The temporary return to the homeland in Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family

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Abstract
This study concentrates on memory in Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family because it is the foundation for the whole novel. Ondaatje’s attempt creates a relationship with the past by performing all acts of the journey in physical and imaginary performances of listening and reproducing. His attempt depends on his own memory; however, his memory does not coincide with stories he has heard, and the historical documents tend to conflict with each other. In the interior of his travels, Ondaatje reveals the extent of his isolation and the impact of his displacement. As he narrates the stories, he faces difficulties in distinguishing between rumors and lies, in organizing fragments of knowledge, and in explaining challenges tied to his own methods of cultural revival. These challenges are met in the non-linear and sometimes stunning text plans which he uses.

Keywords: memory, the self, belonging, past, isolation, homeland.

Introduction
The temporal reversal forms a key feature of the immigrant imagination to seek wholeness through a connection with the past. Although the lived reality of an immigrant writer undeniably affirms the violent temporal rupture that migration enforces “of his present being in a different place from his past” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 12). This very dislocation creates conditions for an imaginary desire to negate time, reverse it, and enact an endless return to the past. It seems that the irreversible wholesale transition involved in the act of migration and settlement opens up imaginative possibilities for the immigrant writer who wants not so much to reverse time but to step back in time and embark on a journey of reversal. Therefore, the impulse which guides Michael Ondaatje to return to his native land through his voyage creates an intimate imaginary landscape that allows him to enter the dialogue with his dead father. It is obvious that the desire for such a connection is strong and no reconciliation is possible; therefore, Ondaatje is unable to imagine the information barrier that divides the past from the present. Sometimes, there is a bifurcated perspective at which the disjuncture is marked by
the results of spatial and temporal dislocation that Rushdie (1991, p. 19) explains a “stereoscopic vision”. Meanwhile, McLeod (2000, p. 209) claims that “the idea of the home country splits from the experience of returning home”. This divided perspective results in irreversible ontological instability for future migrants, who are displaced from their homeland and resettled; it creates a site of endlessly deferred desire. Brah (1996, p. 188) presents the question “where is home?” to explain the place of “home” for the immigrant, exile, or diasporic, where he claims that “home” is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, “home” is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’.

In Running in the Family, the most important postcolonial themes deal with ethnicity, hybridity, and cross-cultural alliances in the critical argument; therefore, this paper explores how Ondaatje could create a connection between “home” and “homeland,” between past and present? It also explores how Ondaatje could represent the “self” in his novel? Because the extent of the connection of Ondaatje’s self is the original homeland, cultural segregation, the duality of spaces, and identification of his autobiography as the “other.” Ondaatje mixes up his autobiographical expectations in several ways, but through the text he symbolizes the questionability of representing a displaced self. He recognizes the challenging task in autobiographical writing which he faces when he chooses terms of cross-cultural identifications. His national duality and immigration make the process difficult in terms of ethnic and national belonging because he is in-between two separate locations, Canada and Sri Lanka. However, these formal complications are clear in the text; it responds to these difficulties.

The Challenge of identity and alienation

The location of immigrant writers is on the edge of cultural exchanges due to the crisis of alienation and displacement. For immigrant writers, the crisis of alienation involves an act of dislocation that positions them at a point of perpetual emergency. It is a space that puts them between the instant of the transition of a dynamic system and the quest for a fixed location which is subverted by a sudden expansion of locations. According to Hutcheon’s (1989, p. 1-23) view of simultaneous inscription and disruption, writing one’s past becomes a desperate attempt to search for the locations forever parading before one’s mental eye. As each of the locations in this round is fixed into the narration, some sort of finality is carried out, though only temporally.

However, a postmodernist point of view would hold that this proliferation of spaces is not tantamount to losing the idea of space as such. The proliferation of meaning does not imply the implosion of meaning as such, to live in many places is not to be placeless. Bhabha (2004, p. 13) explains that for the individual “to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated
in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres”. It is the juncture between the appropriation of homelessness in a deconstructionist context and the rootlessness of the modern world. Bhabha has clarified the concept of “unhomeliness,” which is the condition of belonging to many places at the same time. Further, Ahmad (2000, p. 126-27) explains that “the myth of ontological unbelonging is replaced by another, larger myth of excess of belonging: not that he belongs nowhere, but that he belongs to too many places”.

