

Alterity in Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*

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Abstract

The post-colonial stance aims in destabilising universal monopolies and becoming inclusive of the otherwise 'othered'. Ondaatje toys with the idea of 'representation' and subverts the 'walling in' and 'walling out'. He problematises the textuality of history and uses the novel as a response to biased histories. The mundane is made to appear sublime and polyphonic voices demonstrate how invisibility does not equate with absence. The story as an experienced space highlight the many sidedness of truth. The working class experiences are thus used to point at the insufficiency and gaps in prejudiced documentation. Maybe it is Spivak rephrased; it is not 'can the subaltern speak?' but, 'the subaltern speaks, are there listeners?'. The construction workers transcend their identities as just workers and we get an insight into their life too, sharing their emotions of love, grief, longing, solitude etc. Every character is projected in such a way that first impressions only evolve to grow depth. It can be argued that, the 'othering' need not be strictly based on class, race etc but can operate in more complex ways. The idea of representation is further explored by employing themes of 'darkness and light' throughout the novel. Not only through content, but also through form is the deconstruction achieved. There is formed a third space between fact and fiction in the narrative's lyrical quality. This paper explores how Michael Ondaatje in *In the Skin of a Lion*, uses the form and content of the narrative to explore and practice alterity in its myriad dimensions.

Keywords: Monopolies, Representation, Textuality, Alterity, Solitude.

Michael Ondaatje has been often been perceived as a postcolonial writer dealing with transnationalistic themes and is known to be in possession of 'complex inheritances,' as commented by J. E. Chamberlin (qtd. In Spinks 235). Having been born in Ceylon, moving to England and later Canada must have opportunistically enabled him to witness cultural difference, diversity and determinism. "I am a mongrel of place. Of race. Of cultures. Of many genres." (McCrum), he says about himself in an interview. The very canon of Postcolonial literature or rather Commonwealth literature itself, is constructed as the voice of 'the other' or as a response to the mainstream literary canon of the 'white world'. Canada, a supposedly white nation, to the contrary has never been identified as one, for it is more of a mosaic (Gibbon) than one monolithic entity. So its totality has always been in stitching together its multicolored components, and Ondaatje's writings stand testimony to this phenomena.

While most of his novels deal with South Asian characters and settings, some works like *In the Skin of a*

Lion do not, making it difficult to limit him, merely as a diasporic writer. However each work focuses on its own chosen ethnic group, which apparently always happens to be a representationally mixed one. One can say that he is not exclusively multiculturalistic, but rises beyond that, to what Elenor Ty identifies as the 'global Canadian postmodern' (102). His unique approach to multiculturalism is a variant of its own kind and is a beat of alterity by itself. Ondaatje's specific alterity is in identifying that, to be Canadian is to be global.

The writer in the novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, engages subversion as a mode of alterity reminding us of Wark's words, "The only truly false representation, is the belief in the possibility of true representation." (qtd. In Lucy 107) This allows for a historiographic metafictional outlook wherein we understand that "the past once existed, but that our historical knowledge of it is (only) semiotically transmitted." (Hutcheon 122). The story takes place in Toronto, Canada, a city whose history, like most cities' histories happens to be largely biased, full of gaps and by no means all-inclusive. A city's history is documented and written by historiographers who decide what ought to be included and what deserves to be left out. For example, the region that Patrick has grown up in has only recently said to become official, even though settlers have been

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there since 1815. The area was only named in 1910, indicating the incongruity between the official narrative and the people's actual lives. New historicists caution us about this textuality of history that may be extremely vulnerable to politicization. It is a selective elimination driven by various prejudicial priority like class, gender, race etc.

In the Skin of a Lion is an attempt to experience an almost 'behind the screen' rendition of the city's making, representing the unrepresented. "The articles and illustrations he found in the Riverdale Library depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge" (Ondaatje 151). The library findings of Patrick show us what makes it to the news, "surveys arguments, the scandals.." and only "the deaths of workers fleetingly mentioned" (Ondaatje 150). Contrarily, however, the entire novel is exactly everything other than that. Here the factual figures become trivial and the lives of otherwise neglected people become the mainstream subject matter of the narrative. Experiences of protagonists like Nicholas and Patrick must invariably be alien to members of the class, represented by commissioner Harris. These characters are from the periphery, migrants and poor, who never otherwise would have entered the lime light. We see the workers take part in an unofficial ceremony of their own, walking on the bridge while carrying candles to honour the workers who died during the bridge's construction. This shows the humanitarian side of the worker class and their exercise of little agency whenever possible, like this.

The protagonists are working class men and women whose ordinary lives are made seem more than ordinary by Ondaatje who, defamiliarises 'the mundane' into 'the sublime'. Nicholas Temelcoff is portrayed as a hero on saving the nun and is described in Herculean terms regarding his physical strength. He risks his own life and catches her even without watching her fall, while the one who watches, Harris, does nothing and is immobile. He respects his job and does it with a lot of integrity making him seem respectable, irrespective of the cadre of his job. Though Nicholas is not paid well enough, he does all the dangerous daredevil tasks which the others cannot, that reinforces his capability as distinctive. The Nun whom he saves, renounces religion and becomes Alice after his save. It is Nicholas who is her saviour now, the replaced Christ figure. The presence of an almighty god is never accepted in the novel, instead, the omniscient narrator takes his place. According to this view, divinity and vileness are all inherent within man and are more complexly associated, than being just contrasting binaries.

