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Narrating a Nation into Being: On Michael Ondaatje's Deviant Narrative Strategy in *Running in the Family*

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ABSTRACT

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1982) is often regarded as a fictionalized memoir or auto/biographical fiction that transcends generic conventions. The narrative voice in the book engages the reader by weaving together diverse stories related to Ondaatje's family history in Ceylon/Sri Lanka. The book records the life ("bios") of his people as much as it is invested in his gesture of fragmentary writing ("graphy"). As argued in the article, this latter effort by Ondaatje, embodied in his employment of episodic and sometimes incomplete narrative to reproduce the transient and meandering nature of recollection on both parts of himself and the others, questions the imperative of foregrounding manifest historical accounts in an immigrant writer's text, such as the British divide-and-rule policy in colonial Ceylon and the 1971 insurrection in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Ondaatje calls for a collective self-storytelling that coordinates the seemingly bifurcated personal and political aspects in such a way that the convergence of scandals, gossips, familial archives, and oneiric accounts enacts a dialogic performance. Ondaatje is both conscious of the unreachability of the truth from the outset and is conscientious about presenting the book as expressive of the Burgher people's communal achievement, which counterbalances the nationalist narrative of history dominated by the Sinhalese and the Tamil. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's discussion of nation and narration, this article suggests reading the memoir as inscribing an aesthetic creation of the narrative process on the histories of the multi-ethnic people in the writer's imaginary homeland.

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KEYWORDS: *Running in the Family*, the Burgher people, Homi Bhabha, nation-building, narrative, poetics/politics debate

敘述一個國家的存在：論麥可・翁達傑在《世代相傳》中的特異敘事策略

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摘　要

麥可・翁達傑（Michael Ondaatje）的《世代相傳》（*Running in the Family*, 1982）通常被認為是一部虛構的回憶錄或自／傳體小說，它突破了傳統的文類界限，並以其敘事手法挑戰了讀者在翁達傑的錫蘭／斯里蘭卡家庭成員的不同故事當中穿梭的體驗。這本書既關注翁達傑對人民的生活記錄（“bios”），也著重在呈現他碎片化的寫作姿態（“graphy”）。正如文章中所論證的，翁達傑在後者的這一努力，體現在他採用了偶發的、時而不完整的敘述方式，以再現他自己和他人回憶的短暫和蜿蜒的本質。與此同時，此般敘事姿態亦質疑了一個移民作家在文本中突出顯性歷史敘述的必要性。英國在錫蘭殖民地的分而治之政策和 1971 年後殖民時期斯里蘭卡的起義，就是翁達傑所質疑的大寫歷史之顯著例子。因此，翁達傑呼籲進行集體的自我敘事，以協調個人和政治的分叉。他將醜聞、流言蜚語、家庭檔案和敘述者的夢境記述融合起來，執行一種對話式的操演；在這個意義上，翁達傑從一開始就表達了真相的無法觸及，並努力將此書展現為伯格人的共同成就，以期抵消由僧伽羅人和泰米爾人主導的民族主義歷史敘述。本文借鑒霍米・巴巴（Homi Bhabha）關於民族和敘事的討論，提供了一種閱讀該書的可能性：將此回憶錄視為作家以其特異的敘述過程，在他的想像家園裡對多元民族的歷史進行的美學創造。

關鍵詞：《世代相傳》、伯格人、霍米・巴巴、國家建構、敘事、詩學／政治辯論

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I. Introduction: Poetics/Politics Debate

Reading Michael Ondaatje feels like navigating a complex dream woven from Ondaatje's own multifaceted experiences, with the author-as-narrator interspersing moments of lucid self-awareness and deliberate fictionalization. In many ways, Ondaatje manages to strain and warp his language to achieve certain effects that propel his reader not so much into collecting information and reconstructing the story as a whole, as into savoring the snippets and fragments as individual entities in themselves. The poetic rendition of prose makes his writing attend to (and administer to) the equality of every word and every image he chooses to put on paper. *Running in the Family* is just one of the first exemplars preceding his many others in terms of his peculiar and enchanting stylistic composition, yet it stands out as a unique one, as it confronts the writer's past life head-on as well as his perception of the writing present.

Published in 1982, *Running in the Family* was written in the late seventies, just a few years after the atrocious 1971 insurrection in Sri Lanka.[1] This chronological placement of the book invites an evaluation of its political engagement, a subject that has led to varied critical responses. Critics have often framed Ondaatje's work within the wider discourse of the aesthetic versus the political in postcolonial narratives, as the book has been criticized for its obsessive focus on the author's genealogical concerns, to the point of shunning politics altogether. In the mid-eighties, Arun P. Mukherjee leveled a fierce criticism at Ondaatje in her comparative study of the works of Ondaatje and the Guyana-born Canadian writer of Indian descent Cyril Dabydeen. Mukherjee described Ondaatje as a "universalist" who "chooses to speak to all men," yet ends up indulging in his own imaginary world of words, and "retreat[s] from the questions of ideology, power, race and class" (65).[2] She is especially

[1] The 1971 JVP insurrection was conducted by the communist party Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, also known as the People's Liberation Front. It is believed that the causes of the uprising against the Sirimavo Bandaranaike government of the Dominion of Ceylon were high rates of unemployment among youths, and ideological confrontations between left-wing communists and democratic socialists.

[2] In his article "'Sri Lankan' Canadian Poets: The Bourgeoisie that Fled the Revolution," Suwanda Sugunasiri responds in general to the calling in question in the academic regarding Ondaatje's escapism from Sri Lankan history and directs mainly against Arun Mukherjee's evaluation of four Sri Lankan-born writers. He indicates that Mukherjee's criticism is untenable because she ignores, either

concerned about Ondaatje's silence regarding his own experience of otherness that is otherwise taken up in Dabydeen's writing. Ondaatje, she asserts, fails to thematize his situation as a Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer, as an expatriate whose writing should reflect his postcolonial reality. In "A Trick with a Glass: Michael Ondaatje's South Asian Connection," Chelva Kanaganayakam, while acknowledging Ondaatje's commitment to addressing his thorny identity dilemma in *Running in the Family*, frowns upon "its refusal to participate actively in the referential" and its "foregrounding the 'narrative' at the expense of the 'national'" (40). Kanaganayakam also points out that Ondaatje's contemporary writers tend to be more unambiguously involved in "the immediate and the political" (41). In "Memory, Identity, Patriarchy: Projecting a Past in the Memoirs of Sara Suleri and Michael Ondaatje," Sangeeta Ray warns against the generalization of the concept of "postcolonial" in literary studies and representation. Although *Running in the Family* contributes to "the rhetoric of disembodiment, dislocation, and displacement" (Ray 55) characteristic of postcolonial situations, Ray claims that it lacks nuanced differences in its social enunciation: through the (attempt of) construction of the name of a father figure and the multivocal celebration of the mobility of the Ondaatjes, the author "reifies a concrete world of linkages and images at the expense of crucial class and gender differences" (53).