Consequently, the effects of isolation from the cause, such as whether one is exiled or self-exiled, cannot be distinguished any longer. The concentration is on the performance of isolation and displacement when individuals are forced to live in a proliferation of locations; therefore, it is dismissed, even if nostalgically, and incised by returning to the myth of origin. Otherwise, Rushdie clarifies the concept of “homeland,” which symbolizes the imaginary but sometimes is broken in the exile and returns to the original home. Thus, his attempt is to return to the original home. It seems like the same feelings when the immigrant decides to leave the homeland to expand his exploration of the horizon.

The concept of the transnational can be viewed as a fortification against ethnic exclusivism. The notion of inseparability is mapped onto the circle of nationalism; therefore, the thought of space is itself seen as out of date if the nation is compared with ethnicity. The fiction of a homogeneous nation is set against the multicultural community in which the form of multiculturalism asserts the way that all cultures have always influenced each other and are no longer retrievable in their unique shape. In this form, the idea of pure culture itself is uncovered as fiction, but the attempt to disentangle an intermixture of cultures may be a futile one. Notions of origin are difficult through the terribly quality fusion of new culture and old culture: it is the hybridity that must be treated. The root of its sources will only be inferred instead of accurately reconstructed. Nationalities are no longer moored in their correct meanings. Human bodies themselves that cannot be dealt out the new cultures that merge at intervals attest to the unnaturalness of apportioning out the globe through national boundaries. The riotous property of cultures cannot be unraveled into linear structures.

Psychologically, an individual suffering trauma will surely not remember what happens at the moment of the traumatic incident. People often attempt to forget horrible moments to avoid apprehension. However, those moments upset them in their unconscious and have an impact on their actual conduct. Therefore, the re-memory brings pain which influences their actual conduct psychologically. This is based on Bhabha’s (2004, p. 28) view that the act of memory “is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (ibid., p. 11). The suffering might enable people to know their inner power so that “real human pain can be converted into a regime’s fiction of power”.

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In *Running in the Family*, the important part is the “exoticism,” but Ondaatje’s concern with his integrating identity conceals a delight with exoticism. He takes the imagination of his readers to Sri Lanka to show them the exotic land; therefore, his writing distinguishes the exotic experience from the experience of inundation in the new culture. Michael Ondaatje plays a dual role as a narrator and a reader to reflect the imaginary homeland of Sri Lanka to present it to his readers, but it is obvious that he personally felt loneliness and saw his Sri Lankan community as an exotic land during his visit. Therefore, he returned to the original homeland to explore his identity and ethnicity, where he faced an odd situation. However, Ondaatje’s predicament of an identity of alienation comes from the argumentative space between Sri Lankan and Canadian cultural identity and the impact of colonization on Sri Lanka. The hidden feelings of the indirect conspiracy of colonization lead him to the feeling of Sri Lanka being an exotic land. Ondaatje sheds light on the actual identity crisis experienced by Sri Lankan people in the age of decolonization and how they can transition to a new order.

The time of his text is the past, and the location is Ceylon, where Ondaatje’s parents and grandparents had grown up. Indeed, Ondaatje uses Ceylon to refer to the old name of the country, which is currently called Sri Lanka, so he might be doing this to draw the attention of his reader not only to the history of his family but also the history of the place where he was born. Clearly, his effort is not to conduct a study of the history of Sri Lanka; instead, he somehow wants to revive the memory of his readers. He builds details of his story on the ventures of past generations, particularly, his grandmother Lala and his father. When Ondaatje starts to know more about his family, he realizes that he has a deeper connection not only on a personal level. As Ondaatje (1993, p. 20) points out, “that night, I will have not so much a dream as an image that repeats itself. I see my own straining body which stands shaped like a star and realize gradually I am part of a human pyramid. Below me are other bodies that I am standing on and above me are several more, though I am quite near the top”.

