NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND HISTORY:MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S IN THE SKIN OF A LION AND THE ENGLISH PATIENT

PRADEEP KAUR¹ & JAP PREET KAUR BHANGU²

¹Applied Sciences, Sant Baba Bagh Singh Institute of Engineering & Technology, Padhiana, Punjab, India
²Department of Management and Humanities, Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering & Technology, Longowal, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

The present paper examines how Michael Ondaatje in his works explores the complex issues of identity and individual histories in the transnational/trans-cultural setting. The paper in particular focuses attention on his two works, In the Skin of a Lion (1987) and The English Patient (1992). The paper discusses how in both the works Ondaatje frames the stories around actual historical events, yet at the same time his aim is to uncover the unwritten, hidden, ignored histories of the marginal characters. The historical and the fictional get juxtaposed in his works even as Ondaatje attempts to create a narrative space where many stories/histories may enact/recreate/reinvent themselves. Ondaatje thus adds to the discourse as he challenges and revises the already narrated one to incorporate the other histories. While In The Skin of a Lion is about the immigrant laborers of the 1920s’ Toronto when foundation of industrialization was being laid in Canada, The English Patient is set during the World War II. The novels reveal the inner conflicts that the marginal characters experience as they journey through the external incidents of death, discrimination, domination and seclusion. Ondaatje becomes the voice of the ex-centric people attempting to come to terms with their cultural past, to negotiate identity through the complexities of the present and to secure a place for themselves in the cultural memory.

KEYWORDS: Historiographic Metafiction, Inter-Textuality, Ex-Centric, Identity, Trans-Cultural/Transnational, Postmodernism

INTRODUCTION

Michael Ondaatje, the celebrated Canadian poet and novelist of Sri Lankan descent, writes works that ‘talk’ from transnational/trans-cultural locations. The present paper is an attempt to discuss the quest for identity within the historical framework in his two novels In the Skin of a Lion (1987) and its sequel The English Patient (1992). Ondaatje’s work is an apt example of what Hutcheon (1998 b) defines in another context as “Historiographic Metafiction,” fictions that situate “…themselves within historical discourse, while refusing to surrender their autonomy as fiction.” (p.124). Having a fascination with history in the modern postcolonial world of ever shifting social spaces, Ondaatje in his works repeatedly returns to the themes of identity and individual histories. The juxtaposition of the fictional and the actual worlds allows him to, in his words, “...both reveal and discover myself …I could be more honest about the things I wanted to talk or witness.” (Spinks, 2009, p.6). Hence, again and again he creates what Lee Spinks succinctly terms as “panoramic historical fictions that explore the historical determination of our experience while insisting that what we understand as ‘history’ is always also the effect of a particular perspective or ground.” (Spinks, 2009, p.19). History for Ondaatje thus becomes a ground but he refuses to be contained within its boundaries. Ondaatje instead attempts to counterbalance the omissions and partiality of the historical master narrative through a projection and celebration of plurality of personal and local
narratives that give voice to the forgotten of history. Winner of numerous awards, Ondaatje is a multi-talented writer having written fiction, poetry, autobiography and film.

History is replete with the incidents that modulate our lives and channelize our deeds and actions accordingly. Through history, we learn about cultures, civilizations that enrich and teach us morality and ethics, and help in forming specific principles of society. Traditionally, history and fiction have been posited as opposites, to quote Aristotle’s famous words, “The poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen.”(Quoted in Sifakis,2001,p.19). Histories on the other hand were always expected to relate things as they were. History thus came to be viewed as depicting incidents which actually happened without caring for the consequences; while an artist on the other hand had the artistic license to depict what a man could do when caught in different situations. In the postmodern world however, the paradox of the historical and the fictional representation has acquired larger dimensions. Hutcheon in particular blurs the boundaries between history and fiction with the idea of ‘Historiographic Metafiction’ which as she observes “deals not so much with historical events, personages, and facts as with the reconstruction of the past from the point of view of the present, often reflecting the insights of modern theories of history-theories focusing on the epistemological and narratological problems that beset historiography.” (“Historiographic Metafiction”, 2005 ,p.,216).

