

# Reconstruction of Narrative in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*

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## I

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1982) is a story about the journey to the past, and in the book the past is treated as if it were a strange or different country. It is a travel memoir in which he returns to his place of birth, Sri Lanka, and collects stories about his father. The book has brought about the issue of generic categorization since its publication because of its impossibility to categorize. It is different from autobiography, biography or memoir. And the 'hybrid' structure, which consists of poems, photographs, gossips and maps, indicates the possibility of viewpoint. And its evasion from easy categorization has been thought of as "one of the most complex of Ondaatje's postmodern challenges to boundaries" (Hutcheon 1988 qtd. in Barbour 136).

The tension between autobiography and biography, to write about Ondaatje himself and his father, in *Running in the Family*, is very important, because it raises issues such as how the writer narrates himself by telling about other person, and the changeability of the relationship between the author and the subject, as well as it guides to the issue of act of writing itself. The history of Ondaatje's father, which constitutes the main part of the book, consists from gossips, that is, stories about him from some others' points of view. People's memory is the only key on which the writer depends to create the narrative. Further hearing of unreliable memory about his father makes the writer to keep away from him. The amount of information increase, only a scale of the narrative expanding without the solution to the question who he is. As Minoli Salgado points out, "each retelling of a story serves to 'swell' the narrative" (190). Douglas Barbour call the organization of the book which disrupts any singular reading habit the

“labyrinth”: “[there] are mirrors in the labyrinth of stories but there are also windows onto other sites of narrative” (139). It seems to be possible to apply this concept of the labyrinth to the complexity or endlessness of the narrative itself. Besides, as Graham Huggan discusses, to speak of ethnic origins is “to disappear into a genealogical labyrinth” in the 1920s and 1930s, the era of Ondaatje’s grandparents (119).<sup>1</sup> To try to find his father’s ethnic origin makes him to confront the disordered situation as if a labyrinth. This suggests the possibility of new way of construction of order: Ondaatje has to switch his way of defining the identity from *roots* to *routes*.

This essay is going to examine how Ondaatje constructs the narrative of his identity by showing the ‘routes,’ how he locates himself in the present by shifting to another time and space in his writing.

## II

It is significant to compare *Running in the Family* and the canonical colonial text, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) in order to understand the element of endless re-telling of a story. Same as Ondaatje’s father, the image of Kurtz is created from other people’s gossips: Marlow and his audience (including readers of the book) do not ‘see’ the story — Kurtz — but imagine him by reconstituting the recollection of stories about him. The endless closure of narrative here upholds: the more Marlow makes an effort to know about Kurtz and to approach closer to him, the more another wall emerges and the distance between them expands. Peter Brooks, in his essay, “An Unreadable Report: Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” argues that by telling about Kurtz’s story and how he interprets it to his audience, Marlow narrates himself: Marlow has his own story. He ‘borrows’ the previous journey of Kurtz to narrate his own identity. As Marlow has been being displaced from the centre of Kurtz, Ondaatje confronts the continuous closures of the doors that connect to his father. His narrative reveals the impossibility to reach the center by writing, which is the endless return to the past obsessed by the sense of rootless. And how he describes the process of collecting and interpreting stories about his father comes to be important.

And Marlow's travel to Africa brings him to construct his narrative of identity, the metaphor of travel is very important in Ondaatje's writing. As Iain Chambers says that "to write is [ . . . ] to travel" (Chambers 10), writing is exploring one's identity through language and traveling is exploring a new geographical experience. An attempt to define oneself or the place is performed in the processes of both journeys. And in terms of shifting, that is, to move from one place to another, the similarity between them is crucial. Same as that we shift to a new geographical place in travel, writers or readers shift to another time or space from where they are. Where and how we locate ourselves is important. However, different from travel in which home is the fundamental point where you depart from and return to, in writing, home itself as the space where you come from and return to is ambiguous. Chambers raises an issue of home, quoting Martin Heidegger's words, "Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world" (1). For those who leave out their country because of political reasons and are forced to enter a host country and form a new community, there is no promise of a return to home. This homelessness is not only in the case of migrant people or exile, but it also could be applied to all of us under the pressure of accelerating globalization. Encountering different cultures or a new dimension of our own culture, or confronting some world wide dynamic changes, we are losing the sense of our own identity and feel as if we are floating in chaos. And we obsessively try to search home to define ourselves. 'Home' is mythic space for all of us in this postmodern world. And migrant people's situation, as Chambers points out, is the most fitting metaphor of the postmodern condition because of their "sense of being rootless, of living between worlds, between a lost past and a non-integrated present" (27).