At one point in the novel, Nicholas even displays his scars proving that his body is a lived space of history. The physical body has been employed as a device of aesthetics to revolutionize representations of labour. The characters appear like super humans and adorn other worldly grace in this process. Caravaggio paints himself

blue and artfully camouflages to elude the anyone's grasp. Even thievery becomes poetic in all its adventurous and romantic vigour. This idealisation through art manoeuvre, however has also attracted critical attention. The very idea of alterative representation is to pave way for what would otherwise be misrepresented if not non represented. But if alteration finds itself once again in terms of beautified fallacy then it invalidates the very intention of a counter discourse. Stacy for instance remarks that "attempts to read the novel in this way have produced a critical dead end whereby the book is repeatedly taken up as a proletarian novel and subsequently condemned for its failure to maintain its critique of wage labor and the class" (441).

Lowry talks about representing "racialized" alterity, which is very different from marginality (62). This othering constructs the 'self', which is invariably identified as "whiteness", only to problematise, who constitute this 'whiteness', for Patrick himself hails from the same province. The self is apparently an amorphous entity, indefinite, yet primarily functioning to construct 'the other'. When Patrick first perceives the Irish loggers at the beginning of the novel, from the untainted child's lens, they are reduced to just 'strangers', who 'don't own the land' and disappear with winter (Ondaatje 7). Even before child Patrick could develop a sense of self, he knows who the non-natives or the 'others' are. Critics have always identified Patrick as the 'seeker' figure, who has severe identity crisis until very late in the novel. Ironically, he comes to terms with his selfhood only in becoming one among the 'others'. "His identity develops in relation to a host of other, not quite "white" subjects—Greek, Macedonian, Russian, and Italian. His actions and the kindness of others, rather than his name or his country birth, become the determining factors in his self development." (Lowry 64)

Speaking of the 'represented space', it is interesting to note how the author brings into play, darkness and light imagery. The novel begins from darkness and emerges into light, as in, materializing those that have hitherto been invisible. This also hints at the fact that invisibility need not be synonymous to absence. Siemerling also points at the last dialogue of the novel- "Lights" (92) and interprets that the plurality may indicate at the multiple alterities, maybe, just like how white light is made up of 7 colours. The strangers whom Patrick witnesses dancing and playing in the night, (who we later learn, are Irish loggers), hold on to torches, which can be read as attempts to become visible. Patrick too yearns for a 'lighted space' and migrates to a city. He is drawn to women who are actresses and who are in the light, atleast for a while. Another irony is that though it is the sweat and blood of the workers that built the bridge, but once the lights are fixed, it illuminates the name, 'Prince Edward Bridge'.

One can say that Ondaatje's writing often blurs the lines between fact and fiction and open up a third space of alterity. This alternative space has the essence of a

dream and is tangible only in its elusiveness. Even in *In the Skin of a Lion*, the narrative recurrently transverses into dream sequences which by no means appear anything less than important, but only aid constructively to the story. The story is not in 'what it is' alone, 'how' it is said acquires an equally important formative aspect. The ethereal aesthetics of dreams, in fact only, indispensably, complete the intended affective factor. There are even letters embedded in the text, which add to this effect. These letters are not delivered but, that doesn't nullify their existence either. Their contributory degree is nevertheless obligatory to totality. It is interesting to note how, canonical modes of communication or information like documentation are replaced with 'other' means like letters, dreams, songs etc. The tone of the novel too is lyrical and hardly seems like a work of prose. The entire novel is a frame narrative by itself, which is 'narrated' by a teller and there is a listener. We are again forced to wonder as to how much of it is true. This reinforces the idea of a story as an 'experienced space'. 'Experience' always has its base as, a 'self'. Simplified, identifying who the self is basically the story version, which further reminds us that stories are nothing but simply versions of events.

In fact it is not Ondaatje who is telling us, but made to appear as if it is one of them who is narrating, as it a frame narrative, a typical postcolonial, postmodern turn by giving voice to the 'other'. Maybe it is Spivak rephrased; it is not 'can the subaltern speak?' but, 'the subaltern speaks, are there listeners?'. The construction workers transcend their identities as just workers and we get an insight into their life too, sharing their emotions of love, grief, longing, solitude etc. Every character is projected in such a way that first impressions only evolve to grow depth. The in medias res opening, the fragmented interspersed narrative and the nonlinear time scale, all aid in achieving this. Every character comes with a past and is more complex than he or she appears to be, constantly deconstructing superficial assumptions. In fact this is integrated by Ondaatje, so well that, we realize we can never know a character so well, for characters sometimes, don't know themselves fully either.

Kugkhapan observes that, alternative attitude opens up a, "corpus of stories that were once unwritten, unexplored terrains across space and time" and that "Histories now exist in plural." (127). In a patriarchal world of labour, violence and economics, we get to hear the women too, who are otherwise grossly denied representation in historical renderings. Alice and Clara emerge as two strong women characters capable of influencing people around them. They help us understand the alter to 'the ways of men'; for instance, demonstrate how "love is capable of radically shaping someone's identity" (Legros)

The structure of the novel thus exercises polyphony, destroys narrative monopolies as homogenised explanations and "celebrates the contingent and the fluid over the fixed stability of totalising theories" (Nayar 52). It thereby rejects a universalising reality, defending the epigraph of the novel, "never again will a single story be told as if it were the only one" and does justice to have adopted alterity as its standpoint.

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