

DYNAMICS OF DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN THE FICTION OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE

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Abstract

[Michael Ondaatje's fictional works are primarily concerned with ambivalence and predicaments of displaced people. Traumatic experiences of displacement and dislocation, attempts of relocation in the new land/culture as well as reclamation of root through revisit, nostalgia and memorial reconstruction are delineated in his major characters. Ondaatje's 'divided' self (McCrum) is delineated not only in his fictional memoir 'Running in the Family' (1982), but also through the diasporic protagonists of his novels. As a diasporic writer, he is concerned with negotiation of identity of diasporas from across the world. Ondaatje shows that constructing identity is greatly problematic since everything in the postmodern world is in a flux. In the postmodern world, the diaspora undergoes constant transformations and experiences incessant 'masking' and 'unmasking of identity'. He/she progresses from the 'traumatic individual' to the 'translated' man and from the 'agent of developments' of the homeland to the hybrid-transnational-multicultural self. The present paper attempts to explore to what extent the fictional characters of Ondaatje subscribe to the various concepts of diaspora studies such as dislocation, nostalgic reclamation of the homeland, relocation/assimilation in the host land and construction of identity in the 'third space' through a close reading of Running in the Family and The Cat's Table. His protagonists are examined from the perspectives of diaspora typologies, especially the concepts of 'new diaspora' (Spivak), 'translated man' (Rushdie), 'victim' and 'de-territorialized' diasporas (Cohen) and 'hybrid' diaspora (Bhaba). The author's own sense of settlement in Canada in spite of his feeling of 'half my life' with Sri Lanka has been co-related with his protagonists who despite their sufferings of homelessness embrace multiple 'homes'. Finally Ondaatje's sense of spatial, racial and cultural mongrelization has been highlighted and his hybrid-transnational-trans-cultural diasporic status has been asserted.]

Key Words: diaspora, identity, diasporic consciousness, Michael Ondaatje, Running in the Family, The Cat's Table.

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Diaspora is a key concept in postcolonial culture and literary studies. In its most basic sense it is the 'identity' of the migrant. Sense of 'self' of the migrant in the new region is the core concern in diaspora study. Diasporic consciousness is born out of postcolonial consciousness of migration across national border. All diasporas, in spite of their different 'feelings' experienced at the moment of dispersion from homeland, undergo certain common experiences in the new lands. They feel culturally 'alienated' and 'insulated' (Safran 83) as they are not fully accepted by the host society. With such experience they 'look back' to their original homeland and realize that they cannot dissociate themselves from the native land and culture. They idealize their ancestral home and psychologically reclaim their original identity. Their diasporic sense inspire them for a 'return movement' to the homeland (Cohen "Global' 17), and some may also revisit ancestral land, but there is really 'no coming back'. While the 'forced' diaspora did not have the permission to return, the new voluntary diasporas cannot return due to homeland disturbances and the lack of employment and economic opportunities. Trapped in such critical situations the diasporas attempt to adjust themselves to the new situation by assimilating into the host culture. At times they undergo necessary transformation and adopt a 'host land identity' and at other times they may still continue to identify themselves after the homeland. The diaspora in the process is psychologically dispersed to the 'in-between' zone called the third space (Bhaba "Location" 53). In the process of the journey through trauma, nostalgia, memory, recollection, dislocation, culture shock and desire for relocation and adjustment through torture and humiliation, the diasporic individual is reborn in the 'third space' and the diaspora achieves a trans-national, multicultural hybrid identity.

The diaspora's transformation to the hybrid trans-cultural self interrogates the long standing essentialist notion of one's identity that views identity as a 'fixed' and 'given' fact.

