

Thematic Concerns and Historical Backgrounds in the Works of Michael Ondaatje: A Brief Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the thematic concerns and historical backgrounds in the work of an immigrant Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje who has made his mark in the corpus of Canadian literature. This paper throws light on how his works magically transformed into works of art with poetic language and how he weaves a beautiful and light-handed prose through the histories of people caught up in love and war. This paper concludes with the statement that, he is one of the most innovative and liberating writers of our time.

Key words: thematic concerns, historical backgrounds.

Michael Ondaatje, an immigrant Canadian writer, born in 1943 in Sri Lanka, moved to London in 1954 and emigrated to Canada in 1962. As it is typical of many immigrant writers who strive hard to grow roots in the new soil, Ondaatje is one such writer who has made his mark in the corpus of Canadian literature. Ondaatje is not only a poet but also a novelist living in Canada and teaching at York University in Toronto. What is generally held is that Ondaatje's works are strongly rooted in fact and reality that goes to the level of forming a myth and then magically transformed into works of art with poetic language. The major characteristics that mark all Canadian writing are nothing but the recurrence of the pattern of isolation and fear of survival that gets projected in the literary works of the writers like Ondaatje.

Over the Sixties, Ondaatje's main efforts as an artist were devoted to poetical creations like **The Dainty Monsters** (1967) which is almost the very first book and many poems are over literary and forced in expression, dominated by amusement value with mildly stimulating novelty. The poem "Application for a Driving License" might be quoted in full as typical of this:

"Two birds loved
in a flurry of red feathers
like a burst cotton ball,
continuing while I drove over them.

I am a good driver,
Nothing shocks me" (Mundwiler 29)

"The man with Seven Toes" (1969) is a work of artistic rigor—a dramatic poem of spare, brilliant and of ten haunting images and this was performed as a dramatic reading for three speakers—a convict, a lady and a narrator. **The Collected Works of Billy the Kid** (1970) is a compassionate and convincing portrait not only of a savage individual but of the casually brutal human wilderness in which Billy was both villain and victim. Here Ondaatje creates the near madness of Billy and his companions, the paranoia of the guardian of law and order, and the crazy instability of one era of the American dream. Ondaatje fuses pieces of history with his own poems for describing the events better. **Coming Through Slaughter** (1976) is based on the life of cornet player Buddy Bolden, one of the legendary jazz pioneers of the turn of the century New Orleans. Ostensibly a novel, this is a documentary recreation of Bolden's life, expressed through a collage of fragmented memoirs, interviews, archival material and hospital files. These bits of historical data are entwined with imaginary conversations and monologues which attempt to explain Bolden's life and aspirations in the context of back street New Orleans, the downtown world of bars, whores, the street life of which Ondaatje

spins a story that moves in the direction of truth. The work is made up of cinematic series of short scenes-jagged, dislocated and seemingly spontaneous that approximates the quality of music that strutted or flowed out of Bolden's cornet.

Running in the Family (1982) transgresses several generic boundaries. Here Ondaatje uses writing to disrupt previously cherished notions of truth, violence and history and then interweaves photographs, musical notations and the lyrics of imported American dance hall recordings, historical accounts, a wide reading through European and American portrayals of Ceylon, his own diary's examination of return with his children to Sri Lanka after twenty years in Canada (often in the form of poetry), family legends, gossip and local rumours in his memoir of his parents and their halcyon days in pre-independence Ceylon. In this work, he sets out on a quest for discovering places, people, histories and personas that might provide a sense of belonging, strength and psychic peace. In short, **Running the Family** is an evocative and semi-autobiographical account of a journey back to the beginning, to Ceylon where Ondaatje was born into a privileged group of mixed Dutch, Tamil and Sinhalese origin.

In The Skin of a Lion (1987) is a poem in the form of a novel dedicated to workers and lovers. Their labours change them; their skin comes off and they put on a new skin, becoming someone else. As they love and lose their loves, and love again, their lives explode into new directions. This is an "ethnic fiction that recounts the tale of the creation of a new Canada by the immigrants. "Ondaatje's characteristically cinematic cutting between images that hang in the consciousness as if they were feathers to imagination's air stream and his concern with writing between the official pages of history are used here to evoke what it meant to be "ethnic" and "immigrant" in Toronto at the beginning of this century" (Emmamel 42). The city emerges as the novel's protagonist and is built by the snatches of conversation and sometimes by the intimate voices of several different communities-all of them immigrant and

all engaged in constructing a new world that the novel embodies. **The Cinnamon Peeler** (1989) has Henri Rousseau, the painter and Wallace Stevens the poet as the tutelary gods of this book. Rousseau is presented as the power to invent ominous, devouring landscape whereas Stevens appears as the mind endlessly teasing out the thought inherent in nature. To add further, what Ondaatje the novelist contributes is an acute sense of story and social density. Magical transformation of realistic elements, philosophical speculations and novelistic sensations are the elements of this work.