Ondaatje easily can be taken as belonging to the category of post-colonial writers who again and again blend the genres to provide a wholesome view of reality. In both the selected works, Ondaatje focuses on people who otherwise are not considered worthy to find mention in historical records. In an interview with Catherine Bush in 1990, Ondaatje stated “I think reclaiming untold stories is an essential role for the writer. Especially in this country, where one can no longer trust the media. The newspapers have such power over the story and portrait of Canada. You can see the newspapers moving in a certain politically right-wing or economically right-wing direction, and this-- before you know it—becomes the official voice of the country.” (Bush, 1994, p.247) Writing for Ondaatje thus becomes an act of resistance, an attempt to fill the empty spaces existing in history.

In the Skin of a Lion highlights the role played by workers and immigrants in the history of Toronto, aiming to give voice to the marginalized members of society who formed an active force in making Toronto what it is today, but who were ignored in historical accounts. In The English Patient a group of ordinary persons caught in the crossfire during the Second World War become the focus of Ondaatje’s interest. As a migrant himself, Ondaatje’s work reflects a desire to revise the existing history from the perspective of the subordinate groups. His stories attempt to uncover the lives of those who have been denied a role in Canada’s past: women, immigrants, and the working class. The debate around Canadian history understandably has made a strong impact on Ondaatje. The author portrays the “unofficial” stories of the immigrants normally associated with anonymity and passivity in Canada’s “official” history. Gamlin (1992) rightly claims “Ondaatje’s retelling of hitherto unwritten history emphasizes especially the problem of immigration and the continual struggle for an acceptable division of power within changing social constructs. Ultimately the novel allows an egalitarian voicing of previously marginalized perspectives” (p.68)

The English Patient explores the effects of World War II on a group of four shell-shocked characters. In the backdrop, the encounters of people from various ethnic and national extractions are revealed. W. Shaffer succinctly observes, Ondaatje’s novels concentrate “…on individuals finding, joining and maintaining communities. With individuals or romantic couples in the foreground, these novels investigate formation, legitimization and evolution of communities in the narrative background, and do so across significant geographical landscapes”(W.Shaffer, 2011, p.1274). The focus thus is on the ‘becoming’ of a community, a nation. Though there is no single narrator, the story is alternatively seen from the point of view of each of the main characters. Ondaatje in his novels repeatedly chooses characters from history and
legends along with persons with undocumented lives, existences cloaked in ambiguity. Characters such as Buddy Bolden (in *Coming Through Slaughter*), Billy the kid (in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*), Ambrose Small (in *In the Skin of a Lion*), Laszlo Almasy and Harris (in *The English Patient*) etc. are known historical/legendary figures, a fact that shows Ondaatje’s fascination with the historical and the mythical even as he attempts to reveal the hidden, mysterious and silent truths of history.

Ondaatje’s technique of putting epigraphs to his works enables his readers to unravel the hidden links to the multi-layered, multi-voiced tales. *The English Patient* opens with an epigraph taken from the minutes of the Geographical Society meeting in London of the early nineteen-forties. It reads: “Most of you, I am sure, remember the tragic circumstances of the death of Geoffrey Clifton at Gilf Kebir, followed later by the disappearance of his wife, Katherine Clifton, which took place during the 1939 desert expedition in search of Zerzura”. The characters in the novel spend the last days of the war in the Villa San Girolamo in Tuscany, Italy. The setting is where the Canadian nurse Hana, after having refused to join the troops leaving the villa, nurses the badly burned English patient. They are soon joined by Kirpal Singh, who is called Kip. Kip works as a sapper for British troops, his main task being the defusing of bombs. Hana and Kip falls in love. Caravaggio, the other character joins them in the Villa. He like Hana was there in Ondaatje’s earlier novel *In The Skin of a Lion* also. He worked for British Intelligence in North Africa but lost his thumbs in violent interrogation by the German army. Ondaatje’s focus is on the uncertainty of the patient’s identity, his Englishness coupled with his non-white appearance and his exotic encounters in the desert contribute to a sense of dislocation and a questioning of the traditional concepts of nation, identity, and race. The mysterious Identity of the patient raises the issues of questioning the national identity. The author himself states in the Acknowledgements that “While some of the characters who appear in this book are based on historical figures…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” (Ondaatje,2004, p. 322).

Furthermore, the novel deals with the way history is written and shows through its fragmented style of narration the various ways history is recorded and events are universalized.