Diasporic identity is more akin to postmodern concept of identity that is characterized by 'fluidity' and 'multiplicity' (Culler 115). Erik H. Erikson's concept of identity as a process located in the core of the individual and in the core of the communal culture points to the fluid nature of identity (18). On the other hand, social 'roles' and 'counter roles' of the individual stand for plurality of identity (Stets and Burke 225). Diaspora's experience of plurality of identity brings him a new identity of hybridity. Salman Rushdie's views on diasporic identity can be said to both counter and supplement the concept of hybridity. He observes that identity of the diasporic person is 'plural and partial'. He further observes that diasporas are 'translated men' who 'straddle two cultures' (Rushdie 17, 15). His views indicate that the element of cultural crisis is an important mark of diasporic identity. His observations highlight the diasporic negotiations of identity and the transnational characteristic of the diasporic individual.

Based on this discussion, diasporic consciousness can be described as the experience of dislocation, relocation and hybridization. Diasporic consciousness, in the first place, refers to the negative consciousnesses (Clifford 312)- i.e. the experience of displacement, dislocation, sense of uprooting, alienation and marginalization when the diaspora undergoes crisis of identity. Loss of original culture and native land, problems of relocation in the alien land and the attempt of assimilation are three important aspects of diasporic dislocation.

Secondly, diasporic consciousness urges the diaspora to reclaim original identity through 'cultural and material links'. Avtar Brah focuses on diasporic attachment to homeland when she calls it 'a mythic place of desire' (92). Similarly, Rushdie's observation that 'the past is home' although it is lost in 'the mists of lost time' (9) signifies the aspects of reclamation and re-rooting by the diaspora. In fact, as an 'intellectual' in exile, the diaspora reclaims his original culture. Clifford considers it to be the identification with historical heritage. Homeland researches, reconstruction of homeland history, involvement in homeland development activities (Cohen 17, Safran 83) testify one's diasporic reclamation.

Diasporic consciousness in the third place is the sense of cultural hybridity that refers to the mixing up heterogeneous cultures. Hybridity is achieved in the third space, the intercultural space and the space 'in-betweenness'. Bhaba has associated the notion of ambivalence with the third space. It indicates that diasporic identity is based on the notion of fluidity itself. He observes, 'all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity' (Rutherford 211). Uma Parameswaran has correlated the 'in-between' space of cultural hybridity to the mythic space

called 'Trishanku's heaven'. Like Trishanku in the myth, the diaspora is relocated neither in the origin nor in the destination. In spite of the denial of heavenly pleasures, the diaspora, like Trishanku, has to reconcile himself to the new home with the realization that 'home is where our feet are' (Jain 38). Parameswaran's conceptualization is significant since it indicates an elevation or resurrection of the diasporic 'soul/self'. This elevation is significant because, the diaspora's rebirth as a trans-cultural, multicultural and transnational individual points to his toleration of different cultures (Brooker 144) as well as respect and allegiance to various nations. The broadness of vision with appreciation, interaction, assimilation and promotion of multiethnic thoughts against monoculturalism speaks for a virtual rebirth of the diasporic self. To be precise, journey of the culturally shocked diaspora to that of a transnational-multicultural-hybrid-resurrected self speaks for diasporic success against all odds of alienation and marginalization, fluidity and instability.

In the backdrop of these diasporic concerns, Michael Ondaatje's (b. 1943) diasporic sensibility as depicted in his fiction can be explored. In fact, Ondaatje is a celebrated South Asian diasporic writer who has experienced both geographical displacement and cultural dislocation. His migration to England and then to Canada at a very tender age necessitated not only by education but also family circumstances explains his geographic dispersion. Again his nostalgia for the losses in Sri Lanka in spite of his settlement in Canada is a pointer to his cultural dislocation and urge for relocation. By birth Ondaatje achieves certain hybridity. His parents Mervyn and Doris Gratiaen belonged to the Burgher class, a well-to-do section of Ceylonese Colonial Society. His biographer Ed Jewinski observes that Ondaatjes were "solidly British colonial in outlook" although his ancestry was a mixture of the Dutch, the Sinhalese, and the Tamil (23). Ondaatje's English educational background formed the British strain in him. Later on in Canada he awoke to a new, robust literary tradition. In the multicultural ethos of Canada he develops 'a sense of a new, vigorous, and vital outlook on the world' (Jewinski 31). These various formative influences in a combined way contribute to his artistic mongrelization that has been marked by critics as a sort of diasporic hybridity.