The English Patient (1992) is a kind of post-apocalyptic writing, a kind of a historiographic metafiction. The novel presents a handful of people who suddenly find themselves in a world after the fall in which both physical and psychological reality has become highly volatile. It does record the paradoxical attempt of the characters to forget and remember their apocalyptic experiences as they try to reestablish their lives in order to find a *modus Vivendi* in a post war after world. The English patient's past and identity are a mystery and as he lies on his death bed in a villa in Tuscany in the closing stages of the Second World War, his story unfolds and this novel could be seen as a romance with absurd humour. As Ondaatje himself writes, "While some of the characters who appear in this book are based on historical figures, and while many of the areas described-such as the Gilf Kebir and its surrounding desert exist, and were explored in the 1930, it is important to stress that this story is a fiction and that the portraits of the characters who appear in it are fictional as are some of the events and journeys" (TEP 305). Ondaatje's new collection of poems (1999) entitled "Handwriting" is nothing but a continuation of his memoir **Running in the Family**, where he uses minimum expenditure of words, fine-tuned movement that incorporates as its primary tool suggestiveness and subtlety. His poem "**The First Rule of Sinhalese Architecture**" has been marked by the deft use of white space, short lines and the absence of full stops. These factors allow readers to breathe and interpret with maximum effect:

“Never build three doors
in a straight line
A devil might rush
through them
deep into your’s house
into your life” (Sen 338)

In **Handwriting**, Ondaatje deals with Srilankan past, a past that is very much present in his life. Through this, the poet colours his broader palette, scope and vision. The fact that Ondaatje presents Srilanka realistically and unexotically lends a believable and even magical edge to his text. His observations are sharp and wry, but at the same time wise and pragmatic. The opening lines of the poem “To Anuradhapura” make this point clear:

“In the dry lands
every few miles, moving north,
another roadside Ganesh.
straw figures
on bamboo scaffolds
to advertise a family
of stilt-walkers” (P 338).

This volume is a fine example of free verse, free of all forced and encumbered prosody and poetics but containing breath and breathing. Ondaatje’s many talents are known through his use of juxtaposition. For example, he juxtaposes the epigrammatic and narrative, ancient and modern, spirituality and sexual liberty, all in one ground. Ondaatje’s some favorite poems are prose poems like “Death at Katragame”, “A Gentleman Compares His Virtue to a Piece of Jade”, “Buried”, “House on a Red Cliff” “Last Ink” and “The Distance of a Stout”. Despite his poetic creations winning him a good standing in literature, Ondaatje’s literary achievements won his celebrated novel **The English Patient** the Booker Prize in 1992 and brought the novel to the attention of the British film director Anthony Minghella, who, enthralled by the novel, decided to render it into visual form through a cinematic interpretation.

In The Skin of a Lion is a novel about the making of Canada which is a polyglot, pluralistic state where most of Canada’s people belong to foreign countries. There are many races in the country. The White race dominates the country and suppresses the black race and South Asian

country settlers. This novel **In The Skin of a Lion** deals with this racial problem and also explains how the rich people ill-treat the labourers who are supposed to play an important role in the making of Canada. The novel explains how the labourers are ill-treated by the officers and pictures their hard-working nature by all means. It is just a book about those in power, and their ability to make their word the law, both metaphorically and actually. Gerry Turcotte observes: “In the end, this book becomes the voice of all those relegated to the margins of society, the so-called migrants of a community, the working-class, and the undervalued” (P 43) Ondaatje elaborately picturises the problems of labourers in the field of bridge construction. The very first chapter opens with the labourers; “Thirty loggers, wrapped up dark, carrying axes and small packages of food which hang from their belts. They seem exhausted, before the energy of the sun” (SL 47). These workers wake up early morning before the Sun. Canada is basically an ice land but these workers never bother about the climate. Then the novelist notes the labourers working hard in constructing the Toronto City. The sweat moves between their hard bodies and the cold clothes. “Some die of pneumonia or from the sulphur in their lungs from the mills they work in and during other seasons as well they sleep in the shacks behind the Bell rock Hotel and have little connection with the town” (P 85).

The tunnel has been built under the Lake Ontario. The workers’ arms are itching and the chest dry because of the pumps exhausting power. The workers’ position has been very pitiable in this field. “As the workers slip in the wet clay unable to stand properly, pissing where they work, eating where some one else left shit” (P 106). As a result of the workers’ hard work, the Toronto City had water supply and electrical supply. All workers arrived in the morning in darkness and worked till six in the evening. These labourers’ death and sacrifice is very helpful to the country’s industrial progress and growth. Thus, **In The Skin of a Lion** (1987) is a poem in the form of a novel dedicated to workers and lovers and this is an “ethnic fiction” that recounts the tale of the creation of a new Canada by immigrants.