In this sense, writings by the second generational migrant writers, like Ondaatje, are the representatives of writing as traveling. For those migrant writers, even though they qualify for a host community, situate themselves in the struggle to write with the effect of displacement. John McLeod points out the importance of Robin Cohen's emphasis on collectivity and community in the description of a diaspora, and argues that diaspora peoples (they can be migrant peoples indeed), have "the sense of living in one

country but looking across time and space to another” (207). Under the influence of the “past migration history” of their parents or grandparents, the migrant writers journey to another time and space through writing and attempt to solute the sense of rootless and to search their identity. Being brought up in a host culture, those writers themselves represent the ambiguity of “hybrid” or double identities in the post-colonial discourse. Their acts of writing, which derived from the bitter sense of displacement, can be a positive counter act against the conventional or linear sense of history and show new possibilities.

One of those possibilities is to convert the question, that is, a change from what home is to how you access it. In terms of Paul Gilroy, ‘routes’ provide a better way of thinking about identities than the notion of ‘roots’.<sup>2</sup> As in the discussion on the Rushdie’s essay “Imaginary Homelands” McLeod points out, it is impossible for the migrant writers to return home through the process of writing. And the physical fact that they are in a different place from their past, “this disjunction between past and present, between here and there, makes ‘home’ seem far-removed in time and space, available for return only through an act of imagination” (McLeod 211). The imagination is the very location of home. What is important is not whether you see home but how you imagine or tell your home.

### III

Ondaatje’s poetics of physical image indicates his exploration of how he can grasp the other’s sense and his challenge to the possibility of the act of narrating. Barbour points out the sensuality of Ondaatje’s poetics, “[His] texts seek to create a sensual and emotional awareness of the other’s living, in the midst of his or her experience. To slip into the other body and feel what it’s like to live there, even if the living is chaotic — that is the gift they offer” (137). In this sense, Ondaatje’s journey is oriented to the other’s body in which different time and space expand.

It seems to be useful to consider Elaine Scarry’s study on the body in physical suffering and its relation to the numerous vocabularies, in order to understand how to access the other’s physical experience. In *The Body in Pain* (1985) Scarry claims that pain is the most absolute definer of reality

and emphasizes its inexpressibility and unsharability.<sup>3</sup> But she examines the moment when physical pain begins to tell a story, and finds the way to access the other's body in pain.<sup>4</sup> She points out that human voice, that is language, can provide an external image of interior physical events, and this "trust in language" enables the pain to enter into a "realm of shared discourse" (9). What is important is the way of representation of pain. The writer's attempt to make the other's physical experience sharable to the people in the external world.

This sensual awareness is highlighted in the poem "The Cinnamon Peeler" in *Running in the Family*. The narrator begins his journey to the body of his beloved from the conditional desire that he would leave his smell on her. "If I were a cinnamon peeler / I would ride your bed / and leave the yellow bark dust / on your pillow" (RF 95). He imagines her body would carry the "reek" rather than smell of cinnamon and people around her would know her as the cinnamon peeler's wife. He still sets up the condition that he could not glance at her before marriage nor touch her. Then, he shifts to another imaginary time in the past when he noticed her desire for him because she showed her jealousy of his previous women such as "the lime burner's daughter" and searched her arms for missing perfume (RF 96). She gets his cinnamon smell on her body instead of being "wounded" by "the pleasure of a scar" (RF 96). He marks himself on her body by leaving his smell. The narrator travels into her body by getting on the smell as medium and empathizes with her. This journey depends wholly on the condition as if he were a cinnamon peeler: it can proceed by the smell that is completely imaginative production. As Barbour points out the cinnamon peeler "as a kind of writer" (147), the poem indicates how the writer enters the other's body and share it in his imagination.