The abovementioned criticism brings us to a crucial question: can the aesthetic and the political coexist in a work, or does an emphasis on one necessarily preclude the other? Ondaatje's text indeed revels in its poetic sensibilities, but does that mean it is politically disengaged? The debate over Ondaatje's work often presents a false choice: that his writing is either a poetic exercise or a political statement. Contrary to the view that Ondaatje's poetic form is an apolitical retreat, one could argue that by turning the spotlight on micro-histories, Ondaatje offers a counterpoint to the dominant narratives often found in postcolonial discourse. In *Running in the Family*, the fragmented narrative and poetic language do more than create an evocative reading experience; they serve to disrupt traditional historical accounts, particularly those that have simplified Sri Lanka's complicated ethnic tensions and colonial

consciously or unconsciously, Ondaatje's limitation to his "British sensibility" (63) considering the time he left the island, which is key to his constitution as an immigrant writer. Sugunasiri asserts that what Mukherjee criticizes Ondaatje for boomerangs back at her: "where Mukherjee went wrong, then, is that she stereotyped Ondaatje, dressing him in Sri Lankan garb simply on the basis of his birth, without reference to the sociopolitical context, and history" (64).

legacy. For instance, the book's publication in 1982 followed closely on the heels of Sri Lanka's 1971 insurrection led by the People's Liberation Front against the government. This was a period that exposed the raw nerves of ethnic and class divisions in the country. Ondaatje's choice to focus on personal histories and individual experiences can be seen as a way to counter grand narratives that often reduce Sri Lanka's history to a set of political or ethnic conflicts.

While Ondaatje may not directly address the 1971 insurrection or delve into explicit political analysis, his narrative strategy brings attention to the lesser-heard stories and experiences that are also a part of Sri Lanka's social fabric. By focusing on the lives of the Burgher community—a minority group of mixed European and Sri Lankan descent—he provides an alternative perspective to the Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic binary that often dominates discussions of Sri Lankan history. In this way, Ondaatje's work serves as a form of political commentary that speaks through its structure and storytelling choices. Rather than offering a didactic political message, the book encourages readers to question established accounts and consider the multiplicity of experiences that contribute to Sri Lanka's identity.

II. Scholarly Contributions and Beyond in Ondaatje and Bhabha

Given the manifold criticisms aimed at Ondaatje for his perceived apolitical approach and the aesthetic preoccupations in *Running in the Family*, the challenge lies in how to reconcile the poetic texture of the work with its socio-political backdrop. This brings us to Homi K. Bhabha, a key theorist in postcolonial studies whose concepts provide a sophisticated framework for examining the complexities evident in Ondaatje's narrative. Bhabha's earlier theories such as the "performative" and "pedagogical" aspects of nationhood, along with his more recent advancements on the concept of "montage," serve as a theoretical foundation enabling us to engage critically with both the aesthetic and political facets of *Running in the Family*. They can help us understand how Ondaatje's narrative strategies, often dismissed as apolitical, might offer a different form of engagement with the pressing questions of identity, nationhood, and colonial history.

Interestingly, both Ondaatje and Bhabha have been subject to criticism for their perceived elision of history and politics. The Marxist critique of Bhabha,

as outlined in Paresh Chandra's article titled "Marxism, Homi Bhabha and the Omissions of Postcolonial Theory," argues that Bhabha's theories often sidestep material realities, thus rendering them insufficiently grounded in the socio-political context (208). This resonates with the abovementioned criticisms cited against Ondaatje. The Marxist lens, particularly as sharpened by Chandra, posits that Bhabha's focus on the thematic of hybridity and cultural interstices seems to circumvent the tangible conditions of class and power relations (212). This argument finds a parallel in critiques of Ondaatje, whose literary portrayal is said to favor aesthetic expression over the rigors of historical representation. Central to these critiques is the concern that the abstraction of postcolonial experiences into aesthetic or theoretical models may dilute the pressing realities of violence, oppression, and resistance that shape the postcolonial condition. The specific charge against Bhabha, encapsulated by Chandra's remark that "The creation of discourses of purity and pure cultures takes place through acts (of violence) that come after the fact of hybridity" (202), challenges the chronological and causal assumptions within postcolonial theory, pressing for a reintegration of the historical processes that actively construct and contest cultural narratives. Here, Chandra is identifying a post-construct to what Bhabha presents as a pre-existing condition of cultural mixture. The implication is that Bhabha's theory may inadvertently ignore the power dynamics and historical acts that actively forge the very notions of purity he seeks to challenge. Chandra's critique urges a re-engagement with the materialist perspectives that recognize these acts of violence as integral to the creation and maintenance of cultural narratives, an aspect that is vital for a complete understanding of postcolonial realities.

In a different scholarly engagement with Bhabha's theories, Sumit Chakrabarti underscores Bhabha's strategic shift from the political to the psychological, providing a new terrain upon which postcolonial identity is constructed. In "Moving Beyond Edward Said: Homi Bhabha and the Problem of Postcolonial Representation," he articulates Bhabha's position: "By lifting this problematic of representation out of the political into the psychological, Bhabha allows a free-play of meanings which are not inevitably caught up in the discursive paradigms of colonial rule" (11). This shift is vital in comprehending how Bhabha's concept of mimicry does not merely reflect a power dynamic but also a complex psychological interaction. Bhabha's postmodern approach suggests that the colonial "Other" is not a fixed identity

but a fluid construct that emerges within the interplay of narcissism and aggression, where the stereotype becomes a battleground for identity formation. In this light, the accusation of eliding material realities seems to misunderstand the depth of Bhabha's exploration into the psychological dimensions of colonialism, which does not ignore socio-political contexts but rather expands the understanding of these contexts to include the psyche's role in shaping them.

In examining Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, the strategic elusiveness attributed to both Ondaatje and Bhabha becomes a crucial point of intersection. Bhabha's concept of mimicry, as analyzed in Chakrabarti's article, describes it as "a discourse on colonial strategies of domination and a consequent thwarting of the same by the imperialized" (13). This echoes strongly in Ondaatje's narrative which, while ostensibly autobiographical, also serves to "mimic" the conventions of family history and colonial narratives, thereby disrupting them. Bhabha's idea that mimicry creates an "ambivalent position of the hybrid subject who is neither colonizer nor colonized, but something in between" (13) offers a lens to interpret Ondaatje's complex familial and national identity. Critics may argue that such elusiveness evades a direct confrontation with history and politics. However, this evasion can also be viewed as a form of resistance. The article points out that Bhabha "liberally uses [Western] theoretical tools, their discursive logic, and thereby clearly walks around the paradigm of binary confrontation, but never, for a moment, steps inside it" (20). Similarly, Ondaatje's narrative choices to blur fact and fiction, to infuse the historical with the poetic, challenge the "certitude of uncertainty" (20)—the very predicament that Bhabha identifies for the Third-World intellectual in the First World. In both cases, the strategies of evasion and mimicry call into question the assumed logical and enlightened foundations of colonial histories, leading to a range of unresolved interpretive options.

At the very beginning of their introduction to the book titled *Locating Postcolonial Narrative Genres*, Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio identify a significant lacuna in postcolonial studies, which they succinctly encapsulate by stating,

> In the field of postcolonial studies questions of subversion, parody, and mimesis have predominated over other aspects of aesthetic form. It is high time to attempt to explore wider

> dimensions of a postcolonial aesthetics, a main aspect of which being specificities of generic evolution or emergence. (1)

Importantly, by pivoting the scholarly focus towards aesthetic forms and genre evolution, Goebel and Schabio do not advocate for a disengagement from the socio-political dimensions that have traditionally characterized the field. Rather, they set the stage for a more comprehensive, focused understanding of how postcolonial texts can be both aesthetically innovative and politically resonant. This statement serves as a clarion call for reorienting the focus of postcolonial studies in association with "debates about more mimetic/realistic versus more explorative concepts of literature [that] are reflected, between socio-historical correspondences and the emergence of new generic forms" (6). It suggests that the field has reached a critical juncture where it must expand its horizons to address the complexities of aesthetic form and genre-specificities, without sacrificing its commitment to exploring the political and social contexts of the texts under study. By emphasizing this issue, Goebel and Schabio not only underline an underexplored facet of postcolonial studies but also offer an essential point of departure for scholars and readers alike who are interested in delving into the interplay between postcolonialism, literary aesthetics, and broader questions of socio-political import.

