



## Migrant Experiences in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and *In the Skin of a Lion*

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### Abstract

*This paper addresses the migrant trauma, nostalgia, dislocation and displacement in Michael Ondaatje's novels such as In the Skin of a Lion and Anil's Ghost. It also addresses how Ondaatje mingles both fact and fictitious elements while exploring migrant experiences as a diasporic writer. This Analysis is purely based on the aforementioned two novels. Textual analysis and Diaspora theory are incorporated to write this research article. Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan Canadian Diasporic author has himself experienced transnational migration. That is why he is capable of explicitly expressing diasporic migration issues in his works. In Anil's Ghost, Anil who is the protagonist of the novel undergoes nostalgia, trauma and dislocation, In the Skin of a Lion emphasizes mostly migrant experiences how immigrants from different colonial countries have forcefully dragged to build the major cities of Canada like Toronto. Therefore Michael Ondaatje's works explicitly focus on migrant experiences which blend both fact and fictitious stories.*

**Keywords:** Michael Ondaatje, Diaspora, Migration, Nostalgia, Dislocation, Displacement.

### Introduction

Both the terms 'Diaspora' and 'subaltern' are related to one another because diasporic people experience migration, nostalgia, dislocation, displacement, trauma, rootlessness, and alienation as a result of separation from homeland and marginalization in the host land whereas subaltern people experience segregation because of their cultural and religious practices. After post colonialism, people tend to migrate voluntarily to fulfill their desires and economic prosperity or meet their ends. In host land diasporic migrated people are ignored in all the fields because of the western hegemonic dominance. These diasporic people who are marginalized are subalterns. Old diasporic people are surrendered to their colonial masters whereas these modern or postcolonial diasporic people oppose, question, and recreate themselves a space. Postcolonial Diasporic writers like, Michael Ondaatje has started to 'write back' in their novels to express marginalized voices of the subalterns. So novels of Ondaatje such as *Anil's Ghost* and *In the skin of a Lion* questions and express the voices of migrated and marginalized people through characters. The present paper explores migrant experiences like nostalgia, migration, dislocation, trauma, alienation, subjugation and segregation of the diasporic people and interprets the notion of the author also. The paper is



an analysis of two novels of Michael Ondaatje such as *Anil's Ghost* and *In the skin of a Lion* from the perspective of Diaspora study and textual analysis. This paper throws light on the experiences of the dislocated and dispersed people.

Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) expresses his anxiety and sympathy towards the immigrant workers who construct Bloor Street Viaduct Bridge and a water filtration plant. History of the immigrant workers is not recorded in the archival and history books of construction of Toronto city. Immigrants in Canada are considered as Subalterns and voiceless. The immigrants cross national boundaries of the other culture and considered as outsiders and slaves in the host land. Linda Hutcheon examines that "the outsiders, the "ex-Centrics" are made the paradoxical (and very postmodern) centre of the novel" (Hutcheon, 133).

Immigrants are Indians, Arabs, Armenians, Australians, Nigerians, New Zealanders, Macedonians, Finns, Greeks and Italian workers etc. who migrated to Canada either forced or voluntary. Cultural conflict exists due to various cultural differences in Canada. Culture of the immigrants is quite different from that of Canada. Migrants of different countries are labourers and doing filthy jobs in tanneries, slaughter houses, prisoners, as well as Clara and Alice Patrick Lewis and Commissioner Harris are also Canadians who are treated as immigrants in the novel.

This novel, *In the Skin of a lion* sets during the period close to the First World War when Europe has undergone a huge crisis. Avinash Jodha, in his book, Michael Ondaatje's fiction: Poetics of Exile points out:

Europe during this period was experiencing crisis; in the year 1913, just a year before the First World War, almost 4, 00,000 immigrants primarily from European countries came to Canada, the event coincided with the creation of new provinces in Canada the westward expansion of the country (Jodha Avinash, 80).

Patrick is a protagonist of the novel but he is not aware of civilized society. He is displaced from his native village to Toronto. "Twenty one years old Patrick dropped under the vast arches of Union station to begin his life once more" (*In the Skin of a Lion*, 53). Not only Patrick but also all immigrants from different countries have been displaced and dislocated. Glen Lorry in an article entitled "The Representation of 'Race' in Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*" examines as

The trauma and alienation experienced by the immigrants while working for the building of Toronto city in Canada as: Overlapping the trauma of immigration with the alienation of urbanization, it refigures the expansion of Toronto, the modern industrial core of an emergent nation state, within an international flow of bodies and cultures (Lowry Glen, 64).

