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MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S RUNNING IN THE FAMILY: A CASE OF SELF IDENTITY

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Abstract

Running in the family is more than an autobiography of Ondaatje. Quite contrary to the purpose of narrating his history, Ondaatje uses it as a means to locate and discover himself through his writing. The basic quest of Ondaatje's novel is to search for his identity in the mirrors of his past. The quest for his history, is in fact a quest for himself and he mounts on this quest through the novel 'Running in the Family'. "Ondaatje's relationship to his past is in process-and the text itself is an exploration of that process (Joanne 45-6)." He tries to locate himself in the shadows of his father, his native land Ceylon, his family relationships and tries to piece together the random, frivolous life that he remembers of Ceylon. And it is heartening to realize in the first chapter that Ondaatje has absented himself from his own autobiography in lieu of his perception that his own identity can only be located if he anchors the identity of the peripheral characters.

Keywords

Identity, Past, Shadows, Relationships, Perception

1. Introduction

Ondaatje establishes himself in the beginning as “Half a page , and the morning is already ancient”(Ondaatje 11).But this existence gradually fades and gives way to the lives he remembers in Ceylon, at times, with an urgency to derive a meaning from their existence, so that he can establish his own identity.

The text seems very sentimental and could be understood as written by a person who migrated to England and then to Canada at the age of eleven. As a person who lost his childhood to emigration, Ondaatje’s return after twenty five years, justifies the reminiscing of incidents that he remembers in order to recreate the childhood that he lost at an early age.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Recollection and Mirroring

Ondaatje tries to understand himself through the recollection of a number of key figures in his life. “The self tries to explore itself through the other.” (Miriam 3).Among these figures, his father occupies the most prominent position. Ondaatje’s writing explains in perhaps an irreverent account of his father’s whimsical life. But during the course of his writing, the figure of the scandalous, rebellious person transforms into the image of the father of a son, “and the end of the book reveals a moment of the ‘I ’ the son, in the mirror image of the other, his father” (Miriam 3).

2.2 Self Realization through Reflection

On his journey to self realization through the reflection of others, Ondaatje comes face to face with the complexity of his roots. With an early migration and a life that is mostly spent outside his motherland, his return raises the question of his true belonging. In the straggling state of various identities, pronounced by his expatriate position, he needs something solid to ground himself in. But further on, the reader realizes that the fight is not only between being a local and a foreigner, but also between the multi ethnic locals, that are present as a consequence of the colonization. Ondaatje already being a migrant has the question of identity very close to his heart, and so he is in search of an absolute and a pure identity. His identity is therefore a product of hybridized nationalities made up of foreigners and invaders

In his quest of his identity, Ondaatje also realizes that the place that he is trying to recall and relate to, is not in a pure form, rather it is “built up of sedimentary layers of memories piled upon memories which do not seem to solidify.”(Milica 104)

2.3 Multi Ethnicity

This multi ethnicity, however, loosens the footing on which Ondaatje desperately wants to stand upon. It aggravates his sense of identity and so he is not able to relate completely even to his own ancestors. He is still at a distance from his ancestors as he earlier was owing to the ambivalence of his actual heritage, and therefore fails to achieve the purpose which he was so desperately looking for. He mentions “Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch and Burgher blood in them going back many generations. There was a large social gap between this circle and the Europeans and English who were never part of the Ceylonese community”(Ondaatje 32). Joanne correctly observes that even in the frivolity of the time, there is a melancholy of the roots that cannot be fully traced. (46)

3. Methodology

Ondaatje needs to identify his ancestry, roots in an all encompassing way. For that he utilizes all that he can recall and that he can find in print to fill up the gaps of his life, to make up a complete story. But he has to act through a dual nature. He has to simultaneously be a part of it, and at the same time detach himself from the internal on goings so that he can have an objective view and understand his past in all its true perspectives. “When he runs in his family, he is running both toward it and away from it.” (Miriam 6).He wants to understand his life in all its dimensions and this creates a tension and complexity in his search for his lost past.

The fact that he is an outsider to his own roots, that he has to find himself from within his own place, is a tormenting feeling for Ondaatje. Quite many times, he dwells into the confusion, signifying an undertone of whether he is worthy enough to write about a country that is his, but is still not his. His expatriate position gnaws at him throughout his writing. “I am the foreigner, I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner”(Ondaatje 65). His question of identity raises within him a question of his legitimacy about writing about his motherland, of whether he really has the authority to dwell upon a place of which he is no longer a part of.

4. Conclusion

Ondaatje creates the history of Sri Lanka not as it actually was, he creates it with an eye of the migrant. His personal reminiscence, poetic bursts and amusing comedy is just a way of defining Ceylon as he remembers it, rather than as it actually was. His exoticism of Sri Lanka signifies a detached migrant trying to recollect his mythical motherland, imagining the rich sensual pleasures,

fusion of colors and life. His affiliation with his country is blurred by the setting in of time and space and he attempts to overcome and fill in the gaps of his lost experience through the rich imagination of how he sees his country.

“What Ondaatje actually writes, therefore is not objective history as he uncovers it. It is the awakening of his consciousness to the implications of the realities that he discovers of the connections that he perceives as he contemplates the evidence before him”(Milica 106). His use of exoticism clearly identifies Ondaatje’s detachment from his land and how he relies upon the myth rather than pure objectivity to define his relationship to Ceylon.

5. Findings

Ondaatje as the expatriate and Ondaatje as a Canadian, has tried to recollect and reconcile all that he could remember of his lost past. His mother, a strong willed women, gave up Ondaatje’s father, an alcoholic, who ruined his own life, and spent it in frivolity. But Ondaatje understood that if there was a couple who were classified to be soul mates of one another, they were his parents. In the chapter ‘What we think of a married life’, he shows the comparability and sense of humor which bonded his parents together. Yet when his mother opts out, along with her children, Ondaatje sets in twenty five years later, and remembers his father despite his alcoholism, rather than his mother. Each of the characters he mentioned left in him a part of them. He understood from Lalla how to be true to one’s feelings, from his father’s youth how to be juvenile, carefree and whimsical. At the end of the story, he comes to a realization of how important each of these characters were in making him understand his past.

Though still unsure of his ancestors, his roots, Ondaatje was able to gain something much more than a physical location. He was able to gain and understand his family and thereby understand himself better, than where he started from.

“The ultimate goal of the narrator’s quest, the sense of identity with his land and his family has been achieved” (Milica 108)

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