Against this backdrop, *Running in the Family* emerges as a landmark text in the postcolonial literary landscape, one that engages with and contributes to the evolution of specific formal innovations in narrative genres. Ondaatje's text employs a fragmented narrative that melds autobiography, history, and poetic imagination. This genre-bending approach gains relevance when viewed through the lens of postcolonial studies, a field that has often been preoccupied with questions of subversion and mimesis at the expense of broader considerations of aesthetic form. Revisiting *Running in the Family*, therefore, offers a fresh vantage point for examining its contributions to postcolonial aesthetics, potentially enriching our understanding of how texts like Ondaatje's can play a pivotal role in shaping the development and innovation of literary forms. This exploration is also deeply societal, as the narrative forms Ondaatje employs can reflect and engage with long-term societal structures and tensions. This is particularly relevant given the book's detailed focus on Sri Lanka's colonial past and the socio-political milieu of the late 1970s and early 1980s. By serving as a touchstone in the exploration of how narrative genres can be

stretched and redefined, *Running in the Family* stands as a seminal work that has influenced the stylistic and thematic concerns evident in Ondaatje's later works, such as *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*.

The scholarly landscape surrounding Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, in addition to the politics versus poetics criticisms mentioned, is as multifaceted as the text itself, probing into its intricate layers from various critical perspectives. "'The Place One Had Been Years Ago': Mapping the Past in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*" by Marta Bladek delves into the book through the lens of "return memoirs" (392), focusing particularly on the interrelations between memory and place. Bladek argues that the autobiographical impulse in such memoirs is not just a matter of recounting events but is closely tied to specific geographies that inspire and facilitate the act of remembering. By examining various descriptors used to categorize Ondaatje's narrative—such as "experimental autobiography" and "fictionalized memoir" (392)—the article stresses the importance of place in shaping, triggering, and giving form to memory. This in-depth look adds another layer to understanding how our surroundings are not mere backdrops but active elements in the construction of personal history.

Neil ten Kortenaar's "'Touching Them into Words': Running with Michael Ondaatje among the Dead" specifically focuses on how the narrative engages with the deceased, notably the author's father. The article argues that Ondaatje's writing serves as a medium for "touching" the dead, creating a space for them to exist within the narrative. The text considers the "dead" not only as individual figures but also as symbolic manifestations of absence, loss, or impending mortality, extending the concept to encompass the depths of memory and history that can be resurrected and communicated with through the act of writing (18-19). Ondaatje's work employs literary devices like shifting pronouns and metaphorical imagery, such as mirrors and ominous animals, to explore the transient boundary between the living and the dead. These elements contribute to an understanding of how writing can serve as a conduit for negotiating complex familial histories and the presence of the deceased.

Roger McNamara's article titled "'I Am the Foreigner. I Am the Prodigal Who Hates the Foreigner': Resisting the Exotic in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*" offers a subtle examination of Ondaatje's fictionalized memoir, with an emphasis on its resistance to exoticization and single-story narratives. McNamara deploys the concept of the "single story," as critiqued by Nigerian

writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to dissect how Ondaatje's work challenges monolithic representations, particularly in the context of Sri Lankan political unrest. He argues that Ondaatje employs postmodern strategies that subvert commodification, requiring readers to become active constructors of meaning rather than passive consumers of a pre-defined narrative. The article also pays attention to Ondaatje's portrayal of political insurgents, cautioning against viewing them as mere "two-dimensional caricatures of 'the oppressed'" (18). McNamara stresses Ondaatje's inclusion of the poem "Don't talk to me about Matisse" as a pivotal moment in the memoir that critiques detached European art forms while emphasizing the need to confront colonial and postcolonial realities.

The articles by Bladek, ten Kortenaar, and McNamara each contribute valuable dimensions to the understanding of Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*. Bladek's focus on "return memoirs" illuminates the deep connections between memory and place in autobiographical writing. Ten Kortenaar's piece enriches this discourse by examining the ways the text creates a dialogic space for communicating with the deceased. McNamara's work extends the conversation by exploring the memoir's resistance to exoticization and its demand for active reader engagement. While each of these scholars contributes a distinct lens through which Ondaatje's text can be examined, the current article seeks to add another layer by concentrating on the interaction between "nation and narration," an aspect not specifically covered in the aforementioned scholarship. Narratives are not merely reflections of national identities but active sites where such identities are negotiated, contested, and reimagined. This dual focus allows for a deeper exploration into how personal histories are intertwined with larger national narratives, revealing the complexities and contradictions that often accompany the construction of both individual and collective identities. It also accentuates the political implications of storytelling, as narratives can both uphold and challenge dominant ideologies.

III. Nation, Narration, and the Burgher Community

Mark Currie, in his exposition of two types of identity constitution, claims that "identity is not within us because it exists only as narrative" (17). In addition to telling one's own story and selecting "key events which characterize us," it is also crucial that "we learn how to self-narrate from the outside, from

other stories, and particularly through the process of identification with other characters" (17). Pushing Currie's thread of thought further, we realize that the process of identification requires a narrative that coordinates content and form, rather than an introspective approach. This coordination of content and form is essential to creating a coherent and compelling narrative that can effectively communicate one's identity to others. Ondaatje's writing exemplifies this coordination, as he intertwines his personal experiences with larger sociopolitical and historical contexts. By doing so, he conveys not only his own identity but also the complexities of identity formation in a postcolonial context. Ondaatje's narrative approach is particularly suited to exploring the nuances of identity in a multicultural and multilingual society like Sri Lanka. His depiction of the Burgher people, who are of mixed European and South Asian descent, is an example of how identity can be shaped by a history of colonization and migration.

As an immigrant writer, Ondaatje never intends to evade issues arising "from the outside." While he does not explicitly delve into the island's fraught past, Ondaatje cleverly weaves historical elements into the fabric of his personal narrative. One such instance is his description of an old governor's home in the "Jaffna Afternoons" section. He notes, "The house was built around 1700 and is the prize building in this northern region of Ceylon" (Ondaatje, *Running* 24). At first glance, this may appear to be a mere historical footnote. However, when considered within the context of Jaffna—a city with a layered colonial history first under Portuguese and then Dutch control—the choice of setting gains additional significance. The building is described as an "18th-century Dutch defense" (25), subtly pointing to the historical tensions between the Dutch and the later British colonizers who would eventually claim Ceylon in 1798. The description serves as a quiet acknowledgment of the colonial power dynamics, without making it the central focus of the narrative. This allows Ondaatje to nod toward the complexity of Sri Lanka's colonial past even as he reserves direct commentary for later in the text, specifically in the "Don't Talk to Me about Matisse" chapter. Ondaatje strategically sets the stage in Jaffna and the historical building become proxies for the larger colonial struggle, implicating the reader in a complex web of historical relationships that have lasting impacts on Sri Lankan identity.

Ondaatje's entire book on his homecoming experiences is preceded by a two-dimensional map of Ceylon, which indicates a few cities, mountains and

rivers. This diagrammatic representation of Ceylon serves not only as the preliminary announcement of what he is to delineate regarding the formation and transformation that the island has undergone in its different periods of colonial encounters, but also as his inclination to accomplish his cartography of memory. Nonetheless, for Ondaatje, the map, with its simplicity and rather self-standing ambiance, needs to be redrawn altogether. As the narrative progresses, we witness the nuances given to the sociopolitical, historical, and artistic arenas in Ceylon. "With the collage as a structuring feature of the narrative," remarked Carol E. Leon, "he configures a book that could act as a representation of Ceylon which at the same time remains unconfined by limiting cartography" (15). The author-narrator's conscientious reference to maps appears in "Tabula Asiae," the beginning episode of probably the most politically charged chapter of the book, "Don't talk to me about Matisse." In it, Ondaatje's narrator describes the exotic maps that hung on his brother's wall in Toronto:

> Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations—by Ptolemy, Mercator, François Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt—growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy. Amoeba, then stout rectangle, and then the island as we know it now, a pendant off the ear of India. (Ondaatje, *Running* 63)

In recalling the ways in which Ceylon was culturally re-mapped by European invaders that coerced the island into marriage, Ondaatje's semi-autobiographical narrator enumerates the exertion of the shaping forces of colonial, early capitalistic, and epistemological discourse over the resilience of Ceylon. It is also in the later episodes of the same chapter that he places epigraphs featuring remarks by figures like Edward Lear, D. H. Lawrence, and Leonard Woolf (78). Rather than making explicit statements on colonialism, Ondaatje employs these epigraphs in a way that lets the text perform its own critique. He includes comments that, in their historical context, reflected prevailing attitudes about places like Ceylon among certain segments of the Western intelligentsia.

