

Michael Ondaatje: His Methods and Meanings

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Introduction:

Michael Ondaatje, the Booker Prize-winning writer of mixed Tamil and Burgher ancestry, was born in 1943 in Sri Lanka and left the island at the age of 11. He now lives in Canada.

Cultural Heritage:

Some geographical details about Sri Lanka and Canada will help one to know more about South Asian Canadian writers, since many of them hail from India, Ceylon and Japan respectively.

Ceylon, called Sri Lanka since 1972, is the tear-shaped pendant of an island which lies not far off the Southeast coast of India. Fabled for centuries for its cinnamon, spices, fauna, pearls, and precious stones, Ceylon is to the Canadian imagination a distant, romantic land, an unlikely birth place for a poet of its own since 1962.

The population of the island is a curious admixture of its long imperial history. The two largest groups are the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The Sinhalese are descendants of north India people who colonised the island in the sixth or fifth century B.C.

Their language is an Indo-European one derived from Sanskrit. Most Sinhalese practice Hinayana Buddhism. Concentrated in the north east of Ceylon, Tamils descend from South Indian peoples, speak a Dravidian Language, and practice Hinduism. The island population also consists of a large number of Muslims as well as what are termed Burghers, descendants of Dutch, Portuguese and other Europeans- many of whom intermarried with the Sinhalese. Naturally, this fascinating mix of peoples (much of which is reflected on Ondaatje's own heritage) enriches the

island's culture on one hand, while it has also ensured political, social, religious, linguistic and cultural friction.

Canada, like India, is one of the members of commonwealth family, enjoys cordial relationship with many countries. Especially with India, it works together in many fields. If India has the second largest population size in the world, Canada has the second-largest land-mass; and both are multicultural in nature.

Canada has unique immigration policy, based on race, to fight against apartheid. This was the attempt made by the Prime Minister John Diefenbaker (of Canada) jointly with Jawaharlal Nehru to expel South Africa from Commonwealth that he (Canadian Prime Minister) realized that his own country discriminated against immigrants of certain origins; the result was that Canadian immigration policy became universal in the year 1962, which was formalised with the introduction of a point system for the selection of immigrants, in the year 1967.

Migration is referred to the process by which persons born in one country move to another, permanently or temporarily. Remigration occurs in rare cases.

History of South-Asian Immigration:

Canadians are either immigrants or their children. Almost all the territories of Canada have foreign nationals in their population. Indians, especially Sikh soldiers left for Canada, after their participation in England, during Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1868. They were named "Hindoos" by mistake. These Hindoos struggled a lot to establish themselves and their culture as well. And consecutive immigration was controlled by a law. A quota system was introduced when India became a member of Commonwealth after independence.

There are many terminologies in use to name these immigrants. A few of them are: Aboriginal people in Canada referred to as Indians. People from this subcontinent were called "Fast Indians".

Characteristics of South Asians:

Canada's visible minority are south Asians, who accounted for a remarkable percentage in the total population. These groups occupy major provinces in Canada: Ontario, Columbia, Alberta and Quebec.

Canadians are human as far as racial discrimination is concerned. Studies examining this say that the problem is not as intense as it used to be. One of the studiers says that over 40 percent of South Asians perceived "Colour and racial discrimination" as a major issue. At a later date a poll asked Canadians if they would be inclined to restrict or oppose incursion from any particular country. Most people opposed immigration from India or Pakistan. Even after this incipient opposition, South Asians found an ingratiated place in the Canadian Society.

In short, South Asians made Canada a multicultural nation, because Aboriginal people who lived in Canada were not mono-cultural. To put it in other way, this multiculturalism is only the expansion of biculturalism (English and French)

in the early days of Canadian history. South Asians have made significant contributions in many fields, especially in literature. As John Samuel says, "*Among all immigrants to Canada, the South Asians have perhaps been more active in the literary field than any other single group.*" (IJCS.1993:17).

Michael Ondaatje:

Among the top literary figures of Canada, Michael Ondaatje stands first. His achievement as a fiction writer is immense. Ondaatje's career started after his entry into Canada. His ancestors migrated to Canada a few centuries ago. Ondaatje himself traces this in his novels:

".....my own ancestor arriving in 1600, a doctor who cured the residing Governor's daughter with a strange herb and was rewarded with land, foreign wife, and a new name which was Dutch spelling of his own, Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language...." (Running in the Family, 64).

Ondaatje's works cover different themes. The following pages attempt a critical appraisal of his works and the post-modern techniques in them.

Ondaatje's arrival in Canada in 1962 coincided with the beginning of a remarkable period in Canadian literature. The early 1960s marked the onset of a creative flourishing in the arts which was to establish a distinctive Canadian Literature, both poetry and prose fiction, in the world of English writing. Ondaatje was both a participant and beneficiary of this unprecedented creative ferment.

Ondaatje's literary canon spanned his years in Canada, and it has taken shape in an interesting mix of genres: poetry and fiction. His first collection of poems, The Dainty Monsters (1967), written between 1963-1966. It enjoyed great fame. This collection is a precocious one. A number of recurrent Ondaatje themes are established in The Dainty Monsters. Among these are the bestiary, the webs of family connection an ongoing involvement in myth, pharaohs, Prometheus, Lilith, Philoctetes, Paris, Ionone, Helen are a few characters who find expression in Ondaatje's poetry.

