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Cultural Hybridity and Belonging in the Works of Michael Ondaatje

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Abstract: Michael Ondaatje is a writer who feels that his writing is influenced by a variety of cultures. He is an immigrant to Canada who is of Sri Lankan and Dutch descent, and his writing addresses issues of identity, history, hybridity, and cultural disputes within the country. This sort of writing demands literary critics to reassess the function of multicultural literature in revising the concepts of cultural pluralism in the context of discussions of Canadian multiculturalism. This is because the writing investigates many types of cultural belonging. In order to explain his ideology, which is concerned with achieving a positive acceptance and affirmation of difference, Michael Ondaatje is one of the current Canadian writers who transforms his multicultural experiences in literature. He does this by working through ambivalence in order to articulate his ideology.

Keywords*:* immigrant, identity, hybridity and cultural disputes

The international migrants carry not just their talents and knowledge but also their cultural practices, lifestyles, and beliefs to their new locations. This has led to the emergence of ethnic communities that have integrated into the host social framework over time. The preliminary phase of migration and the establishment of ethnic groups in host countries transpires at multiple stages. Castles and Miller speak of a four-stage model when they discuss on ‘the dynamics of migration pattern’. (Miller, 3) Michael Ondaatje was born on September 12, 1943, in Kegalle, located fifty miles west of Colombo, Ceylon, the capital of Sri Lanka. In 1948, Ondaatje's parents, Mervyn Ondaatje and Doris Gratiaen, separated, and in 1952, Ondaatje relocated to London with his mother, elder brother Christopher Ondaatje, and sisters Gillian and Janet Ondaatje. At the age of nineteen, Ondaatje relocated to Canada to reunite with his brother, Gillian Ondaatje, who resided in Montreal. Between 1962 and

1964, Ondaatje pursued studies in English and History at Bishop's University located in Lennoxville, Quebec.

Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion (1987)* expresses his apprehensions regarding the experiences of immigrants and construction labourers involved in the Bloor Street Viaduct Bridge and a water filtration facility. The immigrant labourers are absent from the official Canadian historical account of Toronto's construction. The labourers traverse the confines of a different culture and are perceived as cultural outsiders in the host nation. Ondaatje has examined contemporary existence and the lifestyle that characterises Canadian culture. Immigrants strive to integrate into the dominant culture; nevertheless, the cultural disparities among the groups hinder their ability to fully merge with it.

The migrant labourers arrive in Canada from many regions to escape economic hardship or political persecution in their native countries. The process of immigration is an intricate endeavour, whether it is undertaken voluntarily or compelled. Cultural disparities within the community are a primary contributor to cultural discord. The culture of the immigrant community contrasts with that of the indigenous population. The immigrants reside in exceedingly impoverished and dilapidated circumstances.

They sleep in the shacks behind the Bellrock Hotel and have little connection with the town...Neither the boy nor his father has ever been into those dark rooms, into a warmth which is the odour of men. A raw table, four bunks, a window the size of a torso. These are built each December and dismantled the following spring. No one in the town of Bellrock knows where the men have come from. (Ondaatje, Skin 8) Patrick Lewis, As a child of a reclusive father in Eastern Ontario's harsh rural region, was accustomed to facing challenges alone. Moving to Toronto and adjusting to the monotony of city life as a lower-class individual first makes Patrick more reclusive, but he quickly finds himself drawn to the lively group of European immigrants in his surroundings. Even though he is Canadian, he finds that he is the one who needs to adjust to the Macedonian culture as he becomes involved in local social life. Because of this, he has to reconsider his long-held beliefs regarding immigration, which hold that newcomers should embrace American culture. Patrick learns from his neighbours that immigration may bring about mutual interchange rather than one-sided assimilation and that everyone can benefit from learning about each other's cultural heritage. Additionally, he comes to the realisation that the hard work of his Macedonian friends on construction projects has positively impacted society. The story comes to a close by arguing that the contributions of working-class immigrants to the city's and modern society's development merit recognition and appreciation.