Patrick along with immigrant workers works to construct tunnel under lake. Dynamiting is very difficult job. Patrick's job is so harmful and dangerous. For doing such a dangerous work Patrick gains more money than other immigrant workers. Patrick, Italians, and Greeks are always silent during their eight hour shifts. So the narrator states that: Nobody else wants the claustrophobic uncertainty of this work but for Patrick this part is the only ease



in this terrible place where he feels banished from the world (*In the Skin of a Lion*, 107). The cooperation and coordination between Macedonians and Patrick is remarkable in the novel. Patrick is wholeheartedly accepted and invited to work for the water work gathering by the Macedonians. Ondaatje explains this as:

It was an illegal gathering of various nationalities and the noise of machines camouflaged their activity from whoever might have been passing along Queen Street a hundred yards away. Many languages were being spoken, and Patrick followed the crowd to the seats that were set up around a temporary stage. Patrick felt utterly alone in this laughing crowd that traded information back and forth held children on their laps (*In the Skin of a Lion*, 115).

Problems of migrants are clearly mentioned in this novel. Migrants faced lot of problems because they are not allowed to conduct or attend any public meetings and immigrants are not allowed to speak their mother tongues except imposed English language. Meanwhile laws have been imposed by native Police Chief Drapper against immigrants of foreign countries. So few of the immigrants have been arrested and jailed for their participation in several rallies in the Shapiro Drug Store clash or in High Park. The situation of the immigrants is expressed as:

He in fact pleasures in his descant interpretations of what is being said. He catches only the names of streets, the name of Police Chief Draper, who has imposed laws against the public meeting by foreigners. So if they speak this way in public, in any language other than English, they will be jailed. A rule of the city (*In the Skin of a Lion*, 133).

Immigrants experience the problem of language in host land (i.e. Canada). Because immigrants from different countries have their own mother tongues but those mother languages are not allowed to speak so immigrants tries to learn English by mimicking an actor through his career. Patrick who is living with Macedonians cannot speak mother tongue but tries to learn English which is imposed. Ondaatje has recorded immigrant's problem of learning language as:

Most immigrants learned their English from recorded songs or until the talkies came through mimicking actors on stage. It was a common habit to select one actor and follow him through his career, annoyed when he was given a small part and seeing each of his places as often as possible-sometimes as often as ten times during a run (*In the Skin of a Lion*, 47).

The sojourner's fairy tales of America has inspired Nicholas Temelcoff who is Macedonian immigrant and his treacherous travels to Canada is remarkable "But it was the spell of the language that brought Nicholas here, arriving in Canada without a passport in 1914, a great journey made in silence" (*In the Skin of a Lion*, 43). Ondaatje discloses Nicholas Temelcoff's passage to Canada who is twenty five year old when he has migrated to Canada meanwhile the First World War has begun "After his village was burned he has left with three friends on horseback" (*In the Skin of a Lion*, 45). They suffered due to fever when journeying from Switzerland to France. While journeying his two friends has died. Their boat



is dirty and covered with lice. ‘Nicholas has no passport; he cannot speak a word of English.’ at First Nicholas has started working in bakery but for Nicholas learning language of English is much difficult than working in bakery. For Him learning new language has become passion and barriers of English have never troubled him. So he has determined to learn and has started going to school but never stopped working in Bakery at night. He has spent his day life in school at age of twenty five and night life in Macedonian bakery “If he did not learn the language he would be lost” (*In the Skin of a Lion*, 46). Nicholas has dreamed of translation also and he has become crazy of learning English Language. The narrator denotes:

During this time in the Sault he had translation dreams because of his fast and obsessive studying of English. In the dreams trees changed not just their names but their looks and character. Men started answering in falsettos. Dogs spoke out fast to him as they passed him on the street (*In the Skin of a Lion*, 46-47).

Pabitra Bharali in an article “Relocating Diasporic subalterns: Carving of space and history in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* and Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Lion*” comment on identity crisis of immigrants and how they are marginalized and become voiceless and how hard they worked in the formation of urbanised and industrialised Toronto.

The various problems of immigrants manifested in their crisis of identity, crossing of cultural border, assimilation and acculturation. In the novel the author shows that the immigrants remain excluded from the very cultural spaces they have created. Wilderness creeps in the moment one is marginalised and „otherized“. The very title focuses on the transformation of identity of the immigrants who face identity crisis in the „wilderness“, i.e. in the new countries they migrate to. The displaced people – the immigrants from Macedonia, Greece, Italy, Finland coming to Canada - who worked hard to lay the foundation of modern industrialized Toronto in the 1920s suffer from unspeakable plight and have to work in the most dangerous situations (Pabitra Bharali, 760).

