TRANSCULTURAL DISCOURSE AND QUEST FOR HOME AND LAND IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY*

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Abstract: This research article entitled Transcultural Discourse and Quest for Home and Land in Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family examines the various reasons for the east and west connections in Sri Lankan culture and the influence of home and land on the mental well-being of an individual. Western invasions in eastern countries left the footprints of its culture in various colonized countries. A sense of belongingness plays a vital role in the writings of diasporic writers. An individual's memory of the past indicates his or her traumatic loss and their desire to reconstruct the past. Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family *is a memoir that blends historical factuality with fictiveness. The narration through maps, photos, and the record of the events depicts the Western consciousness and its perception of Ceylon. The text pictures the story of Sri Lankan culture and its transcultural transformations with the representation of Western culture. Ondaatje knits the deep sense of diaspora and his traumatic loss of home.*

An individual's culture is based on the culture of a group or class, and the culture of a group or class depends upon the culture of a society to which an individual, group, or class belongs. Culture influences the life of an individual, group, or society beyond the national boundaries. Colonization, immigration, and technological development in the field of communication pave the way for transculturalism. In the present scenario, aboriginal culture has become extinct in the majority of countries in the world. Everything is transcultural. Transnational and transcultural issues are the predominant themes in the works of many writers who can no longer be related to one particular nation or culture. In his book *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture,* T.S. Eliot describes that culture has different connections by the 'development of an individual, a group or class, or a whole society' (Eliot, 1973, 21). Transculturalism is a consequence of the interconnections of various cultures. Michael Ondaatje is a transcultural writer as he belongs to different cultures. He is a Tamil-Sinhela-Dutch resident of Canada.

Imperialism is an important phenomenon that creates a hybrid culture in the postcolonial era. An individual's exposure to a foreign culture has a significant role in transculturalism. Occidental representation in colonized countries remains inseparable. Diasporic writers like V.S Naipaul, Shyam Selvadurai, Khaled Hosseini, and Michael Ondaatje use the theme of the quest for the homeland as a backdrop for many of their works. Michael Ondaatje, widely known as a Canadian writer, was born in Sri Lanka into a family of Dutch-Tamil-Sinhala origin. He left the island at the age of eleven. He continued his studies in England for eight years and went to Toronto in 1962. Despite his untroubled transition between the three different cultures, his imagination remains haunted by the first country where he had his childhood days. Ondaatje is meticulous in unleashing the cultural hybridity and Indigenous experience through the significant characters of his novels. Buddy Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter*, Patrick Lewis in *In the Skin of Lion*, and Anil Tissera in *Anil's Ghost* represent the marginalized within the communities where they experience ambivalence and self-division. Ondaatje explores the issues of identity that traverse cultural and national boundaries and encompasses both central and marginal positions in his works.

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Running in the Family, Ondaatje's second prose work, records his journey to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980. It brings Ondaatje's poetic reconstruction with his Sri Lankan roots into the limelight. It is a collage of interconnected stories in which Ondaatje exhibits his plight between different cultures and his carvings for home and land. His trauma of dislocation has been displayed through the memories of the narrator. This memoir begins with an untitled preface in which the glimpse of Sri Lankan space mutates suddenly into a nightmare, unfolding the images of dispassion and loss. In the nightmare, an unidentified male figure is subsumed into an anarchic, and the predatory landscape appears to renew its importance in the act of reclaiming his body:

> All across the city men roll carts with ice clothed in sawdust. Later on, during a fever, the drought still continuing, his nightmare is that thorn trees in the garden send their hard roots underground towards the house climbing through windows so they can drink sweat off body, steal the last of his saliva off his tongue. (Ondaatje, 2009, 2)

The melancholic nightmare vision abruptly disappears by the bedroom light, making the figure identifiable as Ondaatje. The loss of his homeland is felt in his words, "For twenty five years he has not lived in this country, though up to the age of eleven he slept in rooms like this – with no curtains, just delicate bars across the windows so no one could break in" (Ibid.). It implies the motif of return and Ondaatje's firm roots in Sri Lankan soil.