Thus, the portraying of his family supports him in clarifying the importance of the familial link which is considered central to the text. So, Ondaatje (1993, p. 168) thanks his family at the end of the text when he says that they were “central in helping me recreate the era of my parents”.

Ondaatje emphasizes both larger family and individual life to draw the real picture in his autobiographical text. Through other persons in his community and other stories, Ondaatje works to reconstruct his past so that he could create a sense of his own life, which is associated with his family, to make them a part of his story. From the beginning of his narration, Ondaatje stresses his dual identity when he mentions in a conversation with Hutcheon that “I do feel I have been allowed the migrant’s double perspective, in the way, say, someone like Gertrude Stein was ‘refocused’ by Paris” (Hutcheon & Richmond, 1990, p. 197). Ondaatje’s double
identity locates him in the third space; therefore, the ambivalence places him in a difficult state to find a unified identity. His investigation is about his original homeland through his continual experience in his new home. Thus, he begins restoring his memory through the first dream of his father in Sri Lanka, and he is still in Canada. As Ondaatje (1993, p. 15) points out in the first section Asia, “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”.

In fact, he illustrates how he returned in a dream from a frosty Canadian winter to hot Asia. Ondaatje (1993, p. 15) awakes “tense, not wanting to move as the heat gradually left” him as “the sweat evaporated,” and then he “became conscious again of brittle air outside the windows searing and howling through the streets and over the frozen cars hunched like sheep all the way down towards Lake Ontario” (ibid.). Ondaatje refers to “the midst of the farewell party in ... growing wildness” (ibid.); thus, he recognizes ambivalence. Thus, he says that “I was already running ... back to the family, I had grown from those relations from my parents’ generation who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words” (ibid). Clearly, the picture shows the sight of the opera advertised on a large sign which he sees from his home. The writer wants to associate with that scene through the act of writing to contact words through words. The first section begins with a dream and closes within a picture of a big drunk party for young people whose parties and their aftermath are described in the next chapters of the novel. The group of pictures and net of figures slowly take the writer deep into the network of relations in the following chapters; however, nothing is essentially resolved. The problem that faces Ondaatje is the large gap between his own memories of his father and the stories which he has heard about him.

The ambivalent dialogue between here and there is often an investigation between the self and the place. Thus, he finds that he is not “Sri Lankan” and not “Canadian” in any way; Ondaatje (1993, p. 66) mentions in the section “The Karapothas,” “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner”. Ondaatje feels ambivalent while he lives in Canada. When he returned to Sri Lanka, he also felt uncomfortable and not at home. Ondaatje’s text deals implicitly and not obviously with Canadian subjects; therefore, his position as a writer is unclear for critics to call him a Canadian writer. His work often puts him in-between spaces; it is rare to refer to Canada as a location in his writing. Nevertheless, his writings are collected in Canadian studies and taught in Canadian courses because Ondaatje found “himself” after he immigrated to Canada. In fact, Canada as a multicultural state has helped Ondaatje to find the “self” and made him a known writer. Some critics have classified Ondaatje as a “cosmopolitan” or “Third World” writer because his works include diverse cultures and deal with multiple identities; therefore, Ondaatje’s texts are part of transcultural literature. Gandhi (1998, p.
153) clarifies this kind of writing as “entirely explicit in its commitment to hybridity. Positioned on the interstices of two antagonistic national cultures, it claims to open up an in-between space of cultural ambivalence”. Meanwhile, Bush (1994, p. 240) refers to him as “the first of the real migrant tradition that you see in a number of writers of our time – Rushdie, Ishiguro, Ben Okri, Rohinton Mistry – writers leaving and not going back, but taking their country with them to a new place”. Hence, it is clear that his text is entirely related to belonging, migration, self-identity, and others. He emphasizes pain and dislocation, but his text preserves a sense of location, which is always lost in cosmopolitan texts. Otherwise, Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* cannot be included among cosmopolitan writings because this text is concerned with a certain history and memory.