In the novel by Ondaatje *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), Anil’s nostalgia is clearly visible. Anil who is protagonist of the novel was born in Sri Lanka and migrates to London to study and again migrates to America to study. After fifteen years, Anil as migrant visits to Sri Lanka having England Passport as a forensic anthropologist to investigate “unknown extrajudicial executions” (*Anil’s Ghost*, 18) the crime occurred during civil war which ended in 2009 on behalf of United Nations. In her homeland Anil faces diasporic themes such as nostalgia, dislocation and trauma and displacement. Throughout her life Anil has experienced dislocation and alienation. She becomes nostalgic when she walks on the roads of Colombo and remembers that she was a swimmer once when she was a young. “So you are the swimmer!” (*Anil’s Ghost*, 16) are Sarath’s first words of greeting to her. She desires for the liberty of exile. She suffers that she is homeless, rootless, and alienated in her homeland Sri Lanka. Even though, she is not able to speak neither Tamil nor Sinhala. She loves her Sri Lanka. Since she experienced migration and studied in the west she is now a completely westernized and hybridized lady. But her memory never forgets her homeland and drags all



her past memories when she returns to Sri Lanka. Her marriage with a Sri Lankan medical student in London has become futile and that resulted in her alienation.

Horror of civil war are very harmful and Ondaatje in the novel compares that horrors of civil war are dangerous than Greek tragedies “the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent to what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale” (*Anil’s Ghost*, 11).

John Bolland examines and discusses Anil’s condition that Anil is torn between her nostalgia and the freedom of exile in migration. Bolland observes on the circumstance as: The novel presents her in broken personal relationship and torn between a desire for freedom of the exile and nostalgia for her Sri Lankan childhood, whose rich texture are evoked with Ondaatje’s characteristic vividness (Bolland, 86).

Sandeep Sanghera in an article, “Touching the Language of Citizenship in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*” observes that when Ananda touches her back that takes into past memories of her mother or Ayah Lalita:

The touch takes her back before the language of subtleties was lost and Sri Lankan citizenship and belonging was given up...back before her settling on English as her only tongue... It is not just touch that taken Anil in to the past; it also roots simultaneously her in the present. It citizens Anil clearly to Sri Lanka she stands now (Sanghera, 90).

In England also Anil undergoes homeless, alienated and rootless. Firstly Anil during her studies in London she feels isolated. Anil's identity is fragmented and fractured since she travelled across countries she has no fixed identity. As a migrant in Sri Lanka she faces threat and trauma by the Sri Lankan Government when she finds the bodies of victims. To escape investigation and disclose the cases Sri Lankan Government forces her to leave the country by confiscating all the evidences collected by Anil Tessera. Anil also faces identity crisis and cultural clash not only in the west but also in her homeland.

Anil never feels comfortable and happy initially in her homeland, Sri Lanka which is now a migrated country. Anil is completely perplexed because of different geography and environment around her in London. She is not able to find the classroom initially in London so she misses two classes at the beginning. Ondaatje writes in the novel as:

She missed two classes in her first week, unable to find lecture room. So for a while she began arriving early each morning and waited on the front steps for doctor Endicott, following him through the swing doors, stair ways, grey- and- pink corridors, to the unmarked class room.( She once followed him, startled him and other in the men’s bathroom) (*Anil’s Ghost*, 137-138).

Anil is Ondaatje’s so daring character and she is so committed investigator that is why United Nations sends her as skilled forensic anthropologist to disclose the human rights violations have occurred during civil war in Sri Lanka. She thinks she is a native of Sri Lanka since she has the ancestral roots and no other citizen of Sri Lanka neither speak nor ask questions against the Government but Anil speaks and Ondaatje declares her not only as a foreigner but also a Sri Lankan moreover Anil identifies herself one of the natives and



victims Sarath might feel happy for Anil being the one of them. “She was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, ‘I think you murdered hundreds of us. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally us” (*Anil’s Ghost*, 269).