Ondaatje's diasporic background makes him incessantly concerned with displacement and dislocation. In his case, the most significant aspect of the diaspora experience is the experience of moving from one culture to another. As a diaspora, he has 'straddled' multiple cultures- of Sri Lanka, of England and of Canada. His attempt of re-rooting is signified by his

revisits to the homeland in 1978 and 1980 before writing his fictional memoir *Running in the Family*. Culturally he feels torn between Sri Lanka and Canada since both the nations/cultures are dear to him. In an interview he says, "... being Sri Lankan born and growing up there, I feel it's half my life... Sri Lanka was my culture... Canada was the culture I adopted... so these two things are very important to me" (qtd. in Tansley 183). Ondaatje's concerns for the two countries/cultures permeate his works; his diasporic protagonists, like him, negotiate their identity in the alien lands.

The protagonists in Ondaatje's fiction display their sense of displacement and dislocation and their subsequent yearning for an identity. Ondaatje himself the protagonist in *Running in the Family* (1982) undertakes his journeys to native land Sri Lanka to unearth his family root. His migration to England at the tender age of 11 and then to Canada for education and career presents his physical displacement from his native land. It is noteworthy that although Ondaatje's journey to Canada via England presents his multiple displacements, he is concerned with the loss of his native land only. He lost his country, Ceylon even by the name since its new name is Sri Lanka. The land/island was named differently corresponding to the different geographic shapes it achieved throughout history. Ondaatje's repeated use of 'Ceylon' points to the loss of that country which was dear to him but is now irredeemable.

Ondaatje is of course more concerned for his cultural losses. The dislocations Ondaatje has suffered, the family heritage the author has lost, the history and myth associated with their family but unrecorded and the fatherly care he has missed point to his various cultural losses. In fact, his exploration of 'root' is necessitated by his sense of loss not only of place but of a part of the family's past. The dislocations Ondaatje's family suffered signifies Ondaatje's own dislocation. His urge for a niche in the Sri Lankan history indirectly endorses the loss of the privileged social status his family had enjoyed in the past. Similarly his desire to understand the story of his father and his past implies that he has experienced a sort of dislocation from the fatherly care.

Ondaatje's sense of alienation as regards his association with native land points to his cultural dislocations. As a migrant writer, he feels that even though as the prodigal he 'hates the foreigner', he is a 'foreigner' (78). It is with this sense of the 'outsider' that he expresses his dislike of the heat and squalor prevalent in Ceylon (79).

He continues this sense of non-belongingness when he speculates, "We own the country

we grow up in or we are aliens and invaders.” (80). He considers himself as an alien who has “lived in an alien land among strangers, cut away from his own countrymen....” (82). Ondaatje expresses his sense of loss when he says that they are remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. (201). His reference to “distance” with which he writes histories signifies his dislocation. Similarly his sense of loss that he could never speak to his father as an adult (201) points to his dislocation as well as his personal identity crisis.

The issue of Ondaatje’s dislocation from Sri Lanka is discernible in *The Cat’s Table* (2011) as well. The novel is concerned with the diasporic event of dispersion and allegorizes Ondaatje’s own dispersion from Ceylon/Sri Lanka. Here Ondaatje draws intensively from his own perspective as an immigrant settler in Canada and puts together an adventurous story of a sea-voyage. The novelist depicts marginalization and otherisation of diaspora by putting the protagonist Michael (Mynah) at table no 76, the Cat’s Table which is contrasted with the Captain’s Table at the opposite end of the dining room (9). It is called ‘cat’s table’ because it is “the least privileged place, with no special importance” (11). Ondaatje’s diasporic sense leads him to depict displacement suffered by the marginalized.