Also in the poem "Women Like You," the writer enters into the others' body. In this sense, these two poems are different from previous two poems "High Flowers" and "To Colombo," in which the writer describes others in the place from a distance. As Salgado points out the irregularity of line structures of the poem, disturbances and subversion develop in "Women Like You." And the writer shows his attempt to shift to another dimension, the other's body, dynamically. The poem talks about the por-

traits of women on the surface of the rock in the ancient wall painting and the men who come to adore the women and write graffiti. “Hundreds of small verses / by different hands [of those men] / became one habit of the unrequited / . . . Holding the new flowers / a circle of first finger and thumb / which is a window / to your breast” (*RF* 93). And the narrator begins to touch the body of the women on the rock and feel pleasure. Readers suddenly know that the “I” is also one of the men and that he is involved in writing graffiti. The writer accesses the bodies of the women by writing on the rock and makes himself shift into their bodies, and even to feel pleasure. To enter into the body on the very hard rock is unconceivable in the real life. This radical shift of dimension indicates Ondaatje’s challenge to the possibility of imaginative work. And readers understand that “The Cinnamon Peeler” is this writer’s work and the cinnamon peeler’s beloved is the woman on the rock. Because this writer creates the poem, the imaginative entering into her body by floating on the smell comes to be significant. The writer gains physical experience and confirms the sense of himself by shifting into others rather than establishing himself by creating ‘others.’

Ondaatje seems to think the sense of the body important. In the last chapter “Last Morning”, the writer says “My body must remember everything, this brief insect bite, smell of wet fruit, the slow snail light, rain [ . . . ]” (*RF* 202). And he keeps the room dark without turning the light on because he “want[s] this emptiness of a dark room where [he] listen[s] and wait[s]” (*RF* 202–3). He thinks enormous things to remember will emerge and talk to him if he is just waiting for it. The writer emphasizes listening rather than seeing. He is going to enter the dialogue with his body in the dark room. He has traveled into another place, time, and the other’s body. He seizes the physical feeling by shifting into the other’s body and remembers the sense as a real experience even though it derives from his imagination. And it can be recalled at any time because his body itself remembers it. The body has memory. Transformation of space provides the body of the writer with physical experience and leaves memory to it. Ondaatje explores how he can express the process of the body gains an experience and tells a story. In the “Acknowledgement,” he writes, “A literary work is

a communal act. And this book could not have been *imagined*, let alone conceived, without the help of many people” (*RF* 205). And after the list of names of those people, he confesses that “the book is not a history but a portrait or “gesture.” And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts” (*RF* 206). He admits that not only the metaphysical shift into the other’s body in the poems but also the memoir, which consists of information from many people, is a product of imagination. In this sense, what the body remembers, its physical feeling might be more reliable, or the only thing which is real. What we have to pay attention to is what the physical sense recalls and tells.

The empathy by shifting into the other’s body in those poems is motivated from sexual desire, but this concept of shift can be applied to shift from private himself to family history, and from the family history to other worlds. And sexual desire in Ondaatje’s narrative becomes more crucial when it takes on a political aspect. As Neluka Silva suggests, “Ondaatje’s narrative reinvokes the sexual metaphor in imperialist discourse” (73). “Ceylon [was] the wife of many marriage, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language” By calling it the “wife” of marriage, the narrative sexualizes Ceylon in colonialist discourse. And the process of the expansion of European power is proceeded by their “[spill]” of their nationalities (*RF* 64). This use of words such as “wife” “court,” or “spill” indicates the sexual dimension of colonialism. Silva points out that Robert Young’s analysis is useful in locating the cross-cultural alliances in Ondaatje’s identity. Young argues, the idea of colonization itself is grounded in sexualized discourse of rape, penetration and impregnation, whilst the subsequent relationship of the colonizer and colonized is often presented in a discourse that is redolent of a sexualized exoticism (Ashcroft 40–41). Ondaatje’s narrative exposes this fascination by inter-racial sex.<sup>5</sup>