When Anil migrates to England for studies, she struggles to adjust to a new culture of England. She often feels displaced, dislocated devastated and dreadful as a migrant in England. She loses her self confidence in the first month of stay in England. She sometimes becomes emotional towards he mother and motherland. In Anil's memory Sri Lanka is unforgettable country and always the best. She mentally, emotionally, physically suffers in host land. Anil's final chat with her mother in Sinhala is:

She seemed timid even to herself. She felt lost and emotional. She murmured to herself the way one of her spinster aunts did. She didn’t eat much for a week and saved enough money to phone Colombo. Her father was out and her mother was unable to phone to the phone. It was about one in the morning and she had woken her Lalita. They talked for a few minutes, until they were both weeping; it felt, at the far ends of the world (*Anil’s Ghost*, 138).

Finally Sarath is also finds dead for the Government believing that he helped Anil in providing evidences to complete the investigation. Sarath’s dead body is found in the mortuary by his brother Gamini. Voices of Gamini and other citizens are silenced. There is no chance of argument or opinion on the death of Sarath. This is neo colonialist dominance and segregation and subjugation of Subalterns “Sarath’s chest said everything. This body lay undefended, It was what it was. No longer a counter of an argument. No longer an opinion” (*Anil’s Ghost*, 289).

Even though Anil does not have any friends or relatives in touch when she comes to Colombo She was happy to be alone “Anil was glad to be alone” (*Anil’s Ghost*, 6). But Anil had known only one person Laith and Sarong which had her parents gifted her every year for Christmas. She goes to meet Lalita but their conversation dissatisfies both of them because of the language barrier. Lailta and her granddaughter can only speak Tamil which can understand little. This is how Ondaatje presents cultural conflict and Anil’s lost connection with motherland. “...and for the next while the granddaughter talked to Tamil to Lalita. Anil could understand only a few words when it was spoken relying mostly on the manner of speech to understand what they were saying” (*Anil’s Ghost*, 19).

*In the skin of a Lion* is written to depict how Canadian metropolitan cities like Toronto had been built and how urbanization has occurred in Canada. This discourse is purely based on research. Ondaatje has put a lot of effort in the library to collect sources like histories, newspapers, archival, photographs and interviews and read and write this novel *In the Skin of a Lion* which is purely a fact meanwhile recreate his own narrative techniques to create I the novel , Ondaatje adds some fictitious stories. So, novel *In the Skin of a Lion* is a fusion of both fact and fictitious elements.

Likewise *Anil’s Ghost* depicts true history of civil war which occurred in Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009. During civil war there were three groups namely Governments, anti government insurgents and separatist guerrillas. Anil has seen the bodies of victims with her



associate Sarath Diyasena who is an archaeologist who is finally gets killed by the government. Ruwana Kumara who works in mining is killed during civil war by the government. Anil who is forensic anthropologist collect all evidences and ready to find the murderers. But Governments involved in this case so she is not allowed to investigate but forces to return to America. Here to write *Anil's Ghost*, Michael Ondaatje does research and collects all the sources related to civil war and while writing this novel Ondaatje introduces fictitious characters like Anil Tessera who is a protagonist of the novel and Ananda, a sculptor and painter, Sarath Diyasena, an archaeologist, Gamini, asurgeon. Palipana, an epigraphist. So *Anil's Ghost* is a novel which is a fusion of both fact and fictitious stories. So, Ondaatje mingles both facts and fictitious stories to write his novels.

The analysis of the two novels by Michael Ondaatje along with their diasporic and textual analysis bring out that migrated people experiences dislocation, trauma, displacement, alienation and nostalgia, marginalisation, separation and segregation in the host land. Ondaatje's Novels throws light on how fact and fictitious stories have been written in novels such as *In the skin of a Lion* and *Anil's Ghost*. It is observed that selected novel, *Anil's Ghost* introduces post colonial diasporic character Anil migrated to her own native land as an forensic anthropologist in Sri Lanka to investigate the crimes during civil war but she is treated as foreigner and she for being a migrant experiences trauma, nostalgia, displacement and alienation in the homeland. It is evident that a migrant in spite of being native she is now completely westernised lady. In the novel, *In the skin of Lion*, Ondaatje explores both history and unwritten history. He tried to uncover the truth of the hard working migrants of different countries. The immigrants who are not written in official history of Canada are real hard workers in the construction of Toronto. They are ignored in history and become marginalised and subjugated. The migrant people become diasporic subalterns. But Ondaatje as a postcolonial diasporic author 'writes back' and discovers the truth through novel. It is also observed how language of migrant people create cultural crisis. Identity crisis is also visible in these two novels of Ondaatje. Michael Ondaatje has himself experienced migration and as a diasporic writer he has expressed migrant experiences in the two texts meticulously.

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