*In the Skin of a Lion* narrates a story that a young Hana ‘gathers’ during a car journey. Here also, what gives structure to the complex narrative are the two epigraphs to the novel given at the beginning of the book, one drawn from the relatively lesser known *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the other, from John Berger’s novel *G*. The epigraph from Gilgamesh gives the novel its title: “The joyful will stoop with sorrow and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion.” Ondaatje uses the myth to equate the modern immigrant experience with that of the pre-cultural, epical one, like whom, the immigrants remain excluded from those very cultural spaces which they help make possible. Patrick, the protagonist, like Gilgamesh in the epic identifies himself with the fellow Macedonians and Bulgarians even as he is transformed by his relationship with them. The challenge before him is to translate empathy into political engagement by participating in the collective expression of a new social vision. This aspect gets emphasized when we look at the second epigraph taken from John Berger’s novel, “Never again a single story be told as though it were the only one.” As Ondaatje narrates, there emerge many stories with many characters in no defined order, for example, the last scene becomes the first scene while the story must be assimilated and made one’s own. It is a story that defines its characters in social, political and linguistic terms while being continually redefined by the place they make for themselves within its own shifting borders. Ondaatje ensures that the marginalized and ex-centric people no longer remain mere objects or outsiders of others’ history as he interrogates and confronts the dominant culture whose discourse and language do not allow the migrants to fully articulate their experience. The novel’s
oral narrative enables a retelling of the story from multiple viewpoints, yet leaving gaps here and there for the listeners/readers to fill and comprehend.

For Ondaatje the immigrants’ stories are important because they were the ones who built the city. Hence the background of the novel is the moment in Canada’s history when the foundation of modern industrialized nation was laid by the immigrant European laborers in the 1920s. Ondaatje chooses the historic events of building the Bloor Street Viaduct in 1917, the Toronto Waterworks in the 1930s and the construction of Union Street Station from 1914 to 1927. By doing so, Ondaatje gives voice to the blood, the sweat and tears of these workers who have never been recognized by the ‘official’ history. For seeking jobs and exploring greener, newer pastures, people of various nationalities immigrated to Canada. As such, the most important theme of discussion is the portrayal of the immigrant experience. The immigrants are presented as the ultimate ‘outsiders’; they are separated from their old world and excluded from their new one. The official historical records however are silent about the existence and the contribution of the migrants in the development of the new lands as also of their identity. Friedman (1994) rightly opines, “The people without history in this view are the people who have been prevented from identifying themselves for others” (p. 117). They only mention town’s city planners and corporations. As marginalized and ex-centric people, they remain mere outsiders of others’ history. The plot consists of fragmented stories of Patrick Lewis, his two mistresses Clara and Alice, Ambrose Small, a millionaire who vanishes without a trace, Harris, the Commissioner of Public Works, Caravaggio, a thief, Nicholas Temelcoff, a doer of all kinds of difficult jobs. They all exist with immigrants from Macedonia, Greece and Finland. While writing about Toronto’s history, many characters become aware of the fact that they are left out when retelling the history of the city. Patrick reads about the history of the Bloor Street Viaduct, which was constructed at the cost of suffering and lives of loggers. He finds out that all details like the soil, the wood, the concrete used for the bridge are mentioned: “Everything but information on those who actually built the ridge” (Ondaatje, 1997, p. 145). The business tycoons and politicians of that time are mentioned but those who suffered and built this bridge are driven out from the historical records. This message is reinforced when the reader learns that Mr. Lewis, Patrick’s father, has been killed in a mine by a fallen piece of feldspar. The author uses this event to emphasize that people suffer and die accidentally in the process of building a community or a society. They will never be recalled by history. This is exemplified during a conversation between Patrick and the millionaire Harris who was the architect and designer of the bridge, “think about those who built the intake tunnels. Do you know how many of us died in there? This leads to Harris’ reply, “there was no record kept. The workers are never accepted or acknowledged.” (Ondaatje, 1997, p. 155).