The metaphor of the cinnamon smell of the poem becomes to take another political aspect. In “The Karapothas” which begins with the narrator’s statement, “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (*RF* 79), the writer talks about the heat of Colombo that drives British

travelers, including D. H. Lawrence or Leonard Woolf, crazy. The writer points out that “sex is almost impossible in Colombo” because of the extremely hot temperature (*RF* 79). The emphasis on the impossibility of sex seems to be refusal of sexual exoticization of Ceylon. But Ondaatje’s narrative reveals it in a more complex, metaphorical way. In spite of the exclusive environment, many foreigners enter Ceylon. “They came originally and overpowered the land obsessive for something as delicate as the smell of cinnamon. Becoming wealthy with spices” (*RF* 80). In this context the cinnamon is treated as the commodity that is used for the foreigners’ empowerment. They “spill” the money on the land and dominate it without any sexual intercourse. But the following statement indicates their physical desire. “When ships were still approaching, ten miles out at sea, captains would spill cinnamon onto the deck and invite passengers on board to *smell Ceylon* before the island even came into view” (*RF* 80–81). The smell of cinnamon functions as agency and enables them to see Ceylon in their imagination. This juxtaposition of overwhelming economic power and the sensual awareness shows the sexualization of Ceylon as foreign territory in Imperial discourse. And the impetuous people on the deck indicate the emergent crisis of imperial power. This concealed crisis is exposed in the poem “The Cinnamon Peeler.” His sexual desire is represented in his attempt to shift into the body of his beloved and share it in his imagination.

In this way, the narratives interact each other in *Running in the family*. “The Karapothis” is the reference to the political aspect of “The Cinnamon Peeler,” the latter is the reference to the sexual metaphor of the former: the poem of journey to the other’s body becomes the key to understand the sexualization in colonialist discourse. Also the context of sexual desire in the poem is completed by the previous poem “Women Like You.” This self-referential aspect, the interactivity of each narratives is the method of whole this book. The exploration of the way of how he enters into the other’s body or another dimension can be understood as his challenge to creating the narrative, the act of writing itself.



#### IV

*Running in the Family* is an imaginative work which consists of recollections of people's memories. Remembering is a key action in this book. However, as Ondaatje admits the unreliability of those memories, remembering itself is a matter of question in his narrative. In terms of psychology, patients who are suffered from trauma do not remember the crucial horrible incidents in the past. They instinctively forget those incidents to avoid confronting their own anxieties. But it obsesses them in their unconsciousness and affects their present actual behaviors seriously: only the body has memory. So, remembering bring about pain because it evokes the terrible physical or psychological experience against their instincts for forgetting. Homi Bhabha explains, the process of remembering "is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (11). And the pain enables the sufferer to know some other's power in a political aspect. According to Scarry's study of the body in pain, "the attribute of pain can be serves from the pain itself and conferred on a political construct" (14) and "real human pain can be converted into a regime's fiction of power" (18). In Ondaatje's narrative, people who have hybrid identities in the era of decolonization embody the pain caused by the trauma of remembering.

For Mervyn, who has double identity, the experience of hybridity is traumatic. He spends his student days in the space of English aristocracy at Cambridge and returns to Ceylon to be an officer in the privileged Ceylon Light Infantry. He has been regarded "as someone who knew exactly what was valuable and interesting" (*RF* 32) because of his cross-cultural identity, in Cambridge as "the product of the colonial legacy" (Silva 78), and in Ceylon as the privileged and sophisticated who has studied at Cambridge. The hybrid identity in Mervyn's character suggests a new transcultural form within the contact zone produced by colonization. In terms of Bhabha, Mervyn's cultural identity, which emerges from the ambivalent "third space," has the potential to threaten authority of the colonizer.<sup>6</sup> However, as Silva points out, on his personal level, hybridity does not offer Mervyn an identity that he can embrace (79). His falling into the alcohol dependence

syndrome shows his anxiety. His physical disorder because of the excessive amount of alcohol indicates his cultural identical crisis. His body writhes in pain, questing for the stable identity. In Mervyn's case, he does not enjoy the positive aspect of his stay in the third space, but is suffered from the sense of the loss of space, displacement, and loses his reason.