Though Ondaatje settled in Canada, he feels he is in Sri Lanka. His memoir's chapter "Asia" reveals his struggle with two different lands as he is shuttled between two different landscapes. His ambivalent narration 'a collection of maps strewn upon a Canadian floor' shows the fragmented memories of a dislocated childhood experience. Affinity to the aboriginal landscape has a vital role in the psychological resilience of an individual. Ondaatje reveals his strong desire to be in the land of his ancestors, though he was away from Sri Lanka for more than twenty-five years. The visual imagery of the surreal incidents he records in the text makes the narration fact fiction. Loss of familial bond and the quest to reconstruct a happy home is deliberate in his writings, as he shares it in an interview with Catherine Bush:

> BUSH. Did you go back and recreate stories that you remembered or were you discovering a whole other world that you hadn't known?
> ONDAATJE. It was more a discovery. I had been skirting around the world of my parents for a long time in my poems. The anecdotes had been filtered down by my brother and sisters to me. All I was given were fragments. I was always trying to make sense of these surreal lines or incidents, or at least trying to give them a context, a story about my grandmother's breast being fondled by a stranger on a bus, for instance, or an uncle turning up at a wedding on an elephant. When I went back I didn't even know if I could write a book or not, and then of course I discovered a whole ocean of stories and subplots. It was more a matter of keeping material out. There were stories that took place outside Sri Lanka but I decided to keep everything on this one island. (Bush, 1990, 88)

Echoes of the past in *Running in the Family* express the author's trauma of displacement. His novels discuss the dilemma of the immigrants. He has experienced different cultures in different countries, but his association with his homeland, where he lived until he was eleven, dramatically influenced his writings. He states his quest for the homeland as follows,

> This left the family alone once more. We had everything. It was and still is the most beautiful place in the world. We drove up, my family, Gillian's family, from the south coast, dusty, with headaches, tired, up a terrible stone broken road and stopped at the big

> bungalow. And my daughter turned to me on the edge of the lawn where I had my first haircuts and said, "If we lived here it would be perfect." "Yes," I said. (Ondaatje, 2009, 157)

Running in the Family comes under the category of travel literature. Carol E. Leon, in his article "Textual Travel: Creating the Home Space and Search for Belonging in Micael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family,"* analyzes Ondaatje's memoir as a travel narrative. He states that the idea of home in a diasporic context acclaims critical interest. Home plays a prominent role in tracing identity. (Leon, 2022) At Present, the geopolitics of transnationality has created new identities of home, and the motif of writing and returning home reveals the ideological struggles inherent in the construction of subjectivity and place.

Nobody can deny the fact that the home has an impact on geopolitics. The trauma of dislocation triggers repeated memories in the minds of the people who have the quest for their ancestral land. The home is firmly attached to the individual's psyche in the postcolonial and postmodern context. In his article, "New Lamps for Old: Diasporas Migrancy Borders," Vijay Mishra discusses that home is vital in the postcolonial psyche. The diasporic sensibility of the writer in *Running in the Family* can be traced through his desire to reconstruct his belongingness and identity. Homeland presents the psychic imagery of the diasporas throughout the text. It depicts the importance of home to the writer. The pictorial narration adds more emotion to the flashback as it is shared through a combination of travelogue, autobiography, biography, poetry, photography, eyewitness, and journal entries.

In the chapter "Tabula Asiae," Ondaatje highlights the foreign invasion and arrival of the multi-cultures in Cylon. Imperialism has had cross-cultural effects in Sri Lanka. He calls Cylon "the wife of many marriages" (Ibid., 60) as it was exposed to various cultures. He describes the historical transformation of Cylon in the hands of invaders as follows,

> The maps reveal rumourse of topography, the routs for invasion and trade, and the dark mad mind of travellors' tales appears throughout Arab and Chinese and medival records. The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape – Serendip, Ratnapida ('island of gems'), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeila, Syllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon – the wife of may marriages courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language. (Ibid.)

Ondaatje's attempt to find the historical origin of his ancestors discovers the arrival of a trading ship to Ceylon in 1600 and his ancestor's marriage with a Dutch woman. After her death, he married a Sinhala woman. Transculturalism existed in his own family many centuries ago. The marriage between an imperial master and his colonial wife created an unstable culture.

> 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 spilling of his own. Ondaatje, A parody of the ruling language. And when his Dutch wife died, marrying a Sinhalese woman, having nine children, and remaining. Here. At the centre of rumour. At this point on the map. (Ibid.)