Ondaatje has faced the problem of not being able to reach any community outside his family because he left his homeland at the age of eleven. Therefore, he describes the path into time and place because his memory of Ceylon is not sufficient to cover all the stories about the community. Thus, his identity is linked to things larger than himself. Despite his family history being different from social history, Ondaatje uses it to investigate social history. Certainly, he has only dealt with members of his family and famous people in his community as artists with a large “sacrifice of his regionality, his past, and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada” (Mukherjee, 1994, p. 50). He concentrates on imagination and myths more than reflecting the real picture of Sri Lankan society; therefore, his attempt is to hide the reality of people and places. Mukherjee (1994, p. 121) explains that reading *Running in the Family* gives “the impression that the other Sri Lankans – the fishermen, the tea-estate pickers, the paddy planters – are only there as a backdrop to the drama of the Ondaatje family” because he believes that “Ondaatje’s unwillingness or inability to place his family in a network of social relationships makes the book a collection of anecdotes which may or may not be funny depending on one’s own place in the world” (ibid., p. 122).

**The exploration of the “Self”**

In Hutcheon’s view, Ondaatje realizes that he is far from Sri Lankan society, so his attempt is “part of a long tradition of invasions and so forth” (Hutcheon & Richmond, 1990, p. 201). In “The Karapothas” section, Ondaatje (1993, p. 66) refers to D. H. Lawrence’s description: “the roads are intensely picturesque. Animals, apes, porcupine, hornbill, squirrel, pigeons, and figurative dirt!”. Then he portrays another kind of animal in the “Wilpattu” section: a wild pig, “that repulsively exotic creature in his thick black body and the ridge of non-symmetrical hair running down his back” (ibid., p. 115). He also points out William Charles’ description of the jungle in Sri Lanka: “Here are majestic palms with their towering stems and graceful foliage, the shoe flower, the eatable passion flower. Here the water lily swims the rivers with expanded leaves – a prince of aquatic
plants! The Aga-mula-naeti-wala, creeper without beginning or end, twines around trees and hangs in large festoons ... and curious indeed these are from having neither leaves nor roots. Here is the winged thunbergia, the large snouted justicia, the mustard tree of Scripture with its succulent leaves and infinitesimal berries. The busy acacia with its sweet fragrance perfumes the dreary plains while other sad and un-named flowers sweeten the night with their blossoms which are shed in the dark (ibid., p. 69).

In the “Tabula Asiae” section, Ondaatje describes the shape of Ceylon and the changes which have taken place through the years. He points out that the maps on his “brother’s wall in Toronto are the false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of the sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations ... growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy” (p. 51).

He indicates the island’s changing form that shows the desire of conquerors and seduces: “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, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon – the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language” (ibid., p. 51).

Clearly, Ondaatje has recognized the power of agency which is the power of the colonizer. Therefore, he emphasizes the power of representation in most of his discussions as he mentions the old poetry of Sri Lanka’s poet Lakdasa Wikramasinha, which is entitled “Don’t Talk to Me about Matisse.” It is a political poem in which Wikramasinha condemns colonization; it is a tract of political representation which Ondaatje (1993, p. 72) includes in his text to condemn the colonization of his community: “Don’t talk to me about Matisse ... the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio where the nude woman reclines forever on a sheet of blood. Talk to me instead of the culture generally – how the murderers were sustained by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote villages the painters came, and our white-washed mud-huts were splattered with gunfire”.

Ondaatje is influenced by the poetry of Wikramasinha when he describes the Sri Lankan peasants and villagers, so the power of Wikramasinha’s text has appeared in his words. Heble (1994, p. 195) observes that Ondaatje includes Wikramasinha’s poem to clarify that it is “a way of undermining the representational legitimacy of his project (doesn’t anything that Ondaatje says about cultural and political phenomena in Sri Lanka inevitably run the risk of playing into the grid of Western thought and representation so sharply invoked and criticized by Wikramasinha?) and of declaring his faith in imaginative understanding”.