The choice of these specific epigraphs serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it exposes the biases and assumptions that were present in historical Western

writings about non-Western lands, particularly during the era of colonial expansion. Secondly, it allows for a critique by juxtaposition; these historical biases stand in contrast to the more multi-dimensional portrayal of Sri Lanka that Ondaatje offers. For example, the quotes from Oderic and Douglas Amarasekera[3] serve to point out how both historical Western perspectives and local viewpoints have contributed to shaping complex, and often problematic, perceptions about Sri Lanka. Ondaatje may not explicitly interrogate the colonial past, but his choice of epigraphs creates a space for readers to engage in this critique themselves. The reader is encouraged to confront and question the power relations involved in representing a nation or culture. In this manner, the epigraphs do more than offer historical commentary; they invite reflection on issues such as "ideology, power, race, and class" (Mukherjee 65) that continue to influence perceptions of Sri Lanka in the postcolonial present.

From Ondaatje's cartographic prelude, where the map of Ceylon is re-envisioned as a landscape rich with sociopolitical and historical layers, we venture deeper into the narrative's heart. The text unfolds as a palimpsest, where Ondaatje's selective historical references act as a subtle form of critique. His method of incorporating historical commentary through epigraphs sets the stage for a broader dialogue on representation and power. Here, Ondaatje's work becomes an interface, a zone of engagement where past imprints and present realities converge. As readers navigate through the interstices of Ondaatje's narrative, they discover the fact that the text's structure, akin to a mosaic composed of various historical voices, implicitly challenges them to question the dominant narratives that have long shaped the collective memory of nations. This re-evaluation bridges us to Bhabha's discourse on nation and

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[3] Reminiscent of Edward Said's use of two quotations from Karl Marx and Benjamin Disraeli on the preliminary page of *Orientalism*, Ondaatje's epigraphs also include two quotes that appear to touch on the subject of orientalism. One is from a medieval Franciscan friar named Oderic, who wrote about his observations of Ceylon, and the other is from the scholar-painter Douglas Amarasekera. Amarasekera's quote presents a bipolar account of the Americans' success in lunar exploration compared to the Sinhalese and Tamils, whose supposed incapacity is attributed to their lack of mastery of a particular language.

> I saw in this island fowls as big as our country geese having two heads . . . and other miraculous things which I will not here write of.
>
> —Oderic (Franciscan Friar, 14th century)

> The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the earth was flat.
>
> —Douglas Amarasekera, *Ceylon Sunday Times* 29.I.78

narration. Bhabha's critical examination of national identity formation, particularly through the lens of minority voices, echoes the layered approach Ondaatje takes in his memoir. Just as Ondaatje disrupts the singular historical narrative with a multiplicity of voices, Bhabha disrupts the singular narrative of nationhood by emphasizing the marginal, the hybrid, and the displaced.

An essay deeply exploring the intertexture between the notions of nation and narration, Bhabha's "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation" is instrumental in examining Ondaatje's establishment of a Burgher viewpoint as well as in responding to the interrogation of the latter's "foregrounding the 'narrative' at the expense of the 'national'" in *Running in the Family*. In the essay, Bhabha claims that the conceptualization of a nation is much more complex than its being imagined through the "homogeneous, empty time" as described by Benedict Anderson in his influential work *Imagined Community* (Anderson 33; Bhabha 158). Anderson elaborates the imagined community as one's constitution of a national identity with others who intellectually or affectively relate to shared interests and symbolic capital such as memory, novels, and language. In order to construct a bonding identity in solidarity, people imagine a holistic history of a nation. Bhabha, nevertheless, reminds us of the substantially modified demographics brought about by immigrants, diasporas, exiles, or mixed-race individuals in modern nations. Often neglected, the process of identification on the part of these marginal people, dissimilar from the majority nationals in the imagined community, becomes challenging. As a counterbalance to the homogeneous understanding of identity formation, minority discourse has developed along with the process of identification among the marginal, the hybrid and the displaced, providing them with the chance to narrate their version of a nation that endorses cultural difference.

Bhabha's essay gives prominence to the importance of acknowledging the diversity and complexity of the nation-building process. He argues that the notion of a homogeneous national identity is not only unrealistic but also harmful as it disregards the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities. Bhabha suggests that the concept of a nation should be reconceived as a space of cultural hybridity and intersectionality, where the voices and narratives of minority groups are given equal importance. Bhabha's insights are especially relevant in the context of postcolonial societies, where the legacy of colonialism has engendered a complex interplay between different

cultures, identities, and histories. In such societies, the dominant narrative of the nation often excludes or marginalizes the experiences of indigenous communities, people of color, and other marginalized groups. Bhabha's essay offers a theoretical framework for understanding and addressing these issues by emphasizing the significance of recognizing cultural differences and the need to incorporate diverse perspectives in the construction of a national identity.

Bhabha's inclination toward transnationalism and cosmopolitanism [4] might be mistaken for an appeal to renounce nation and its derivative nationalism altogether. In fact, he admits that nation, both as a concept and a realistic entity that is still enforced or pursued in most places, is never easy to cast away (Bhabha, "Art" 82). Yet, he is concerned about the consequences of the linear and continuous narrative of nation and nationalism that expresses a totalizing historical doctrine: "Nationalist aspirations turn the values of civility into forms of ethnic separatism; a sense of community is replaced by the crisis of communalism" (Bhabha, "Anxiety Nations" 202). In other words, a search for a unified national identity could paradoxically leave people stranded in varied forms of modern apartheid. In "DissemiNation," Bhabha suggests that we deliberate on the relation between an individual and their nation "within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement":

> The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference . . . . We then have a contested conceptual territory where the nation's people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical "objects" of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin in the past; the people are also the "subjects" of a

[4] In "Looking Back, Moving Forward: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," Bhabha distinguishes "vernacular cosmopolitanism," which "measures global progress from the minoritarian perspective" (xvi) from "global cosmopolitanism" that "moves swiftly and selectively from one island of prosperity to yet another terrain of technological productivity, paying conspicuously less attention to the persistent inequality and immiseration produced by such unequal and uneven development" (xiv). For Bhabha, vernacular cosmopolitanism refers to a perspective that recognizes the diversity of cultural and social experiences and values the contributions of minoritarian perspectives. In other words, it emphasizes the importance of local cultures and recognizes that progress should be measured from the perspective of marginalized or minority groups. On the other hand, global cosmopolitanism refers to a more selective and privileged form of cosmopolitanism that tends to move from one prosperous area to another, without necessarily addressing the persistent inequalities and impoverishment produced by uneven global development. Global cosmopolitanism, shortly put, is more focused on the prosperity of the global elite than on addressing the needs of marginalized communities.