Patrick comes to understand his own self and the country only after he meets Alice who teaches him about the lives of the workers: “And all of his life Patrick had been oblivious to it, a searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country…” (Ondaatje, 1997, p. 157). With his will power and inspiration of political activism of Alice, he fights for the recognition of the marginalized people. The inter-textual reference to the epic of Gilgamesh indicates that he must hide in a ‘different skin’ in order to be able to blend into their surroundings. To become a part of society, the immigrants need to adopt the skin of Toronto. Hutcheon (1998b) succinctly explains in another context, “The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction enacts, in a way, the views of certain contemporary historiographies: it offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces—be they literary or historical” (p. 125). The intertextual references reveal a blending of the mythical, historical and fictional in the invention of identity. Patrick is shown as Ondaatje’s other and parallels the character of Gilgamesh. Patrick, like Gilgamesh, is on a quest. In the epic, Gilgamesh roams with the wilderness “in the skin of a lion”, mourning the death of his friend Enkidu. On his quest to find out why his friend Enkidu has died, Gilgamesh visits the garden of the gods and tells a woman, Siduri, of his grief and his
quest. Similarly, Patrick hides on an island during his quest to avenge the death of Alice and thinks of telling a blind woman he meets in a garden there of his love and grief. Both use artificial weights to dive deep into the water towards the seat of power. Patrick prepares to swim through the intake tunnel of the Waterworks (which he has earlier helped to build) in order to confront Commissioner Harris and to dynamite the plant, he changes his skin colour.

As Harris accepts his role in the death of Alice, Patrick too acknowledges his complicity in the accident that killed Alice. He thus lays down the mantle of a victim and recognizes that he has also become a part of aggressive community. With this realization he finally finds release from the burden of the past. He finds anchor in Clara who, he knows, shall free him from the solitude, enable him to reconcile with the human urge to forge bonds, family ties and embrace the world. Since Patrick decides not to blow up the waterworks, Harris does not hand him over to the police. The closing pages of the book find Patrick embarking on another journey. A call from Clara sparks a trip with Hana, whom Patrick now acknowledges as his daughter, to rescue Clara from the same isolation from which Patrick suffered. Ondaatje ends and begins the novel in the twilight mood of a car with father and daughter. The car ride is the result of Ondaatje's ability to transcend time and space- the story ends at the beginning of the novel and begins at the end, as if Patrick has told his story not only to the young Hana, but ultimately, to readers: “This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through the darkness...” (Ondaatje, 1997, p. 2). Ondaatje encompasses the nightmare in a narrative which does not end the novel in darkness, but with “lights”(Ondaatje, 1997, p. 244), “ready to be revealed”(Ondaatje, 1997, p.120).

Ondaatje thus presents the character’s stories to his readers in a fragmented, non-linear way which the reader must unfold. Leckie(1991) succinctly observes “Ondaatje’s use of history, his stress on multi-voiced narratives spoken from unusual locations, and his self consciousness about different art forms are indicative of the time during which he has written” (p.28). The title of the novel indicates that it is a call for action, for taking responsibility for one's own story and for its narration in order to compensate for historical silences, as Alice states: "...Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story..”( Ondaatje,1997, p.157). The novel thus indicates how identity may be asserted only after negotiating the historical spaces.

In The English Patient also, Ondaatje uses flashback sequences to allow his characters to travel back and forth in time in order to reveal the plot of the novels. The English patient begins to tell the others his story when he is asked under the influence of morphine. At the beginning of the novel, the man has no identity; he is referred to as the English patient. His real name is Almasy, though this is not definitively confirmed until Chapter IX. Information about other characters in the novel is also revealed in bits and pieces. By using these techniques, Ondaatje portrays his characters gradually becoming more open and ready to reveal their true selves to each other. The novel seeks to explore the problem of identity and displacement against the backdrop of history.

Ondaatje uses the English patient as a way for Hana to deal with her past. Ondaatje adds the existence of the Herodotus, The Histories, a book in which Almasy has been jotting down notes as another inter-textual reference. According to Hutcheon(1998a), “Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context”(118). Thus nothing is fixed in the novel, the gap between binary opposites like reality and imagination, truth and fiction are deconstructed and the lines separating them are erased. Ondaatje’s treatment of the immigrant experience questions the colonial construction of race and identity. As the pages are turned, the English patient relives his journey and contemplates the legend he is leaving behind. "It is when we are old, concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future. We become vain" (Ondaatje,2004, p.151). As we travel back and forth through Hana's memories, we discover that she has lost her
father, her husband, and unborn child during the war. The English patient serves as an outlet for her desires. She finds solace in serving him as she regrets her absence during the time when her father needed her to nurse him.