The majority of Patrick's coworkers are immigrants from Europe, and they all share a sense of not belonging as they fight for survival in a city to which they do not truly belong. Under these circumstances, going about one's everyday business might turn into an impersonal ritual that drives a wedge between people rather than bringing them closer together. Because he doesn't feel connected to his own family at a young age, Patrick experiences feelings of living in another universe. His mother is completely absent from the story, and even if his dad gives him some good dynamiting training, he's still a mysterious figure—quiet and unattached—who enjoys working alone more than spending time with his son. Patrick does not mature into a person who is secure in his national or familial identity.

This feeling of alienation is echoed when Patrick, at the age of twenty-one, relocates to the city. "Now in the city he was new even to himself, the past locked away." (Ondaatje, Skin 8) Because of the distance between him and his old life, he must start over in this new setting. Patrick, on the other hand, is content with his meagre lifestyle and refuses to seek for companionship. For a long time, Patrick stays on the periphery of this community, even though he lives in a diverse neighbourhood with many of his fellow workers, guys who have recently immigrated from Europe. He feels "ashamed they could discover so little about him" when he talks to local Macedonian store owners who just know that he lives alone and that he always orders peaches on Friday. He had essentially de-emphasised himself. Because of the anonymity it offers, city life has cut Patrick off from his community, giving him more freedom but also relegating him to a life of loneliness.

Ondaatje's Booker Prize-winning work, *The English Patient* (1992), addresses the issue of dislocation. The narrative centers on the effects of World War II and the experiences of four protagonists, all of them are displaced persons residing in the abandoned Tuscan Villa San Girolamo in Central Italy. All these displaced persons possess diverse nationalities and varied cultural identities. They suffer severe injuries in combat, whether mental or physical. They have established a society within the villa, isolated from the external environment. Throughout the conflict, the villa serves as a military hospital for the Allies. The author illustrates the deplorable state of these individuals: "...bom in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our live" (Ondaatje, English 188)

Kirpal Singh, often known as Kip, is an Indian Sikh who displays a clear sense of estrangement from his biological family. In contrast to his younger sibling, he rejects his cultural heritage and joins the British military. There is a lot of overt and open racism in the story, reflecting the racism of colonial society, and Kip still faces a lot of it even if he wants to

adapt and become Western. Kip feels "he would be admitted easily if it were not for his race"(Ondaatje, English 200) as he aced every entrance exam for Lord Suffolk's experimental bomb squad during the war's early months. Kip is worried that his Indian heritage will make him an unwelcome target despite his intelligence and qualifications for the position. Lord Suffolk unexpectedly chooses Kip for his squad, and although Suffolk is friendly and accommodating, the majority of the soldiers treat him poorly. Kip enters "the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world""(196) as a person of colour in an essentially white army.

Even though he's fighting for the British, Kip is constantly ignored and disregarded. There is "always hesitation by the soldiers to call him'sir.'"(139) Kip rises up the ranks thanks to his brains and abilities. Since the majority of Kip's battalion consists of Englishmen, they find it difficult to accept the Indian who, by their racial standards, is beneath them: Kip. The villa serves as a site of subtle racism, yet it is arguably the most egregious example of racism in the book. Even though he was a subject of the English empire, Kip is never perceived as English by the other villa residents, who like, appreciate, or even love him nonetheless. The English patient, on the other hand, is universally recognised as "the English patient" by the villa's inhabitants due to his distinctive accent. Surprisingly, the patient is actually Austrian, a country that opposed England during the war. "English" patients are tolerated just because they are white. Kip is never completely white as he isn't.