> process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity. (145)

Bhabha's perspective on transnationalism and cosmopolitanism arises from the recognition that, while nations and nationalism remain prevalent, the pursuit of a unified national identity can lead to exclusionary practices and communalism. Sri Lanka underwent several political turbulences during decades of modern nation-building after gaining independence as the Dominion of Ceylon in 1948. In 1956, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party was elected as the first Ceylonese premier. Actively responding to the former British rulers' divide-and-rule policy during the colonial period when the Tamil people were fostered in significant positions, Bandaranaike's government supported Buddhism and ordained that Sinhalese be the sole official language according to the Sinhala Only Act. This led to growing tensions between Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and Tamil Hindu regionalism. Four years into his office, Bandaranaike was assassinated due to alleged political and commercial factors, preceding the many political assassinations that followed in Sri Lanka's political arena.

The assassination of Bandaranaike was a significant event that marked a turning point in Sri Lanka's political landscape. It intensified tensions between different ethnic and religious communities in the country, widening the divide between Sinhalese and Tamil populations. The aftermath of Bandaranaike's assassination saw a series of political assassinations and violent clashes between different groups, which deepened the societal fault lines and contributed to a prolonged period of instability and unrest. To some extent, the persistent conflicts that have plagued Sri Lankan politics, particularly after gaining sovereignty from British colonizers, indicate the central issue identified by Bhabha. Ondaatje shares a similar concern with Bhabha, being cautious not to take sides that could result in "ethnic separatism" fueled by extreme nationalism or regionalism. Rather than providing explicit references to historical events, as some critics may expect from a Sri Lankan-born writer, Ondaatje presents his own interpretation of Ceylonian reality, a reality that is not bound by historical facts and archival evidence. He seeks a truth that exists in the artistic gestures of writing that "touch [everything] into words" (Ondaatje, *Running* 22).

As Milena Marinkova aptly points out, Ondaatje "does not aim for fidelity to an external reality or for crude political indoctrination of the reader" (75). Instead, he chooses to portray his Ceylonese subjects as embodying a singular yet not monopolistic rhetoric that reflects a nation of cultural symbiosis. Ondaatje's decision to focus on the Burgher people, a mixed-race community in Sri Lanka, as an alternative lens to examine the realpolitik of Ceylon may be debated due to his family's belonging to that group. It is possible that Ondaatje uses the Burgher perspective as a means of expedience to "touch them into words," since his memoir is tinged with the color of a family saga. Nevertheless, his book advances beyond mere family concern in an effort to leave historical annotations, through the unique social status of his people, to the already saturated discourses on the nation's political swamp.

During the early days of British colonization, the Burgher community, as depicted by Ondaatje, was perceived as a privileged group compared to the average Ceylonese bourgeoisie. This is evidenced by his father's overseas studies in the UK and the family's residence at Rock Hill. However, despite their status, the community never managed to earn a place in the upper echelons of the Anglophile Sinhalese and Tamil elites who worked in the colonial administration and managed their manorial economy to maximize colonial profits on the island. After Ceylon claimed sovereignty from the British colonizers in 1948, the Burgher people, along with the native elites, were deprived of their privileges as nationalistic ideology took over the island. Although the native elites were sliding down the social ladder, they still managed to retain their positions of power, unlike the Burghers, who remained outsiders on the island. In Ondaatje's book, a Burgher character named Emil Daniels, when asked about his nationality by the British governor, responds, "God alone knows, your excellency," a sentiment that "summed up the situation for most of them" (*Running* 41).

Commenting on the role of the Burgher community as outsiders during the transitional period leading up to the mid-twentieth century, Kanaganayakam observes that "[p]articularly as the country moved closer to Independence, the tenuousness of [the Burgher] community whose strength and weakness lay in its cultural syncretism became increasingly apparent" (34). As a social group mediating between the native population and the colonizers, the Burghers were often viewed as opportunists and substitute proxies by the lower middle class. However, the Burghers were never fully assimilated into the life of the

colonizers: "There was a large social gap between this circle and the Europeans and English who were never part of the Ceylonese community" (Ondaatje, *Running* 41). For Ondaatje, "the mongrel collection part Sinhalese part Dutch part Tamil" (188) of his people serves as an undeniable indicator that Sri Lanka can never become a single-voiced nation. Rather than vying for dominance in the nationalistic discourse, which Ondaatje argues would only fall into the pedagogical logic of rendering politics one-dimensional, he instead appeals to, to borrow from his own terms in the book, "the mercy of distance" (179) by deviating from the nationalistically established course of narration. The existence of the Burgher people as interior others, paradoxically involved in and alienated from the ideological commotion, has proven that a polarized practice of politics is doomed to fail. The ambiguous status of the Burgher people positions them in an ambiguous and parallactic angle that Ondaatje believes provides room for exploring the complexities of discourses surrounding the issue of national belonging. The Burghers' ambiguous status serves as a compelling lens to understand the intricate dynamics of identity, culture, and politics in Sri Lanka during this period of transition.

Ondaatje's approach to writing about Sri Lanka is not just a personal choice, but also a reflection of his broader philosophy regarding the nature of truth and reality. He is not interested in providing a definitive or objective account of Sri Lankan history, but rather in exploring the multiple and often conflicting narratives that constitute the country's cultural identity. In this sense, Ondaatje's work can be seen as a challenge to the dominant nationalist narratives that have shaped Sri Lanka's political and cultural landscape since its independence. By accentuating the Burghers' ambivalent position as a privileged yet marginalized group, he draws attention to the ways in which power and identity are negotiated in Sri Lankan society, providing a rich and textured portrait of a country that is often reduced to stereotypes or political slogans. Furthermore, Ondaatje's portrayal of his Burgher family embodies both entanglement and disentanglement in political matters, echoing Bhabha's dialectic speculation on the pedagogical and the performative, the two faces that indicate the nature of national belonging:

> The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of

> national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modem society becomes the site of writing the nation. (Bhabha, "DissemiNation" 145-46)

Intent as it is on presenting a challenge to the appropriation of public space as the field of endeavor for different causes by nationalist or anti-colonist undertakings, the gossips, fragmentary stories, and dream-induced monologues and talks in *Running in the Family* have helped carry out Ondaatje's demonstrative narrative performance aimed at bringing to the fore the "scraps, patches and rags of daily life" that are crucial to the point that a nation is narrated into being. Ondaatje's "'subjects' of a process of signification," with himself being one of them, are revealed in tandem with the way in which he deals with the surreal and dream-like narrative in the work, a kind of narrative that the author employs to embody his feeling of the intimacy of distance when it comes to his relationship with his family and political realities. As Graham Huggan perceives it, "Ondaatje seems to want to see, but also to prevent himself from seeing. He avails himself of the license of ethnic indeterminacy in order to dream about a past that remains strategically out of focus" (121).[5] Huggan notes that Ondaatje's narrative style is marked by a tension between seeing and not seeing. On the one hand, Ondaatje is deeply committed to exploring the intricacies of Sri Lankan history and identity. On the other hand, he is acutely aware of the limitations of his own perspective and the ways in which his position as a member of the diaspora shapes his understanding of the past. At the heart of Ondaatje's project is a desire to disrupt the dominant narratives of colonialism and nationalism that have shaped Sri Lankan history. By foregrounding the "scraps, patches, and rags" of everyday life, Ondaatje seeks to stress the ways in which the nation is constructed through a process of ongoing negotiation and contestation. Through his use of dream-like and surreal

[5] According to Sam Knowles, Ondaatje creates this ambience of ambiguity early in the first episode of *Running in the Family* when he writes, "I knew I was already running" (Ondaatje, *Running* 22), which immediately references the title of the book. Knowles observes that "He is no longer simply talking about genetic inheritance—saying that a particular trait 'run[s] in the family'—but stating that this 'running' is an action performed . . . " (39-40). Knowles implies that the indeterminate prepositions that can be added to "running" (whether "toward" or "away from") indicate that the book "is as much text of biographical avoidance as memoir seeking familial connections" (40).

narrative techniques, Ondaatje challenges us to rethink our understanding of what it means to be a nation and to imagine new forms of solidarity and community.