The aspect of a travel memoir of this book is a site for 'exoticism,' and the pleasure of exoticism conceals Ondaatje's traumatic anxiety derived from his hybrid cultural identity. By taking readers' or his own attention to the attraction of Sri Lanka and showing them a kind of safari park in imagination, he exoticizes the land. As Tzvetan Todorov points out, the exotic experience must be distinguished from the experience of immersion in a foreign culture: only those who do not feel that they belong to the community can take pleasure in contact with it (qtd. in Huggan 122). In this sense, Ondaatje's flexible status as the writer or the reader indicates his ambiguous feeling toward Sri Lanka: he plays the role of a representative of the land when introduces the landscape and the society of his native land to external readers, but at the same time, he shows the sense of alienation from the community when he sees the exotic land as an observer or a tourist. He never completely commits himself to the community. On the process of the travel to his native land, his exploration of his ethnicity, he confronts his alienated situation of his identity. In the case of Ondaatje, his identity crisis does not derived only from the controversial space between Canadian and Sri Lankan cultural identity, but also from his specific status as an alternative highborn privileges. The concealed sense of indirect complicity in Sri Lanka's colonialism drives him into exoticizing the land. Ondaatje's narrative exposes the trauma of cultural identity crisis of people in the era of de-colonization, in the process of transition to another new order.

## V

*Running in the Family* is a kind of collage work, which consists of many fragments such as journal, gossips, memories, poems, and visual images. The radical usage of the visual images of photographs and maps shows new possibilities of creating narrative. They betray readers' expectations

because they do not provide facts. After the explanation of sexual photograph of Sir John without showing actual image, the writer turns to tell about the “the photograph I have been waiting for all my life” (RF 161). He describes the photograph of his parents minutely with his impression; “they were absolutely perfect for each other. My father’s tanned skin, my mother’s milk paleness, and this theatre of their own making” (RF 162), and then in the following page the photograph appears. Since we read the description by the writer, the photograph is not open to other interpretation. Photograph, which is in general supposed to provide an objective fact, transforms to a fiction. And in the chapter “Tabula Asiae,” which deals with the history of Ceylon as a colony, a series of “false maps” indicates the visual image of exoticized Ceylon by Imperial power (RF 65). The map has been changing its image as “a mirror,” reflecting each European power. And, talking another story of his ancestor, the writer says, “Here. At the centre of the rumour. At this point on the map” (RF 65). The centre of the rumour is the location of another story of politics. As Barbour points out, “[even] the maps are fictions” (143). Those fragments of visual images as agencies of a fiction construct the narrative.

There is a psychological therapy: the patient creates a collage work by him/herself, and after he/she completes it, he/she has to destroy it, and he/she recreates a new collage work again. To destroy a collage work means to destroy the image of oneself, and recreation means to reconstruct oneself from chaos. The new possibility of one’s identity emerges from the chaos of the destroyed self-image. The hybrid generic character of *Running in the Family* as if a collage, providing the possibility of many kind of reading (even one reader can change his/her interpretation each time), suggests the necessity to destroy self-image. Through the whole book, Ondaatje explores how he sees himself as other in order to establish himself. Different from his father, who has “his technique of trying to solve one problem by creating another” (RF 33), Ondaatje has been bringing transformation within himself by traveling to the other space, shifting to the other’s body, exposing his own trauma of painful remembering, and challenging the explosion of generic classification of his writing.

## Notes

1 “Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in the going back my generations. . . . My father always claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, though that was probably more valid about three centuries earlier. Emil Daniels summed up the situation for most of them when he was asked by one of the British governors what his nationality was — ‘God alone knows, your excellency’” (*RF* 41).

2 In “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity,” Paul Gilroy explores the transnational connections, crossing and tensions between Africa, the Caribbean, America and Britain. He shows how black peoples, who have been travelers in history, contributed to the development of Western modernity, and how their journeys disturbs the borders of ethnicity, race and nation.

3 Quoting Virginia Woolf’s claim that the artist falls silent before pain, Scarry argues, “Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4).

4 She says that the sentient fact of physical pain is “so nearly impossible to express, so flatly invisible, that the problem go beyond the possibility that almost any other phenomenon occupying the same environment will distract attention from it” (Scarry 12).

5 Silva discuss the marital relationship between Vere and his wife as the most fitting situation of marriage as colonial mission. Vere marries his wife for her money and abandons her on the wedding night. This indicates that “after sufficient economic aggrandizement, the colonies were abandoned with inadequate provision for future governance and the implications of the colonial powers’ long-term involvement on the territories was not an issue” (Silva 74).

6 “It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory . . . may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (Bhabha 38).

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