He makes the important point that his disconnection from the birthplace is not only geographical but also cultural and literary. Ondaatje (1993, p. 71) reveals that
he has never known famous voices who have had an influence on the Sri Lankan community. For instance, Ian Goonetileke is “a man who knows history” and helps him to restore a sense of history by emphasizing family and relatives. Linda Hutcheon points out “the map and the history and the poetry made a more social voice, became the balance of the family story, the other end of the seesaw” (Hutcheon & Richmond, 1990, p. 201). It is clear that his attempts use different strategies to be in the third space in-between the past/present and there/here at the same time. Nevertheless, his text is undermined by mixing different destabilizing styles through a representation of history in the narrative. Therefore, this method has made his process extremely complicated to reach his family’s past. Ondaatje (1993, p. 168) has referred to people with whom he has conducted interviews as not having a rich memory. He has, therefore, acknowledged that “all these names may give an air of authenticity”, but he “confesses that the book is not a history”.

Through his exploration of the contact zone between past and present, Ondaatje (1993, p. 154) refers to the old novel which had lost its pages in Kegalle’s church: “ants had attacked the novel thrown on the floor by the commode. A whole battalion was carrying one page away from its source, carrying the intimate print as if rolling a tablet away from him. He knelt down on the red tile, slowly, not wishing to disturb their work. It was page 189. He had not got that far in the book yet but he surrendered it to them”.

Another example which relates to the guestbook in the Church is where he mentions “lifting the ancient pages and turning them over like old, skeletal leaves. The black script must have turned brown over a hundred years ago. The thick pages foxed and showing the destruction caused by silverfish, scars among the immaculate recordings of local history and formal signatures” (ibid., p. 54).

However, it is clear that these different old texts have corroded during the past time; these texts symbolize the “authenticity” and the “truth” which he seeks. Ondaatje poses a paradoxical challenge in his text to inscribe his own form of family and place. His desire is to create his own story by himself; therefore, his text represents an unstableness between reality and fiction. However, at some moments, Ondaatje realizes that he wants to reach the truth. In the “Tropical Gossip” section, Ondaatje (1993, p. 44) poses questions: “Where is the intimate and truthful in all this? Teenager and Uncle. Husband and lover. A lost father in his solace. And why do I want to know of this privacy? After the cups of tea, coffee, public conversations ... I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover”.

Further, in the “Lunch Conversation” section, he starts his conversation with his family by saying, “wait a minute, wait a minute! When did all this happen, I’m trying to get it straight ...” (ibid., p. 84). Although he asks about the truth, this conversation contains a mix of fragments that add nothing.
As his desire is to inscribe himself into the virtual landscape, Ondaatje (1993, p. 15) mentions a dream “in a jungle, hot, sweating” in Asia. He knows very well about “Asia. The name was a gasp from a dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be whispered, would never be used as a battle cry. The word sprawled. It had none of the clipped sound of Europe, America, Canada. The vowels took over, slept on the map with the S. I was running to Asia and everything would change” (ibid., p. 16).

Based on Ondaatje’s view, “Asia” has a lack of specificity, despite its breadth. Therefore, his journey is an attempt to create his own image of Asia. This process is an attempt to recover the original culture and to restore (history, identity, and tradition). According to Hall (1998, p. 18-19) that “there is no way in which people of the word can act, can speak, can create, unless they come from someplace, they come from some history, they inherit certain cultural traditions ... the past is not only a position from which to speak, but it is also an absolutely necessary resource in what one has to say”.

The text in Running in the Family is the restoration of cultural identity at a moment when the writer admits to the doubt. As Ondaatje (1993, p. 60) insists on exploring the self, he mentions that the text is the “last chance for the clear history of the self”.