IV. Narrating between the Dreamy and the Real

"Asia," the first episode of the beginning chapter titled "Asian Rumours," has set the tone for the entire work. In less than three pages, the author gives an account of a dream, some enlightenment provided by a friend at a farewell party, the peculiar pronunciation of the word "Asia," and his determination to visit his birthplace. Despite the apparent loose connection between these paragraphs, they are indeed connected and will be further developed in the following chapters with themes such as dreams, drunkenness, and temporal-spatial dialectic functioning as a means of linkage between his memory work and narrative. Even in "Asia" alone, the connection is traceable. The essence of dream and drunkenness are placed side by side, serving to accentuate the paradoxical operation of one's consciousness. Told by a friend at the party that being drunk leads to a genuine grasp of one's desires, Ondaatje later narrates his own experience of being able to balance a glass on his forehead with his jocund dancing moves. The gesture of renouncing a soberly chronological narrative is implicated in this very beginning of the book, where his narrative strategy is likened to a dancing performance, "a trick which seemed only possible when drunk and relaxed" (Ondaatje, *Running* 22).

The claim made by Ondaatje in the "Asia" episode, that "What began it all was the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto" (Ondaatje, *Running* 21), serves as a prelude to the author's recurring references to dreams. In the dream that propels Ondaatje to undertake "psychical writing, the materiality of which relinquishes interpretation" (Kamboureli 85), an unidentified tropical location, where the author sees his father surrounded by barking dogs, is contrasted with the bitterly cold weather of Canada. The dream's content is not elaborated upon until much later in the memoir, in another episode entitled "The Bone." The cause of the dream referred to in "Asia" is most likely derived from a rumor that Ondaatje later recounts in "The Bone": after escaping from a train mischief, Mervyn Ondaatje, the author's father, is reportedly seen by his friend Arthur in the jungle holding five ropes, each with a dog hanging from it and struggling to break free. The father, the dogs, the heated density in the air, and

the title that reminds the reader of the writer's "bright bone of a dream" are the elements that connect these two episodes. What is intriguing is that the "reality" presented in "The Bone" is no more real than the author's dream, considering, for instance, the incompatibility of his father's relentless treatment of the dogs with the author's knowledge of his father as a dog lover. The congruence, nonetheless, lies in the author's tactical narrative strategy of deviance embodied in surreal and fragmentary oneiric accounts, and its portrayal of Mervyn Ondaatje as someone who appears to have gone into a deranged state of mind.

In "Monsoon Notebook (i)," Ondaatje merges the dreamy with the real, the uncanny with the daily, in yet another example of the cancellation of demarcation. The author combines observations of a vomiting man, a dead pig, and childhood girlfriends, with descriptions of his fogged-up watch and blistering feet caused by wearing cheap sandals for too long. Using a series of disparate experiences woven together in fragmented syntax, "Monsoon Notebook (i)" reflects Ondaatje's randomly rummaged memory of Ceylon. Also kept in the note that relays in one breath with twenty-two lines running into one sentence is his peculiar story of encountering a drunken man sleeping on the street. Worried about the man's safety, the semi-autobiographical narrator tries in vain to get his concern across to him because of the language gap between them. Yet, one cannot be so certain about the reality of this anecdote, as adjacent to this stream-of-consciousness sentence is his two-time mention of drunkenness and dream: "the toddy drink I got subtly smashed on by noon so I slept totally unaware of my dreams" (Ondaatje, *Running* 70) and "the necessary sleep in the afternoon with dreams blinded by toddy" (71). The man presumably serves as a substitute image of his father, who is always drunk and involved in trouble. This episode, which explores the theme of incommunicability, leads the reader to another episode titled "Final Days / Father Tongues." Here, Ondaatje's half-sister Jennifer reminisces about their father. She recalls that:

> When he began drinking I would just get lost . . . . There was a song he used to sing when he was drunk, over and over. He had made it up and he sang it only when he was really drunk. Partly English and partly Sinhalese, a bit like a baila as it used brand names and street names and gibberish. It made no sense to anyone

> but it wasn't gibberish to him because he always sang exactly the same words each time (194-95).

Although Ondaatje recounts numerous events involving Mervyn Ondaatje, his writing primarily focuses on the seemingly futile attempt to reconstruct his father's persona. It could be argued that Ondaatje is not just searching for his father as an individual, but also for the narrative "tongue" that would enable him to recount the history of his hometown. In essence, his pursuit is not solely for Mervyn Ondaatje, but for the means to tell a larger story. While Ondaatje addresses his father in an emotional confession: "I am writing this book about you at a time when I am least sure about such words . . . . Give me your arm. Let go my hand" (180), he also implies a Joycean attempt to keep his intimacy in distance as the only way to gauge his love for the country.

The scrutiny of the above excerpts from *Running in the Family* unfolds the features of drinking dream or dream-like drunkenness that constitute the bedrock of Ondaatje's way of narrating his stories. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Ondaatje reveals, "I started to discover I was being more honest when I was inventing, more truthful when dreaming" ("Interview" 257). This sentiment resonates with Karen Solie's observation that "*Running in the Family* is a document of the multiple and partial, of how memory, curiosity, invention, and history converge to trouble any search for truth" (84), suggesting that the memoir's essence lies in its embrace of narrative complexity rather than a singular, authoritative truth. This in turn helps us understand his own confession in the acknowledgements at the end of the book: ". . . in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts" (Ondaatje, *Running* 206). As a writer who questions various forms of established boundaries, Ondaatje defies monologic historical truth in favor of contingent coming-to-truths, truths that are always on the way of developing into formation and always allowed space for variegated interpretations. He has thus adopted an unorthodox way of writing and constructed his deviant narrative reminiscent of dreamwork in a deliberate manner to address the issue concerning the correlation between family, nation and narration. As a matter of fact, *Running in the Family* is far from a self-indulgent display of the coterie composed of his family members living in a self-standing ivory tower. In its stead, through its zooming in on the Burgher people, to which the author-narrator's parents and relatives belong, this

fictionalized memoir engages with Sri Lanka's colonial past, prompting discussions that may unsettle traditional views on political correctness.

As we examine the narrative architecture in Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, it becomes evident that the text does more than just recount a family's history or Sri Lanka's past. It engages the reader in a form of cognitive labor, asking them to piece together fragmented memories, anecdotes, and historical accounts. The narrative itself becomes a participatory arena, much like a collage that invites viewers to connect disparate elements. This active engagement with the text offers a new lens to approach not just Ondaatje's work but also the broader issues of identity and representation in postcolonial settings. This idea of active audience involvement in constructing meaning serves as a useful segue into Bhabha's interpretation of montage as a significant cultural practice.