The Cat’s Table can be connected to the memoir *Running in the Family* because in both the works the protagonists are dispersed from Sri Lanka due to the rift of the parents, both Michaels --the narrator and the author-- immigrate to England as children to meet the mothers and both are Sri Lankan-born writers now settled in Canada. Different shades of migration are depicted in the novel. The protagonist experiences deep sense of displacement during the voyage. In this regards Charli Ann Punt observes: “... it is through an exploration of his experience of voyage on board the Oronsay that Mynah is able to reflect upon this deep feeling of displacement.”(51).

With the experience of alienation, marginalization and sense of distance due to displacement and dislocation, it is natural that the diasporic individual attempts to find a ground to re-root him/her. Consequent to these attempts, he/she undergoes certain transformations, becomes ‘translated men’ with their assimilation into the host culture. He/she may also attempt to reclaim the original home/culture/ethnicity/nation. Ondaatje’s characters present their journeys from dislocation to relocation in both senses – of assimilation with the new situation and of re-rooting in ancestral home/culture.

In *Running in the Family* Ondaatje reclaims his roots through revisit to homeland, exploration of family history and native myth, reconciliation with his father, concern for native

language and rediscovery of images, sounds, colours and smells. His journey to Ceylon/Sri Lanka is his attempt to re-root himself in the original land. It is notable that throughout the memoir he calls his native land 'Ceylon', not Sri Lanka, the present name. By this, Ondaatje means that he attempts to reclaim the land when its name was Ceylon.

Ondaatje's exploration of family history is his attempt to re-root himself in the original culture. Since a name is an important marker of culture, Ondaatje's firm sense of rooting in his original culture is shown in his obsession with family name. He is excited to discover his family name in old documents at St. Thomas Church. The name chiselled on the stone floor thus becomes a proof of permanence and the perpetuation of the Ondaatjes' name. He takes with humility the responsibility of carrying it, and thus becomes a part of his ancestry and heritage. In the same manner, his observation with the native language Sinhalese as 'the most beautiful alphabet' (83) is a pointer to his reclamation of Sri Lankan identity.

Ondaatje's representation of mythical view of Ceylon signifies his reclamation of Ceylonese identity. In the section *Tongue*, he refers to a myth that "if the child is given thalagoya tongue to eat he will become brilliantly articulate, will always speak beautifully.." (73). It reveals his interest in myth and gossip that are part of any family history. His mythic technique aligns him with the family myth makers.

In his attempt to authenticate familial lineage Ondaatje uses visual images along with verbal description. Ondaatje uses seven photographs to showcase his family history. In fact, the photographic device helps Ondaatje to come to terms with the past that is both personal and cultural.

In order to connect himself to family lineage, Ondaatje brings in the idea of a family pyramid. He says, "I am part of a human pyramid. Below me are the bodies that I am standing on and above me are several more, though I am quite near the top" (13). He realizes and recognizes his attachment to something larger than himself. He incessantly struggles to understand his father's life and his relationship with his mother. In the chapter 'Blind Faith' he expresses his yearning to reconcile with his father and says, "Give me your arm." (202). He also desires to justify his father's character and his tendency to excessive drinking, love of stories and extravagant imagination. Through his writing, Ondaatje comes to terms with his past as also with the suppressed part of his identity. Through all these methods, Ondaatje voices his desire to rebuild his Sri Lankan identity.

The desire to reclaim Sri Lankan identity is carried out in *The Cat's Table* too. Ondaatje's reclamation of Sri Lankan identity is signified in the opening paragraph of *The Cat's Table*. The protagonist Michael's journey to the Sri Lankan port through Reclamation Road (3) stands for Ondaatje's renewed concern for his childhood voyage. Michael's physical and literary journeys allegorize Ondaatje's 'runnings' as depicted in *Running in the Family*.