The English Patient is a post-modern novel that reveals the post-modern idea of re-writing the history. Most of the happenings in the novel have post war Italy as the background and the ending of the novel is about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So it becomes necessary to know about II World War and its background, particularly in Italy. During the final moments of the Second World War, in a deserted Italian villa, four people come together: a young Canadian nurse, her life focused on the English patient who is charred beyond recognition and identity, a Canadian- Italian thief who prefers to be described as a mover of things, the inert patient and an Indian soldier in the British Army who is a bomb disposal expert. This novel is located in an Italian villa, villa san Girolambo, a former nunnery used as a hospital in war time, now declared unsafe because of the bombing and infused landmines occupying the place. In it the English patient lies whose face has been burnt out of recognition in a plane accident in the Libyan Desert during the war. This patient is being nursed by a twenty-year old Canadian nurse. She had a broken relationship and an abortion and she herself is the child of broken marriage. She comes to know that her father is dead, again the victim of a fire accident in the war. The English patient and Hana placing them in this ruined villa is an act of willed seclusion. Both are found living in a kind of sleep-like state. Their seclusion was interrupted by two men. They are Caravaggio and Kirpal Singh. Caravaggio, her father's Italian friend, is a thief and spy. Kirpal Singh is an Indian sapper who has been deputed to clear the mines in the area. Because of these two outsiders, disruptive and regenerative forces enter the villa. The patient has long confessional sessions with Caravaggio as he goes over the past. He talks about the Libyan Desert. Its geographical location has been shifted by the sandstorms. The patient's account of his love relationship with Katherine also uncovers his identity.

Actually he is the Hungarian spy, Almasy. Singh's full-bodied presence in this world of mutilated men awakens desire in Hana. Both the narratives work in opposite directions. The English patient's case states that identities can not be shed or

camouflaged and the past can not be discarded. The relationship between Hana-Kirpal pretends, for a while, that they can shed or change identities. In that villa, temporarily, they concede that the racial or political pulls are irrelevant. There are several sub-narratives within these two main narratives. Caravaggio has a past of his own involvement in politics and spying. The English patient has also been a double agent. Kirpal's training period in England brings in the colonial-imperial relationship.

This novel **The English Patient** is a part of the tradition of apocalyptic literature. It ends in the destructive climax of the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But it also resists this tradition in a double move: not interested in the thrills apocalyptic climaxes offer, Ondaatje presents the climax via Kip's reactions seen from Hana's future perspective. He thus supplements the spatial distance of the events which happen far away in Japan by mediating them through the temporal distance of Hana's memory just as the apocalyptic losses of world experienced by the English patient. The English patient's story seems to be confirmed by Caravaggio's information. Both are citizens of morphine addicts, dependent on each other and morphine for stories, for making sense of their apocalyptic war experiences one way or another. Further more both are spies, professional liars and thieves. The desert researcher knows he is out there "to explore a half-invented world of the desert" (EP 150). Sailing into the past and away from a world which has become uncomfortable with the realization of the absurdity and meaninglessness of "The Great War" it has just been through. From this perspective, the' reaction against nation and identification makes sense: "I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation" (E P 139). Ironically, this man, stripped of identity and nation, is referred to as "English".

When Hana asks for confirmation about the English patient's identity, Caravaggio's reply is evasive and later on the narrator also switches back to "English patient" to return just once to

“Almasy” in the confusion at the end of the story, when Kip aims his rifle at the patient. Here Caravaggio intervenes: He isn’t an Englishman. But at this point this does not matter any more: “American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman” (E P 286). At this terminal point of the war, “Englishman” no longer seems to refer to nationality only but to attitude; by this logic, it does indeed not matter any more whether the English patient is English. The English patient’s rolling cry “Erase the family name! Erase nations” has been heeded in the novel. In post-apocalyptic times, questions of nationality have become secondary, contaminated; another concept of nineteenth-century stability is shattered in the onslaught of twentieth-century reality.

To conclude, Ondaatje’s both the novels **In The Skin of a Lion** and **The English Patient** are based on historicity. In **The English Patient**, the background is absolutely the Second World War and it’s surrounding. In **The Skin of a Lion** shows how the Toronto City emerges. In **The English Patient**, Michael Ondaatje weaves a

beautiful and light-handed prose through the histories of people caught up in love and war. This pair of novels, when taken together, confirm Ondaatje’s standing as one of the most innovative and liberating writers of our time.

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As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others.

~ **Bill Gates**