Bhabha has continuously evolved his theories to address urgent and complex social, political, and ethical issues. In the dialogue between Bhabha and Frank Schulze-Engler, Pavan Kumar Malreddy, and John Njenga Karugia ("Even the Dead Have Human Rights" 2018), Bhabha discusses William Kentridge's[6] use of montage as an aesthetic and socio-political practice:

> Montage exploits both meanings of "contingency": contingency as a spatial relation of proximity, things that occur beside each other; and contingency as the sudden or imminent visibility of a new or unexpected temporality that disrupts our conventional reading or rendering of meaning and significance. (Schulze-Engler et al. 4)

Montage, as Bhabha describes it, operates on both spatial and temporal dimensions. It juxtaposes different media, materials, and meanings, generating a displacement in the visual field and a disjunction in the act of signification. In this sense, montage is not merely a stylistic choice but a method of grappling with social and cultural landscapes. In the interwoven narrative of between past and present that characterizes Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, readers

[6] William Kentridge (1955-) is a South African artist renowned for his multidisciplinary approach that encompasses visual arts, theater, and filmmaking. Kentridge gained international acclaim for his charcoal drawings and animations, which often explore themes related to apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Notable for their political and social commentary, Kentridge's works frequently engages with subjects of history, memory, and social justice, deploying a variety of media including drawing, sculpture, animation, tapestry, and performance.

encounter a narrative that functions less as a linear exposition and more as a montage of experiences and memories. Each fragment of Ondaatje's story—whether an intimate family anecdote, a vivid recollection of the Sri Lankan landscape, or a historical commentary—stands in proximity to others, yet retains a distinct temporal and emotional resonance. This technique mirrors the aesthetic and political practice of montage that Bhabha elucidates in his discussion on Kentridge. Just as Kentridge's "processions" are made up of "short, sharply cut shots" of disparate elements, as described by Sergei Eisenstein and referred to by Bhabha (Schulze-Engler et al. 4-5), Ondaatje's narrative brings together fragments that each tell a piece of the larger story of Sri Lanka as a nation.

The memoir's structure, with its juxtaposition of memories and temporalities, reflects this dual aspect of montage as both an aesthetic and a political practice. It mirrors the way in which montage places elements side by side, inviting the reader to forge connections while also introducing temporal shifts that challenge linear narratives. This technique resonates with Bhabha's interpretation, where montage becomes a tool for revealing the unexpected, allowing new meanings to surface and inviting a reevaluation of what we deem significant. Ondaatje's narrative, with its fragmented and non-linear progression, disrupts the reader's conventional understanding of the story, much as Bhabha suggests montage disrupts meaning. The political implications of such a narrative strategy in Ondaatje's work become evident when we consider how this form of storytelling can unsettle the historical accounts shaped by colonial narratives.

When it comes to Kentridge's description of the figures represented in his procession works, Bhabha describes them as "motley representatives of those in any society who find themselves stateless and status-less even if they are legally citizens" (Schulze-Engler et al. 4), which reminds us of Ondaatje's portrayal of the Burgher community—a group with a complex colonial legacy, embodying a sense of cultural dislocation within the Sri Lankan national narrative. Bhabha's montage emphasizes the simultaneous proximity and alterity of juxtaposed images. Similarly, Ondaatje's montage-like narrative presents the Burgher community as intimately connected to yet distinct from the dominant cultural narratives of Sri Lanka. Ondaatje's portrayal of the Burghers—legally citizens, yet often feeling stateless within their own country—challenges the reader to reassemble these fragments into a coherent

understanding of identity that is in constant flux. In doing so, he mirrors the "biopolitical montage of 'foot-power'" that Bhabha describes in Kentridge's work (4), where the very act of movement—whether through cultural shifts or narrative progression—constitutes the political body of the marginalized.

Bhabha delves into the inherent tension within montage, suggesting that this tension obeys a "law of fission" as it rises (Schulze-Engler et al. 5). This fissionary nature not only offers a spatial model of exclusionary societies but also serves as a measure of the temporality of escalating conflict. As tension increases, signs and symptoms erupt into the public sphere, affecting everyday life and introducing a sense of urgency. This fissionary composition harmonizes with the performative aspects of identity and nationhood, where the tension between different identities and histories can act as a catalyst for change, much like the tension within a montage. This sequence can be linked to the performative aspects of identity, where identity is not a given but is continually enacted and re-enacted through "short, sharply cut" instances of recognition, misrecognition, and negotiation. In *Running in the Family,* montage serves as a literary technique to weave together fragmented memories, myths, and histories of Sri Lanka into a composite narrative, illustrated in episodes such as "The Bone," where dream-like experiences and historical realities coalesce to create a disorienting but deeply resonant narrative, and in narrative instability evident in Ondaatje's depiction of contradictory facets of his father's character—his treatment of dogs, his drunkenness, his love and torment. The juxtaposition of different temporalities, cultural elements, and individual experiences creates a montage that is both a reflection of the complexities of Sri Lankan identity and a performative act of assembling that identity.

Drawing upon Bhabha's concept of montage as a dynamic layering of diverse elements, Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* employs a similar narrative strategy that oscillates between dream-like episodes, such as the surreal story of "The Bone," and grounded historical contexts, like the colonial implications for the Burgher community. This layered, at times dream-infused, approach leads us back to viewing the fictionalized memoir as partially embodying Bhabha's conception of the pedagogical and the performative. Ondaatje navigates between these contrasting paradigms, crafting a form of storytelling that becomes a performative act in itself, echoing Bhabha's understanding of identity as perpetually in the making and influenced by a rich amalgam of voices and histories.

The pedagogical serves as a conduit for official nationalist narratives, which operate within a linear time structure to fabricate a unified history and culture. Schools and other state institutions often disseminate this one-dimensional chronology, solidifying its cultural influence. In stark contrast, the performative destabilizes this uniform timeline, invoking a cyclical or even fragmented sense of time. It accommodates the experiences and practices that challenge the state-sanctioned narratives, turning the spotlight onto the fissures and inconsistencies within them. Ondaatje's way of presenting the double perspectives of the pedagogical and the performative, not dissimilar from Bhabha's reference to "rhetoric" and "nation as narration," envisages temporality as a base. The idea of narrating the nation, for both writers, is not to be delimited by the grand nationalistic narrative composed of linear temporality. As an alternative way to understanding the social momentum of a postcolonial society, the complementary performativity required in national identity in the context of ethnic hybridity reveals the insufficiency of the pedagogical strategy employed by nationalism. "In seeking to shift the focus of colonial discourse analysis to questions of identity-formation, psychic affect and the oppositions of the unconscious" (Moore-Gilbert 116), Bhabha is attentive to the nation as a split subject that reflects the slippery nature of language, and non-linearity in terms of temporality. In light of his endowment of the notion of nation with the feature of narrative, the significance of temporality as an interpretative medium in relation to the nature of a nation emerges. Ondaatje, like Bhabha, refuses to tether the act of nation-narration to a single, immutable timeline. Instead, he enlists a multiplicity of perspectives and identities, thereby destabilizing the conventional, linear temporal framework. This strategy mirrors Bhabha's aim to expand colonial discourse analysis to account for the fluid and often contradictory facets of identity formation.

The pedagogical concept of "historicism," often understood as a "theory that events are determined or influenced by conditions and inherent processes beyond the control of humans,"[7] exemplifies what both Ondaatje and Bhabha critique. This framework assumes that events are predetermined by immutable conditions, positioning history as fixed and unyielding. When adopted within a pedagogical framework, historicism serves to fossilize cultural narratives,

[7] This definition of historicism comes from *The Free Dictionary*. Please see the entry "Historicism, N. (1)."

transforming the nation into a static "imagined community." Such a pedagogical approach aligns with the construction of a cultural paradigm that privileges a continuist notion of time—one that envisions history as a seamless, linear progression. Any disruptions to this paradigm are viewed as threats to the coherence and integrity of history as an unbroken edifice. The pedagogical application of nationalism opens up a road to the constitution of a holistic history in which the origin or the past can be imagined and thereby appropriated to form a holistic national identity of a people. The result is an imagined community, with its culture essentialized as an unchanging entity oppositional to any external menace that intends to alter even the slightest element of it. Under such a passive constitution, an individual merely becomes a byproduct of ideology, an object.

