211) The switch over to the first person not only accentuates the intense pain felt by Mervyn Ondaatje but also suggests establishment of a connection with his father that wasn't there before. It is as if Ondaatje is in a rendezvous with his father. Ondaatje comes to completely identify with his father during his writing process where 'he moved towards the porch, a case of liquor under his arm' (Ondaatje, 211) and suddenly 'he'(father) changes to 'I', the author, 'The bottle top in my mouth as I sit on the bed like a lost ship on a white sea.' (Ondaatje, 211). Identifying himself with his father's drinking, he tries to create and re-affirm emotional bond with him.

The reconnection achieved however is not on his own; Ondaatje draws from the world of literature to heal himself. Shakespeare's 'King Lear', as also poetry of Pablo Neruda, Lawrence and George Keyt become instrumental in his becoming whole at last. In the chapter, 'Blind Faith' he expresses his yearning to reconcile with his father. He desires to assume the role of Edgar, Gloucester's son in Shakespeare's play, and avers:

Look, I am the son who has grown up. I am the son you have made hazardous, who still loves you. I am now part of an adult's ceremony, but I want to say I am writing this book about you at a time when I am least sure about such words...Give me your arm. Let go my hand. Give me your arm. Give the word. 'Sweet Marjoram'...a tender herb. (Ondaatje, 202)

Though still not knowing how his father felt being a father, Ondaatje the son successfully frees himself from the shackles of his unhappy and broken memories. As Ondaatje reconnects with his familial past, he is able to look at the present with greater confidence and hope for a wholesome future. Ondaatje is overwhelmed by the sense of connectedness which he had missed and yearned for years. Carol E. Leon succinctly observes, '*Running in the Family* shows, the diasporic writer, by imposing imaginary homelands on an actual geographical location, may seek out firmer ground than abstractions to build ways of belonging to the places/spaces of the world.' (E. Leon, 104) Thus Ondaatje negotiates his way around his scrambled family history, to track his father, picking up traces even if not fully, to rebuild his feeling of belonging to his native place.

To conclude, Ondaatje in *Running in the Family* draws intensively from his personal life. The work documents his quest to find and recover lost identity by tracing links to family, ancestry, culture and history. The search to relate with his father takes him on to recreate his family's past as embedded within memories of his childhood as well as in the gossip of his friends and relatives. His attempts to reconnect with his past take him on a journey back to Sri Lanka in order to have a better insight into his own identity. He wants to be free from the guilt of living far away from his family and not coming back to meet his father even during his last days. Through the act of writing, Ondaatje successfully creates a space where he is able to relate with his father and re-define his identity. This narrative space gives him an opportunity to give vent to

his pent up feelings for his father, to embrace him, and belong to him. He finally comes to terms with his own self. The work thus documents the dilemmas faced in the transnational/transcultural setting which identity must negotiate with in order to achieve a sense of balance with one's present. This is important as only then one may go on towards the future with a sense of self in harmony with the world outside.

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