



Self as a Construct in Select Fiction of Michael Ondaatje

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Abstract

This paper intends to look at the subjectivity constructed and, evinced in the works of expatriate Sri Lankan novels. In this case, Michael Ondaatje's fictional works namely *Running in the Family*, *Anil's Ghost*, and *The English Patient* are taken for discussion. The selfhood as a manifestation of narrative influences both within and without is focused. Whereas the formative influences of Michael Ondaatje cause to construct a sort of Sri Lankan selfhood, the experiences abroad constructs a transnational character of it. Stuart Hall's theorizing of identity in this connection is employed to understand the selfhood being portrayed in the fiction under study. Thus, a self with constructed strategic, and positional character is posited as opposed to age-old modernist assumptions of essentialism.

Keywords: Ondaatje; construct; essentialism; identity; selfhood; fiction

Introduction: selfhood

The Oxford online dictionary defines selfhood as "the quality that constitutes one's individuality; the state of having an individual identity." The concept of selfhood, by and large, is seen in those forms enunciated through such terms as identity and subjectivity. Historically speaking, during the Renaissance, man had been placed at the centre and accorded a unique, coherent, rational and autonomous identity. This is the founding precept of humanism that separated the self from the other. The idea of the 'individual' and its essence called 'human nature' was still carried over into modernity intact at large. However, postmodernity was not happy with the terms that were in currency such as 'individual' and 'identity'. Along with the decentering of these concepts of selfhood, these began to be replaced





by 'subject' and 'subjectivity' respectively but with an added air of ambiguity. The concept of subjectivity replaces human nature with the concept of the production of the human subject through ideology, discourse or language. The constitution of the selfhood as fractured - 'divided within itself' in the postmodern sense - came to light as an after-effect in the wake of poststructuralist thinking on how subjects internalize social values and the process of which is passed for 'natural' phenomena (that is, how the self is linked to the world through language and power). Hence, the name subjectivity. This postmodern self was no longer seen as a coherent whole, instead, as something that accommodates the other within itself.

However, while the selfhood is an umbrella term, identity and subjectivity have been more or less interchangeably used despite differences latent in them. Generally, identity is deemed as either sameness or uniqueness. That is, that which sets someone or something apart from everyone else is identity. The society one was born into and the people one grew up with impact on one's identity. As well, identity need not necessarily have any society, peoples or countries. One's experiences and his/her search for self are enough to project a sense of identity. Stuart Hall describes identity as a meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities which construct us as subjects which can be spoken (Hall 5-6).

Hall also states that identities are points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us (Hall 6). Althusser attempts to throw light on the inherent links between identity and ideology in his explanation on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). The 'interpellation' – the hailing of the subject – gets done unawares as ideology effectively works at the most rudimentary levels of psychic identities and the drives, and at the level of the discursive of formation and practices which constitute the social field (Hall 8).





To be precise, the meeting point between the discourses and practices and the processes that produce the subjectivities is called identity. In this sense the manifest forms of selfhood in the fictional works of Michael Ondaatje would be the focus of the study. Thinkers have been grappling with the notion of subjectivity since they began to think inwardly. The question as to what is meant by 'I' when one speaks of himself has been for long an inscrutable phenomenon. This subjective formation of the 'I' inevitably entails narratives of the society among which one happens to live in. One's perception of oneself as being a subject is the consequence of how the severally produced narratives of the members mediate to form an idea of oneself. The constitution of the subject thus involves negotiation of the multiplicity of narratives produced of oneself in society and the self-narrative of the subject concerned. The past experiences of oneself contribute to the subject constitution of oneself. The factors at work to making the human subjectivity can be reductively stated as ideology, language, and discourse. This follows that any action performed by the subject must also be a consequence of such factors to a large extent.

Running in the Family

An idea of one's ancestry and posterity is really an idea of the self, says Scott N. Momaday in *The Names: A memoir* (M. Zivkovic). The memoir *Running in the Family* offers several peeps into the variously set up selfhood in Sri Lankan soil. Ondaatje's revelation as to his roots as commingling initiates the issue at hand. Migration and education in Europe that take place during his teen age were not enough to make him a complete European. The shift from first person to third person narrative forges the idea that they are narrated by a community rather than by a single narrator. Several "I"s relate stories. This suggests there could not be one version of a truth. The stories from the father's land all help to create a diverse impression. It simply means that the father's land forms part of his own identity through the consciousness created by means of pluri-vocality. Lurking remembrances and influences return to haunt. His self-initiated self-search too made him return to his roots. The selfhood that comes about thus,





is a mixture – a fusion of various threads. It entails ancestry of various lines. Yet the memoir now speaks of his very self-same community of intimate people. It leaves out a larger section of a community that forms considerable portion of his selfhood. The first half of the work concentrates on the family. Ondaatje's personal account on the importance of his childhood would sound relevant here. He says that he realized the fact of his having slipped past a childhood that he had ignored and not understood. Thus *Running in the Family* now is an attempt to fill the missing element of his childhood. Just as the Sinhala Buddhist element was ignored in *Running in the Family*, the Tamil element too is missing. Ondaatje was not dealing with the nationhood. He was just zeroing in on the small Burgher community. The work is especially concerned about aesthetics and his own identity. That he is concerned with his smaller minority community actually gets round the problem of identifying his own selfhood.