The narrator feels alienated as he has stayed away from his homeland for twenty-five years. His ambivalent narration depicts his loss of identity and the firm sense of belonging, "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner"(Ibid.,78).

Though he lived for more than two decades in Canada, which is more remarkable than Sri Lanka, the contradictory weather condition of his homeland did not make him worry, "We are back within the heat of Colombo, in the hottest month of the year. It is delicious…This heat that drove the Englishmen crazy" (Ibid., 78)…. "Heat disgraces the foreigners"(Ibid., 79).

Ondaatje's multicultural issues initiate a discourse on dislocation and displacement. Ondaatje's loss of home and family is reflected in his writings. The central characters of his novels represent his traumatic loss of home. *Running in the family* comes under the category of travel literature. The 1993 vintage edition of the book describes it as an inspired marriage of travel narrative and family memoir. Bharathi Mukherjee is of the view that the book is a "part familial saga, part the typical North American roots search, part travel account and part social history, delivered with consciousness and intensity of poetry" (Mukherjee, 1982, 30). Loss of familial bond and the broken relationship of his parents took him away from his family and made him an expatriate. The home space creates numerous problems for the writer as he has been away from his ancestral land for over two decades. Ondaatje's panic about visiting Ceylon is imaged primarily in the context of a dream. The evocative use of verbal imagery in Ondaatje's memoir entices the reader through a pictorial narrative. He begins the text with a terrible memory of the landscape and his father figure in his dream:

> What began it all was the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto. I was sleeping at a friend's house. I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them were screaming and barking into the tropical landscape. The noises woke me. I sat up on the uncomfortable sofa and I was in a jungle, hot, sweating. Street lights bounced off the snow and into the room through the hanging vines and ferns at my friends window.(Ondaatje, 2009, 5)

The narrator's dream describes his identities colliding. He fears visiting his homeland because he thinks the home space can unsettle the diasporic individual's sense of identity. The disturbing memory of home and land questions the author's conception of self and belonging. The homeland for a diasporic writer can never be completely reclaimed. Salman Rushdie states that the diasporic writer feels the loss of homeland in an intensified form as it reminds the loss of self. Ondaatje is nostalgic by showing his roots and knowledge of his homeland in *Running in the Family*. He has crafted stories that enable us to understand the need for familial bonds for an individual's physical and mental well-being. His traumatic experience of loss of home and family is reflected in the central characters of his novels. The source of such characterization is made vivid in the last few chapters of *Running in the Family*. Ruined relationships and broken families caused by the carefree nature and chronic dipsomania of his father resulted in Ondaatje's exile to a foreign land. The inadequate parental care and familial bond gave Ondaatje and his siblings perpetual worry, though they were able to make their lives better. At the end of his memoir, he grumbles about the loss of home and family: "Fortinbras. Edgar. Christopher, my sisters, Wendy, myself. I think all of our life have been terribly shaped by what went on before us" (Ibid., 201).

The narrator's indigenous experience results firmly in his attachment to his home and native land. The interconnected memory in his narration shows his unfulfilled desire. The loss of his home and land echoes throughout his memoir *Running in the Family*. His unhappy past, the failure of familial construction, and the loss of the relationship between father and son are reflected in his words as follows,

> Words such as *love, Passion, duty,* are continually used they grow to have no meaning – except as coins or weapons. Hard language softens. I never knew what my father felt of

> these 'things'. My loss was that I never spoke to him as an adult. Was he locked in the ceremony of being 'a father'? He died before even I thought of such things.
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> I long for the moment in the play where Edgar reveals himself to Gloucester and it never happens. 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. (Ibid., 202)

The text *Running in the Family* acclaimed various critical responses ranging from the author's use of postmodern ideologies, conventions, and histographic practices to colonial nostalgia and diasporic sensibility. Expatriate consciousness and the echoes of the past entice the readers to witness the narrator's attempt to recover and understand his past as the tapestry of private and communal memories: " The jungle and gravestones … Reading torn hundred-year-old newspaper clippings that apart in your hands like wet sand, information tough as plastic dolls" (Ibid., 67). Ondaatje's attempt to record various names and dates from various sources in his notebook to reconstruct the stories he heard displays his skill of knitting the interconnected stories to compose a text that makes visual imagery of his experience of meditating on 'running in, with, into, after and against his family, community, memory, and gossip.

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