The process of writing text in Ondaatje’s story is the process of writing himself into being. Therefore, he creates some moments in the text which are purely his invention. He clearly exaggerates his love for his family, particularly his father and grandmother, the love that he inherited from his ancestors. Ondaatje (1993, p. 102) notes in one of the stories in relation to his grandmother that “it was her last perfect journey. The new river in the street moved her right across the race course and park towards the bus station. As the light came up slowly she was being swirled fast, “floating” (as ever confident of surviving this too) alongside branches and leaves, the dawn starting to hit flamboyant trees as she slipped past them like a dark log, shoes lost, false breast lost. She was free as a fish, travelling faster than she had in years, fast as Vere’s motorcycle, only now there was this roar around her. She overtook Jesus lizards that swam and ran in bursts over the water, she was surrounded by tired half-drowned fly-catchers screaming tack tack tack tack, frogmouths, nightjars forced to keep awake, brain-fever birds and their irritating ascending scales, snake eagles, scimitar-babblers, they rode the air around Lalla wishing to perch on her unable to alight on anything except what was moving”.

Otherwise, Ondaatje’s answer is different from the one he gave in Toronto that his grandmother’s death was from “natural causes.” In the text, there are several realistic moments where Ondaatje gives up the limits of the prospect. He enjoys referring to his family’s stories, as they allow him to write the history of his family. With these stories, he fills the missing gap, where he adds his voice to that of others.
Overall, various stories related to Ondaatje’s family represent the imagined moments of Ondaatje’s writing; thus, these texts represent a link between tradition and postmodernism. They are Ondaatje’s direct response to homeland and family, so these texts show his desire to support his connections to his family and his father. The process of writing involves Ondaatje seeking out his original culture by looking for the history of his ancestors in Sri Lanka. His text thus involves time, dates, and family events. In the section “Monsoon Notebook (i),” he shows that he emphasizes his sense of the landscape. Ondaatje (1993, p. 57) mentions that they are “driven through rainstorms that flood the streets for an hour and suddenly evaporate, where sweat falls in the path of this ballpoint, where the jackfruit rolls across your feet in the back of the jeep, where there are eighteen ways of describing the smell of a durian, where bullocks hold up traffic and steam after the rain”.

In fact, Ondaatje’s description is one of self-representation; it is an odd moment for Ondaatje himself. His negotiation and position have the opposite influence on events; they give him an opportunity to be in contact with what he reflects in the text. Ondaatje (1993, p. 157) points out “Midnight, this hand is the only thing moving. As discreetly and carefully, as whatever animals in the garden fold brown leaves into their mouths, visit the drain for water, or scale the broken glass that crowns the walls. Watch the hand move. Waiting for it to say something, to stumble casually on perception, the shape of an unknown thing”.

In this passage, he makes it clear that one’s surroundings are very important. In a paradoxical way, he describes the place, smells, and sights of Sri Lanka during the Canadian winter; therefore, his magic impression of Sri Lanka aids him in bringing himself to the place where he lives as Ondaatje (1993, p. 108) mentions that, “Now, and here, Canadian February, I write this in the kitchen and play that section of cassette to hear not just the peacocks but all the noises of the night behind them – inaudible then because they were always there like breath. In this silent room (with its own unheard hum of fridge, fluorescent light) there are these frogs loud as river, gruntings, the whistle of other birds brash and sleepy, but in that night so modest behind the peacocks they were unfocused by the brain – nothing more than darkness, all those sweet loud younger brothers of the night”.

Obviously, Ondaatje is provided with a kind of experience that helps him to build the fundamental image of his direct sensory link to Sri Lanka in order to reach the “truth.” He clarifies that the relation between the nature of the individual and his past has an effect on the self-representation in his writing. Busia (1998, p. 267) shows struggles that come together when she writes “an article for a collection on multicultural states. The trouble is, such reflections always assume so much: that we know who ‘we’ and ‘us’ and ‘they’ and ‘them’ are; that we know where and what ‘home’ is; that we have a sure sense of ‘margins’ and ‘centres’ to help us articulate the manifold implications of the movements of history that have
brought into being these multicultural states in which we all live. Yet, as I sit down to write, I must begin with the fragments, the bewildering geography of my life that is part of your legacy to me”.