In Kip, the sapper, a displaced person, Hana discovers emotional support, compassion, and intimacy, which are commiserated in the physical sense as well as on an emotional level. Caravaggio is a thief turned spy (he was a thief in *In the Skin of a Lion* but is a spy in *The English Patient*), for practical rather than political reasons: “They couldn’t believe their luck, they were falling over themselves to use me” (Ondaatje, 2004, p. 37). The readers however are told very little about Caravaggio’s personal history, except that he was involved with a group of thieves. One of the most telling descriptions of Caravaggio depicts a man who has consigned himself to the shadows through his choice of lifestyle. As a thief, he moves through society like a shadow, ‘he would never leave his name where his skill had been. He was one of those who have the fury or sadness of only being described by someone else. A terror of roads, a house-builder, a painter, a thief- yet he was invisible to all around him” (Ondaatje, 1997, p. 199). Caravaggio in part tells his history through the scars on his body. His scars tell part of his story, “He saw his neck for the first time in a mirror, scarred from the prison attack three months earlier” (Ondaatje, 1997, p. 182). Caravaggio, carries his history with him, his is written on, and through his body. His escapades as a thief have left scars and deformities on his body.

He comes into Ondaatje's story after hearing that Hana, a child he knew before the war, is in a small villa caring for a wounded man. Ondaatje through the stream of consciousness technique uses several flashback sequences with Caravaggio in order to reveal the friendship Caravaggio had with Hana's father. "Gelato for tonsils, he remembered. Accompanying a girl and her father to have her tonsils out" (Ondaatje, 2004, p. 31). This sparks a need to protect Hana and to save her from herself. There he becomes obsessed with the English patient and revealing his true identity to Hana and Kip. The remembrance of Katherine, the English patient's lover, re-ignites the love of life in Hana and all it has to offer. In the end, Hana comes to terms with the war and its casualties and decides to return home to be with her stepmother. Kip, as he deals with the everyday dangers of disarming bombs, relives childhood memories of his father. He tells of a time when his father would disguise his hands and have Kip distinguish between the different fingers. Ondaatje uses these flashbacks to reveal Kip's strong family bond and his desire to honor them. When his older brother is put in jail, Kip sees no other choice than to join the army in his brother's place. The 'sudden' transformation in Kip when he hears the news on the radio of the atomic bombing of Japan should not be viewed as an isolated incident, for there are many times throughout the story where Kip is reminded of his otherness and inability to perform the patterns of Englishness perfectly and thus for Kip’s subsequent break with the English. He feels that he is the only thing that is safe and never allows himself to become attached to anyone. He views his relationship with Hana to be a temporary arrangement to pass the time “Later she will realize he never allowed himself to be beholden to her, or her to him” (Ondaatje, 2004, p. 135). The difficulties for Kip in repeating the patterns that affirm his belonging to the English and keep him seeing them as superior can be seen in his relation to his fellow soldiers. His service in the army is for him of crucial importance. At the villa, he “is the only one of them who has remained in uniform. Immaculate, buckles shined, the sapper appears out of his tent, his turban symmetrically layered, the boots clean.” (Ondaatje, 2004, p. 79). That he is basically working on his own, without contact with the rest of the forces, does not change his determination to wear his uniform, since it affirms his sense of being a part of the English army and thus belonging to the English. In the end, Kip realizes that he has been subjected to othering just like the Japanese. Also, that the English are never going to change, so he feels betrayed. Kip gathers his belongings and leaves the villa, traveling against the movement of the war to return home. For Almásy, this is clearly not just a physically painful process. He recognizes a change in himself: “I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states” (Ondaatje, 2004, p. 147). His sense of nationlessness is further deepened by the realization that the creation of nations and
the notion of nationality are destructive and lead to warfare. Bolland (2002) aptly quotes Joseph Pesch, “With the sense of historical progress and civilization at an end, the characters are shown returning to the past in an attempt to stabilize their lives” (p.67). Since the past cannot be changed, it must be revisited for its better understanding.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, as Ondaatje demonstrates, it is only through retelling and connecting the stories together that personal histories may usurp the ‘official’ histories. Each character throughout the novels reveals something about his/her life that creates a different picture of history. Thus Ondaatje successfully re-evaluates history by focusing on the relations between the margin and the centre, the personal and the public to solve the problems related to defining identity. The process of identification however is always a construction; and a process that never gets completed. As such, the characters grapple with the inner conflicts and external issues of migration, belonging and acceptance while facing chaos and difficulties. They can come to terms with their present only after they are able to relate with their past; their history, which may not always be what really was, rather, what they believe it to be. Identity thus as Ondaatje demonstrates, is always constituted within the historical, mythical and fictional discourses.

REFERENCES


