

A TRICK WITH A GLASS

Michael Ondaatje's South Asian Connection

Chelva Kanaganayakam

You tell me to pack up my bags and go
But where? I turn my face towards
Country after country
Silently I lip read their refusal
What do I call myself?
Exile, émigré refugee

Jean Arasanayagam "Exile II"

IN AN ESSAY APPROPRIATELY titled "Going Home," Zulfikar Ghose reflects on the experience of visiting Pakistan after twenty-eight years, of becoming aware not only of the transformations caused by successive governments but also of deep-seated ambiguities in the task of reclaiming one's past, of establishing a space within one's psyche that promises contentment through its unequivocal assertion of identity. He describes a visit to the Peshawar museum where the incomplete statue of the fasting Buddha compels his attention:

The missing parts of the statue appear to have a vital presence: the starved, absent organs — shrunk, withered, annihilated — throb bloodily in the imagination; that which is not there startles the mind with the certainty of its being; it is an image of amazing contradictions, and illustrates the ambiguity of all perception: reality can be composed of absent things, the unseen blazes in our minds with a shocking vividness. (Ghose 15)

For the exile, the expatriate, the referential surface is not without significance, but it remains a part of a larger perception that seeks continuities, detects dichotomies and connections, and forces the imagination to transform what is seen to reflect and accommodate what lies below the surface. If the experience of exile inevitably involves division, it also affords the perceptions of complex connections that ques-

tion and subvert prevailing structures. As Aamer Hussein points out, “there is . . . a tremendous inherent privilege in the term, a mobility of mind if not always of matter, to which we as writers should lay claim: a doubling instead of a split.” (Hussein 102)

Michael Ondaatje, in *Running in the Family*, returns to a country he left twenty-five years ago, and his perception of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) is no less profound, no less complex, for it entails returning to a past characterized by the duality of being both “native” and “foreign,” to a tenuous, middle-of-road position that served as a constant reminder to the British of the unfortunate effects of miscegenation; for the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the Burghers symbolized the residual vestiges of colonial domination, and therefore an extension of British, metropolitan culture. As Ondaatje puts it, “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (79). The gap that separates the British finds expression early in Ondaatje’s work:

Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British 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. The English were seen as transients, snobs and racists, and were quite separate from those who had intermarried and who lived here permanently. (41)

The Burghers, by implication, are closer to the land than the British, but they too do not escape the stigma of alienation. The author mentions that Emil Daniels, when asked by a British governor what his nationality was, replied “God alone knows, your excellency” (41). Particularly as the country moved closer to Independence, the tenuousness of a community whose strength and its weakness lay in its cultural syncretism became increasingly apparent. As Ernest Macintyre, whose plays point to the loss of self in neo-colonial Sri Lanka and whose decision to emigrate to Australia underlines the problems of the Burgher community in the country, comments, the Burghers “were to enjoy an entire mortality of heightened unreality, a surreality because they wouldn’t be provided with even a humbug of ‘a tryst with destiny’ at midnight in 1947 when Ceylon was given the legality of Independence” (Macintyre 315). Ondaatje’s return to the country of his birth needs to be seen as a complex version of the familiar “been-to” situation.

TO BE REFUSED A ROLE in history is to be denied the very basis of identity. Hence the author’s need to establish a niche for himself in Sri Lanka, which appears time and again with obsessive insistence in his work. His father claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, an identity that the son treats with some scepticism. His own sense of origins is deliberately ambiguous:

My own ancestor arriv[ed] in 1600, a doctor who cured the residing governor's daughter with a strange herb and was rewarded with land, a foreign wife, and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language. (64)

The ironies are striking. The name, hardly recognizable as Tamil or Sinhalese, with minor changes, means, in the Tamil language "to become one." A far cry from the state of limbo that characterizes the Burgher community, a predicament that Derek Walcott's Shabine so aptly describes in *The Star-Apple Kingdom*

I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I'm a nobody, or I'm a nation (Walcott 4)

The need to probe and resolve this duality, however, is obsessive. Ondaatje left early enough to avoid the gradual disillusionment that set in among the Burghers in the latter part of the 1950s and early 1960s following the introduction of Sinhala as the official language and the switch to Sinhala and Tamil as the languages of instruction. Speaking of the inevitable alienation and the desire to emigrate, Macintyre mentions the large-scale exodus from Sri Lanka to Melbourne, and of Ondaatje's family, "a small inner circle which had become far too used to their Ceylon fantasy to make that very real journey from Tullamarine airport to the suburbs of Melbourne" (Macintyre 316). Ondaatje himself chose to leave for Canada, but the need to return finds expression through dreams that encroach into his consciousness and through the marginal position of sleeping on a couch at a friend's home. The intertextual reference to Jane Austen's *Persuasion* is apt, for it underscores the hastiness of his departure from Sri Lanka and the need to re-live a romance that was once rejected. The return is not entirely euphoric, for images of claustrophobia constantly interrupt those of nostalgia. Dream and nightmare compete in the author's consciousness. The precariousness of the position is emphasized by the metaphor of balancing a glass of wine on his head while dancing. Ironically, it is while he is drunk, and most likely to stumble, that he acquires the art of balancing the glass. Now, tormented by the dreams that invade his mind, he loses the balance, the glass is about to tip over and the author says, "I knew I was already running."