In the last section, “Last Morning,” the writer symbolizes the body as a pot of memory in which he keeps all his memories of his family; thus, Ondaatje (1993, p. 166) says “my body must remember everything”. At the same time, his memory returns him to the last moments in which he had left Ceylon with his mother “There is nothing in this view that could not be a hundred years old, that might not have been here when I left Ceylon at the age of eleven. My mother looks out of her Colombo window thinking of divorce, my father wakes after three days of alcohol, his body hardly able to move from the stiffness in muscles he cannot remember exerting. It is a morning scenery well known to my sister and her children who leave for swimming practice before dawn crossing the empty city in the Volks, passing the pockets of open shops and their lightbulb light that sell newspapers and food. I stood like this in the long mornings of my childhood unable to bear the wait till full daylight when I could go and visit the Peiris family down the road in Boraalesgamuwa; the wonderful, long days I spent there with Paul and Lionel and Aunt Peggy who would casually object to my climbing all over her bookcases in my naked and dirty feet. Bookcases I stood under again this week which were full of signed first editions of poems by Neruda and Lawrence and George Keyt. All this was here before I dreamed of getting married, having children, wanting to write”.

Thus, Ondaatje has reconstructed his past through negotiation with different sides of geographical spaces. Because the contemporary writings after waves of immigration tend to be real, they therefore emphasize experiences and real documents to re-evaluate the terms of ethnicity and genre (Kadar, 1995, p. 70). Angus (1997, p. 22) points out: “In the case of ethnic identity, which normally draws upon a sense of a traditional cultural unity inherited from the past, it is ... the case that a contemporary politics of identity actively recover and rearticulates the received culture and projects it into the future”.

Therefore, Ondaatje differs from a number of writers who believe that it is possible to make a link between experience and the voice of narration in immigrant autobiography because he uses the real text to integrate literature, history, and general experience in order to generate a complicated speech of self.

Kroetsch (2000, p. 35) points out how to make a connection to the past through his poem “Seed Catalogue,” which he begins with “how do you grow a past / to live in / the absence of silkworms,” and he asks about the absence faced by Prairie writers. The answers to his questions become clearer in the next lines of the poem to refer to the stages of growing the past. In Ondaatje’s case, his attempt is to clarify how isolated individuals can tell a story of themselves to themselves about their past. As for the link between Kroetsch’s questions and Ondaatje’s view, they show that Kroetsch’s desire is to fill the space with the past, while Ondaatje’s view is to
recreate meaningful spaces in-between past and present to fill the gap. Therefore, he integrates his actual experience of the present with stories of an imaginary land based only on his memory of the past.

**Conclusion**

In *Running in the Family* Ondaatje recognizes his own text to inscribe himself in the history of “Ceylon.” He focuses on the political representation of his voyage to deal with the past. Nevertheless, his attempt is to show the sense of belonging through his writing which might be filtered through the process of the integration between the past and the present. He creates his text to look for the self rather than providing any conclusion about identity, ethnicity, and belonging. Nevertheless, his experiences with building social text and generating and writing texts make the text a complex critical pattern, which shows an insistence on belonging and supports the narrative-historical experiment. His text needs an active reader to take part in gathering stories and tasting sounds, which represent cross-cultural identity.

Certainly, Ondaatje shows in several sections of his novel that he lacks a sense of belonging to his original homeland; thus, he shows in the text that he is in search of the self. In this text, he concentrates on the theme of autobiography in different strategies, building his narrative in certain ways by using different layers, showing maps, and choosing different inter-texts which connect to self, past, and homeland. In this kind of narration, memory is a form of fiction, and in this kind of text, memory is the fundamental document with which the narrator works. All Ondaatje’s texts are equal in wealth, but, in this text, he creates a deeply dialogic text which carries his own voice, his family, his friends, and his relatives. Ondaatje creates the text of the fragmental foreground for contributing to the biographical or historiographic metafiction method that the reader can easily share. The extraordinary immediacy of the language of *Running in the Family*’s text has the appeal of gossip while pushing beyond the limitations of gossip at every turn.

**Reference**


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