Within the textual framework, transformation of identity is presented in the growth of Michael, Ramadhin and Cassius. The twenty one day journey gives them exposure to the adult world. Later, Michael becomes a writer (199), Cassius, a painter (179). Again, Michael's marriage to Ramadhin's sister 'to stay close to a community from childhood' (197) points to diasporic attempt of reclamation of root. Michael's observation that many immigrant family 'remain haunted by the persistent ghost of an earlier place' (192) points to diaspora's 'mythic desire for a home'.

The dislocated diasporas constantly negotiate their allegiance to different lands and cultures. Despite their attempts to assimilate with the people of the host country, they may still be put in the periphery. Again, although they try to reclaim root through revisit, there is 'no coming back' except in memory. They belong to both and yet belong to neither. Trapped in such a dichotomy, the diaspora has to identify his/her 'self' in the third space. The diasporic self is reborn in the third space and diaspora achieves the identity of a hybrid, trans-national and multicultural individual. Ondaatje diasporic individuals rise above the trauma of dislocation from the homeland and marginalization in the host country. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje links himself to mixed heritage. In mapping out the experiences of the two journeys to 'Ceylon' he highlights his hybrid heritage and thereby indicates his original hybrid identity. Lee Spinks states, "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). This 'doubleness' of roots contests any essentialist identity for Ondaatje and establishes his unavoidable hybridity.

Ondaatje projects the hybrid nature of his native land as a symbol for his identity. He projects Sri Lanka as a multicultural nation consisting of people of various cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds. He questions the notion of a pure and stable Sri Lankan identity and assumes the space of hybridity. The constant negotiations of domination and discrimination in Sri Lanka, as Ondaatje projects, make Sri Lanka a multicultural and hybrid nation. As a diasporic writer

from a hybrid country and living in another multicultural state, Ondaatje cannot help being a hybrid.

In projecting his sense for the homeland and the host land Ondaatje delineates his hybridity. He revisits the native land, but does not return to it. He has the dual sense of the 'prodigal' and the foreigner in regard to 'Ceylon' (RF 78). His concerns for two countries push him to a third space where his identity as a transnational individual is reborn.

The Cat's Table depicts Ondaatje's negotiation of identity in the third space. The sea-voyage turns out to be a Trishanku's Paradise for Michael, the protagonist and his friends Ramadhin and Cassius. It is this paradise the grown up Michael traces to showcase his trans-cultural identity. The trans-cultural space of the voyage makes their identity free from constraints of time and place. In this "in-between" space, identity interacts, shares experiences and gains understanding from various people belonging to different cultural backgrounds. The past has not really passed for the adult Michael, who looks back on his childhood to reconstruct it by projecting himself into the future. Ondaatje depicts Michael's rise from homeland identity by nicknaming him after a bird – the 'Mynah'. The voyage becomes a site for cultural encounters that tries to dissolve the duality of self/other, inside/outside, familiar/strange, center/periphery and Michael, the narrator, allegorically the author, becomes the voice of the migrants who struggle to cope with life in the transnational/transcultural spaces.

Ondaatje forges the differences of age, class, gender, race, the painful and thrilling transition from East to West that challenge the freedom of self and identity. He emphasizes the significance of ordinary, anonymous, unrecorded persons in the development of identity and culture. His migrants live in between both identities, permanently in a flux, simultaneously inhabiting the two worlds, enjoying both the states of comfort, happiness and despair. The initial losses as also the remaking of identity in transnational/trans-cultural spaces point towards a hopeful future. Thus Ondaatje portrays in *The Cat's Table* as also in his other fictional works the migrant coming to terms with trans-cultural identities.

Ondaatje's trans-cultural sense leads him to take up the task of rewriting the history of his multicultural host land. His works demonstrate the changing nature of diasporic identity. The author has negotiated his own identity in the memoir as well as through his other fictional writings. He reclaims his roots as part of his identity. The progress of the diasporic self from the traumatized man to the settled individual has been the core structure of his fictional works. He

demonstrates cultural hybridity, trans-nationality and multiculturalism as the solutions for fluidity of diasporic identity.

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