His next collection, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (1970) raised him to the front ranks of Canadian

poets. In form this is a collage consisting of stark poetry, chiselled prose, photographs, etc., Rat Jelly (1973) is a well-crafted, deeply moving collection which explores several thematic rivers that flow through Ondaatje's work: family, animals and myth. Secular Love (1984) is autobiographical in theme with solipsism mixed. As author of several subsequent collections of poetry Ondaatje turned to prose fiction after the publication of In the Skin of a Lion (1987).

Ondaatje's first novel, Coming Through Slaughter, weaves intense fiction around the life of Pioneer Jazz Cornetist Buddy Bolden, published in 1976 after five years of research on the author's part. This book eventually won "Books in Canada" award. The struggle of Buddy Bolden, in this novel, is identical with Ondaatje's struggle. In other words, the narrator's search for Bolden (in this novel) is framed, in turn by Ondaatje's own search for "the man behind the legend," the historical Buddy Bolden. Thus the author, the narrator and web operate as the lenses of an imaginary

telescope through which the reader studies the object, Buddy Bolden. Yet, if one turns the telescope around and reads the novel- so to speak- in reversed order (from Bolden to Web, to the narrator, to the author) it is Ondaatje that becomes the object of the reader's search.

To put it short, Coming Through Slaughter is basically an attempt to describe the art of man who did not want his art to be described, who did not want his music to be assimilated "into wax history" or "electronic history" (CTS, 37). Thus the book's failure as a conventional biography is to be regarded as its triumph as Foulcauldian "archaeology" or "effective history."

The next important work Running in the Family functions as a microcosm of the world of the upper-class burgher. They exact the traumas of fining hither to accepted realities and identity established in the transitional era of decolonisation. The key events occur in the historical juncture when colonial hierarchies are in the process of being dismantled autobiography, which is a search for self through

parents and grandparents. Thus Running in the Family becomes a search for identity in the island itself. Through this novel Ondaatje makes a plea for the recognition of multiple identities and ethnicities which negate the nationalist or fundamentalist assertion of a homogeneous national self.

The English Patient (1992) was declared joint winner of the Booker Prize in 1998. Most people considered the award, as a sign of indisputable international recognition for one of Canada's most singular authentic voices. This novel was generally praised for its narrative inventiveness, the poetic quality of its prose, and the exotic richness of the meandering life stories, it depicts. Some felt that Ondaatje had carried his signature generic indeterminacy and his self-reflexive narratology to such an extreme that the novel effectively succumbs to a lack of cohesion and resolution.

Post Modern Techniques in Michael Ondaatje's Works:

Post-Modernism is a term used in literary parlance to refer to a corpus of

literature that has been written in the mid-fifties, sixties and after. This vogue hit Canada towards the end of the 1960s, Michael Ondaatje one among the South Asian Canadian writers, using post-modernist techniques in his works, establishes his Canadian identity.

The next two pages attempt to examine the selected works of Ondaatje throwing light from Post-modernist features. In Running in the Family, foregrounding a post-modern trend is employed by Ondaatje with "Asia" as the signifier, we find the writer of Canada and the lover of Asia in the Following lines:

Asia: The name was a gasp from dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be whispered would never be used as a battle cry.....
.....
.....
.....I was running to Asia and everything would change.(22)

Here Ondaatje attempts to recreate reality through its invention from history with the help of language. One can see a constant play with all possible borders of art and like in an

auto-, bio-, and historio-graphic meta-fiction by a self conscious bio-grapher-historian-novelist.

Fragment, one of the inheritances of modernist has become a major post-modernist form. Running in the Family carries the fragmented units of biography and history. In the chapter titled "April, 11, 1932" begins with the statement "I remember the wedding...." (36) Naturally the reader expects the author to describe the event of his parents wedding. But what follows is a textual gap represented by ellipsis disappointing the reader and making him wait indefinitely.

The matter of factness and the elements of chaos and violence in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid speak for post-modern aspect. This is well elucidated in the following passage:

".....sticking a rifle to the back of Tunstal's head (they) blew out his brains Half drunk with whisky and made with the taste of blood,.....
...this as their devil's mockery, their joke-ghastly, meaningless" (CWBK, p.54)

The post modern writer Ondaatje hails from Sri Lanka. The above said details are the origin, journey and

writings of Ondaatje in exile to Canada from a distant part of the world- who touches the lives of other [people, other kinds of exiles in to words.

Ondaatje's works subsume the predominant post modern techniques. Critics are also enamoured of a bleak, "Post-modern" vision - a reading of history that is disconcertingly anachronistic. This project (thesis) proposes to examine the fictional world of Ondaatje, to find out whether

the diasporic sensibility forms the structure of his diverse fiction and to some extent his poetry too.

Thus Ondaatje personifies and presents a multi-faceted themes and techniques in his writings. This paper has analysed a few of his themes and techniques.

Works Cited:

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