Anil's Ghost

The novel *Anil's Ghost* is more of a work that discusses issues related to the self-the other rather than the conventional preoccupations of a postcolonial novel. The selfhood out there is not one fixed. This is obvious given her transnational perspective. She passes through various ideological boundaries. She happens to occupy such liminal positions because of her of the complications involved in her experience as a Canadian and as a Sri Lankan. This is not to say that she lacks any identity at all. Rather, it would be an unconventional sort of fusion that is not identical with that of the traditional one. She exhibits a multicultural nature following her encounters with various cultures. In this backdrop, the self as such is a construct, Ondaatje seems to imply. He does not preclude the other. The other is part of the self he undertakes to explore. Anil's transnational character, being an upshot of the mingling of a number of cultures retains the traces of those roots in her one single self. A number of influences from both Canada and Sri Lanka mediate in the making of her subjectivity. The western education and culture which she has become very much used to, and the remembrances of Sri Lanka through her Ayah, habits, and other very remotest people and places such as father's friends,





swimming, the sketchy Sinhala language and the harbor all remains at least remotely afresh to influence her thoughts. The splintered self thus makes itself self-evident.

Ondaatje explores into how one constructs his/her identity with the mediation of language and culture. Naming is an indispensable feature of identification. That which is named gains a special identity. That which is nameless lacks identity. In *Anil's Ghost* there are a variety of people who lack either name or face. The eponymous character disowns her name signifying a resistance to traditional identity. Those in the disappearance list are represented through a name 'Sailor' by Anil. The resurrection of their identity defies the convention again.

The traditional notion of identity as a fixed one no longer carries effect, Ondaatje seems to portray. He argues that identity is shifting. Thus he resembles the notion of identity of recent thinkers such as Stuart Hall, who says that identity is a process (Hall: 1996, 3). Ondaatje wants to drive home the point that identities are ideological constructions. Anil's renaming herself, while being a defiant act against the conventional identity expected of her, makes her forget her past. She becomes a complete stranger to herself. That her adoption of a new name is described as remarkable event whereas her name before that, was not reportedly in use. It is also significant that she obtained her new name from somebody who is related to her, which implies that she is trying to establish her identity through connecting to her ancestry. Still, the name Anil, in Sri Lankan context, is a male name. This too points towards direction of Anil's aspiration for a free identity, stripped of any traditional associations. Such contesting of conventions in the individual persona comes to represent the entire nation. This again indicates the inevitability of the impact of transnationalism. There are several indications that Ondaatje's identity lies substrate in Anil. The biographical similarities of Ondaatje could be seen in the details described about Anil (That her migrating to Europe during teenage, and in her insistence on her own desire to come back to see her Ayah, and that her forensic investigation on an abandoned ship). The tragic element put to the story signifies the sort of identity Ondaatje attributes in his discourse of *Anil's Ghost*.





The English Patient

In *The English Patient* the eponymous character is a nameless 'patient', devoid of any external marks that could show his identity. The borderless identity is robed in the description of the 'patient': "We were German, English, Hungarian, African - all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless." (Ondaatje 1992: 147) That he was working with different forces at various points of time during the world war is another case in point. As a consequence of the imperial/native encounter, there has been an identity crisis and the novel discusses it. It is concerned about negotiating the subjectivity in those who fall in the category of exiles, immigrants and expatriates. That there happens a gathering and cohabitation of personalities of entirely different make and nativity hints at the transcendental nature of identities. There is an attempt on the part of these four single individuals for a search to reconceive themselves. The Indian sapper Kirpal Singh, alias Kip, too undergoes changes in terms of aspects of his selfhood. The 'open identity, says Ernest McIntyre, found in *The English Patient* is co-creative in exploring the human condition which includes identity. Ondaatje's preoccupation regarding the self – the other is a void/null. Through plot arrangements, narrative modes and its structure, issues of identity overwhelmingly handled well. Postmodern techniques such as the mini-narratives, fragmentation in story, multiple truths all point towards the constructed nature of the self. The cohabitation of four different personages point up the inevitable human condition, and thus the exigency to demolish the absolute conceptions of the self.

Conclusion

All in all, Ondaatje seems to suggest that the self is not something out there already as an absolute entity. Instead, he apparently suggests that the self is something always in construction through the impressions and experiences one undergoes and some portion of it is already in the making through variables such as the space and time.





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