Upon learning of the nuclear bombs launched on Japan at the novel's finale, Kip realises his place in relation to the other villa occupants, the British Empire, and white society in general. Instead of the Germans, the Japanese were hit by these bombs, the most savage destructive weapon utilised in the conflict. Kip, who shielded Allied troops from German bombs during the war, comes to the realisation that the Allies "would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation"(286) at this very moment. White culture will perpetually treat non-white people much worse, Kip realises, regardless of how devastated Europe is by war. "When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman," (286) Kip says, pointing a rifle at the English patient. You all picked it up from the British, right? After leaving the villa, Kip leaves Hana, whom he loves but knows is a part of the white elite who will treat him poorly no matter what. Following cultural norms, he goes back to India and becomes a doctor. After coming to terms with the fact that he will never fit in with white culture, he rediscovers his roots. in the same time, following the blast, nobody in the villa can dispute that Kip is angry. Hana writes a letter to her stepmother just before she goes back to Canada. According to Hana, "if we can rationalise this, we can rationalise anything,"(292) which seems to be the main argument put up by Ondaatje regarding the Japanese attacks. Two

Japanese cities populated by innocent people were levelled to the ground by the British because of the racism and Western arrogance that prompted their colonisation. White racism against non-white people is much more powerful, widespread, and destructive, as Ondaatje makes evident in a novel about a love ripped apart by passion and jealousy and Europe ripped apart by nationalism.

Ondaatje's most recent publication, *The Cat's Table (2011)*, depicts the journey of the protagonist Michael, also known as Mynah, to the West. Michael sets sail on the naval vessel 'Oronsay' from Colombo to England, passing through the Suez Canal. The narrative chronicles Michael's journey from the East to the West to reunite with his mother in England. However, in England, Michael never experiences a sense of belonging. This imaginative memoir, a quintessential immigrant narrative, takes place aboard a ship in the early 1950s. This narrative depicts Mynah's journey aboard the vessel and his interactions with a captivating array of adult figures, along with two peers named Ramadhin and Cassius. All these personalities disclose their personal narratives and unveil the trauma stemming from cultural conflicts they have faced throughout their lives. Michael, an eleven-year-old referred to as Mynah, serves as the narrator of his migration tale and maritime journey. He sets sail for the inaugural time, coinciding with Ondaatje's age. The narrator says, “He was eleven-years old that night when, green as he could be about the world, he climbed abroad the first and only ship of his life.” (Ondaatje, Cat's 4)

Michael Ondaatje's intricate cultural heritage compels him to often explore themes of dislocation and displacement in his writing. His latest literary work. *Anil's Ghost* (2000) explores the turmoil of identity stemming from cultural conflicts. The narrative recounts the tale of Anil Tissera, a young female forensic anthropologist originating from Sri Lanka and educated in Western institutions. She is employed for an international human rights organization. She revisits her own land for the first time in fifteen years to recognise the victims of political violence. The Sri Lankan government designates Mr. Sarath Diyasena, a native archaeologist from Colombo, to collaborate with her on a seven-week Human Rights Investigation project.

Anil arrives in Sri Lanka at Katunayake airport in early March. After spending fifteen years in the West, she has returned to her birthplace, having adopted a Westernised perspective, and views her original land from a distant vantage point. Despite being in Sri Lanka for 18 years, she no longer possesses fluency in Sinhala. During her time in Sri Lanka, she engaged in swimming. She desires to obliterate her previous identity as a swimmer. She desires individuals from Sri Lanka to recognise her as a forensic professional affiliated with

Geneva organization. Sandeep Sanghera in his article "*Touching the Language of Citizenship in Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost*" in Zeptnek's Comparative Cultural Study examines Anil's identity and raises the questions posits by Ondaatje about her identity crisis: .. .just who is Anil? Is she a foreigner? If so, is she American (for that is where she studied and lives "mostiy"), or is she British (for that is the passport she carries). Or as a representative of an international human rights centre based in Geneva, is she a mishmash citizen of all things Western? In that context then, how does Sri Lanka fit in, since after all that was her first home? That was the space where she first learned to walk and talk. So could she be hyphenated? But then is she a Sri Lankan- American or a Sri Lankan Britisher or is she just a generic Eastem - Western mix? (Sanghera, 83). Finally, Ondaatje's reinterpretation of belonging is central to his work in modern literature. In a world marked by war, migration, and empire, he argues, belonging is no longer determined by one's place of origin. Rather, it is determined by one's capacity to remember, to hold several homes inside oneself, and to learn to live with the cultural echoes of other voices.

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