While historicism and pedagogical strategies have been traditionally employed in the construction of national identity, Ondaatje and Bhabha offer a different perspective that emphasizes the importance of narrative and performance. By challenging the notion of a fixed and unchanging national identity, they offer a more dynamic and fluid understanding of the nation that is better suited to the hybrid nature of postcolonial societies. Ondaatje's delineation of surreal moments in the book is a literary counterpart to Bhabha's thought, and an attempt to seek the breaking point that might render fissured the edifice of Ceylonese history built up fundamentally by the alternating political praxes of conflict and compromise between the two dominant races. As is discussed above, these moments are brought forth mainly by Ondaatje's dream-related accounts. Besides the dog scene that involves Mervyn Ondaatje with his nakedness and drunkenness, "The Passion of Lalla" is probably the most uncanny description of his family member in the whole book. Adapted from Ondaatje's award-winning short story of the same title (CBC Short Story Prize in 1982), the chapter describes a peculiar life journey of Ondaatje's maternal grandmother Lalla. Among all the anecdotes where Lalla's images as an unorthodox woman are animatedly presented, the dramatic delineation of an invented cause of Lalla's death stands out: an unreal apocalyptic flood in 1947 takes Lalla to "her last perfect journey" (Ondaatje, *Running* 128). Whilst carried away by the flood, she still manages to adore the beauty around her: "The symmetrical flower beds also began to receive the day's light and Lalla gazed down at them with wonder, moving as lazily as that long dark scarf which trailed off her neck brushing the branches and never catching" (128). This

fantastically invested writing of Lalla's final experience, nonetheless, is soon brought back to the realistic time when she begins to witness a dead body and drowned animals around her. With the episode of "her magic ride" (129) all coming to a "real" end when she hits something unknown and dies, Ondaatje demonstrates the way in which a subject is caught between the split nature of temporality. Lalla's death, which occurred on August 15, 1947, a week before the first Ceylonese parliamentary election that would substantially influence the island's political climate after it gains independence five months later, symbolizes the exclusion of the Burgher community from the political arena.

For Ondaatje and Bhabha, national culture is not a monolithic entity, but rather a complex and multi-layered process of signification that is constantly evolving. They view the performative as a more useful way of understanding this process, as it emphasizes the heterogeneity and contingency of cultural meaning-making. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje's choice of ushering in the surreal moments and intertwined temporalities displayed in his dreams aims to counterbalance the overwhelmingly bipolar realpolitik in post-independence Sri Lanka. It serves as a writing back to the colonial discourse, which "resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism' (Bhabha, "Other Question" 71). Ondaatje sees the modern concept of nation as involving a certain amount of people living in a state of hybridity that registers the non-stop dislocation and relocation of cultural signs. A national culture that shares a tonal affinity with language holds as its core principle that as a process of signification, it is destined to bear doubling and splitting all the time. In it, what Bhabha calls performativity maintains a distinctive advantage over pedagogy. While the latter calls for a continuous and stabilized time, the former emphasizes a disjunctive and repetitious one. The performative is taken as an interrogation of the homogeneous, empty time the pedagogical seems to support, emphasizing instead cultural difference as well as a heterogeneous thinking of history.

V. Conclusion

Michael Ondaatje's narrative, like Bhabha's theoretical framework, suggests that the act of recounting one's history is intrinsically political. By

reassembling fragments of the past, Ondaatje performs a kind of narrative agency that corresponds with Bhabha's understanding of political action as inherently discursive. The characters in *Running in the Family* do not passively inherit a static past; instead, they actively participate in its retelling, embodying Bhabha's assertion that cultural identity is produced—and not merely reflected—in the act of narration. This reflects a political stance not of escapism but of alternative engagement, wherein the performative aspect of storytelling becomes a site for reclamation.

Ilan Kapoor's interpretation of Bhabha's conception of agency as intertwined with discursive subjection in "Acting in a Tight Spot: Homi Bhabha's Postcolonial Politics" helps us further understand the narrative workings in *Running in the Family*. Kapoor elucidates how Bhabha cautions against the direct opposition to power, suggesting that such resistance may inadvertently perpetuate existing structures of domination. This insight resonates deeply with Ondaatje's narrative approach, which forgoes overt political confrontation in favor of a subtler, more intricate engagement with the legacies of colonialism in Sri Lanka. The book's fragmented storytelling is in accord with Bhabha's notion, articulated by Kapoor, of politics as an iterative process embedded within the existing discourse. Ondaatje's work exemplifies Bhabha's concept that "the people-as-subject, for him, only emerge out of the nation when they act as political agents, parading the heterogeneity and ambivalence (as opposed to the static 'pedagogical object') that is the nation" (Kapoor 572). In Ondaatje's narrative, the act of recounting a family's history becomes a performative exercise in which the characters, much like the subjects of a nation, emerge through their stories, revealing the diverse and often contradictory facets of their identities.

In the performative fabric of Ondaatje's fictionalized memoir, the characters' stories unfold in a manner that illustrates Bhabha's political implication as a "contingent/contingency plan" (Kapoor 569), an iteration of discourse rather than a severance from it. Ondaatje's work can be seen as an embodiment of this notion by presenting a familial and national history that is not a rebellion against the past but a rearticulation of it. This performative reiteration corresponds to the concept that agency operates within the confines of hegemonic discourse, challenging it through subtle acts of reenactment. *Running in the Family* thrives within the semiotic realm, with its political agency emerging through the performative acts of storytelling and memory

reconstruction. It is through these acts that the narrative reclaims personal and national identities, demonstrating how semiotic performances can wield political significance. The fragmented and negotiated storytelling in *Running in the Family* serves as a testament to the political power of cultural performance, engaging with the past to shape the present and future of postcolonial identity.

The notion of the performative is delicately intimated in *Running in the Family* to suggest that the recognition of the instability of personal, national, and cultural identity turns out to be the path that leads Sri Lankan people to diverse and harmonious ethnicity. Identity otherwise becomes static if the pedagogical practice of nationalistic discourse is the only determinant of its formation. The cultural signification of a nation is thus inevitably a performance of its "split," and "[i]t is from this *instability* of cultural signification that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities—modern, colonial, postcolonial, 'native'. . ." (Bhabha, "DissemiNation" 152). The multiple and, for the most part, overlapping times of surreal moments in Ondaatje's book echo Bhabha's notion of performativity as generating differentiated narrative times. Open to changes and metamorphoses, people living in/as the varied temporalities potentially become determining and productive subjects. As Ray cogently puts it, "in the denial of a singular identity Ondaatje always foregrounds location, language, time, and class" in which his fragmented and deviant narrative form "functions less as a postmodern experiment, reflecting rather the material conditions of moving between cultures, nations, and generations" (41). This suggests that Ondaatje's use of fragmented and deviant narrative form is not simply a postmodern play but rather reflects the lived experiences of individuals who are constantly moving between different generations and cultures, reaching the potential to become determining and productive subjects. It emphasizes the idea that cultural identity is not just a matter of abstract ideas or theoretical constructs but is intimately connected to the material conditions of individuals' lives.

Ondaatje and Bhabha propose a vision from which to conceive the nation not as a static entity but as an evolving narrative, one that is performative in nature and integral to shaping our subjective state of being. They suggest that we should make rigid and inflexible pedagogical inscriptions of national culture become performatively mobile and floating. For them, attending to the latent "rhetorical split" (Bhabha, "By" 204) and the "rhetorics of indeterminacy" ("Conclusion" 253) in cultural signs is no less pivotal to the understanding of

identity formation than considering the representation of temporally and spatially "moving" experiences of people living in-between. These two aspects are irrevocably interlaced with one another. Attempting to offer a way to think beyond essentialism that dictates political alignment and cultural purity in the process of nation formation, Ondaatje perceives Sri Lanka as emblematic of a form of transfiguration into negotiation, fluid and open to every possibility.

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