The notion of "running" is particularly appropriate, suggesting as it were several alternative prepositions, all of which define the preoccupations of this work. *Running* is as much about running "in" as it is about "to," "from" or "against." The constant shifts in perspective, the foregrounding of textuality, the anxiety to belong and the need for distance, the awareness of history and the self-consciousness about historiography — all combine to create the effect of a complex quest in which the notion of identity needs to be explored in all its multiplicity. Probing one's identity is problematic in the best of situations, let alone in the case of one who is seen as both the agent and victim of colonial hegemony. As in Ghose's essay, there

is a constant awareness of the space that separates the real from the everyday, and the power of the imagination to transform the referential into a fictive construct that speaks more eloquently about the self than any preoccupation with meticulous detail. The objective is not without validity, but it remains only one of many possible representations. As Linda Hutcheon comments, "in all forms of narrating the past, the realization of the essential subjectivity of the enterprise has recently supplanted any positivist faith in objective representations" (Hutcheon 306). If the cold weather renders the people of Ontario "pink and frozen," the generations who constitute his ancestry stand out in memory like "frozen opera." To give them a meaningful reality is to transform them through the imagination: "I wanted to touch them into words."

The problematic and controversial aspect of the work becomes evident at the very beginning, in the section entitled "Jaffna Afternoons," which opens with a description of the governor's home in the Jaffna Fort, that impressive structure in the heart of Jaffna, overlooking the sea, an enduring symbol of subjugation and defeat. (It is significant that the fort, until recently, was used as a camp by the Sri Lankan army in their effort to overcome the Tamil rebels. According to recent reports, the rebels who have now secured control of the fort have begun to demolish it in an attempt to erase what they perceive to be a symbol of subservience.) Ondaatje's choice of beginning his work in Jaffna and not in Colombo suggests at least a partial recognition of his father's claim to be a Jaffna Tamil. Having done so, strangely enough, he isolates himself in the Fort, and hardly draws attention to the ethnic conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese during the past few decades. His reference to his uncle Ned as heading a commission on race-riots deepens the irony of seeking an elitist seclusion in the governor's home. Granted that ethnic violence in Sri Lanka did not escalate until 1983, the growing tension between the two communities was too obvious to be missed. Presumably, the author's intention was to distance himself from ideological issues that he did not feel strongly about. That writers like Jean Arasanayagam — another Burgher writer who decided to stay — chose to write about the ethnic conflict provides an interesting comparison with the apolitical stance of Ondaatje. This refusal to be drawn into issues that surface in any serious discussion of the country has been criticised, not undeservedly, as an example of solipsism. Arun Mukherjee's observation that Ondaatje "does not get drawn into the acts of living, which involves the need to deal with the burning issues of his time" (Mukherjee 34) can hardly be refuted, regardless of the author's angle of vision or aesthetic sensibility.

Even more significant is that Ondaatje visited Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980, less than a decade after the 1971 Insurgency shook the country out of its complacency and forced it to confront issues it had chosen to ignore. Sri Lankan writers who for a long time had confined themselves to imitative writing, now responded to the pressure of the times, and several writers, including Punyakante Wijenaikē, James

Goonewardene and Edirwira Sarachchandra wrote about the effects of the Insurgency. Ondaatje could not have avoided discussing the movement, for some of the bloodiest battles were fought in Kegalle, where his ancestral home was located. He refers to the insurgents in Kegalle and their project of going from house to house collecting arms to begin the struggle, but only to shift the emphasis into one of irony. Here is the description of their visit to his ancestral home:

While all this official business was going on around the front porch, the rest of the insurgents had put down their huge collection of weapons, collected all over from Kegalle, and persuaded my younger sister Susan to provide a bat and a tennis ball. Asking her to join them, they proceeded to play cricket on the front lawn. (101)

The juxtaposition is hardly amusing or convincing. But when he speaks about the incarceration of the insurgents at Vidyalankara Campus, their graffiti poems that spoke of their hopes and anguish, he curbs the impulse to aestheticise the movement. The context in which this description occurs propels the narrative towards aesthetic distance, but the parallel with the graffiti poems on the rock face of Sigiriya, and the implied contrast between the love poems written to satisfy a despot king and the angry verses to defy a hostile government provide a saving sensitivity. The author concedes: "The works seem as great as the Sigiriya frescoes. They too need to be eternal" (85).

THE AUTHOR'S QUEST IS less ambitious than that of the insurgents, but it too involves history, a need to establish roots. Hence the excitement and exhilaration of seeing his name cut across the stone floor of a church:

To kneel on the floors of a church and see your name chiseled in large letters so that it stretches from your fingertips to your elbow in some strange way removes vanity, eliminates the personal. It makes your own story a lyric. So the sound which came immediately out of my mouth as I half-gasped and called my sister spoke all that excitement of smallness, of being overpowered by stone. (65-66)

To have to be reminded of one's history in this manner is uplifting and painful, as he recognizes when he washes his hands and sees "the deep grey colour of old paper going down the drain" (68). The sense of inadequacy, the anguish of having been severed from history comes across in a wonderful statement that intertextually recalls Prufrock; the author comments:

After the cups of tea, coffee, public conversations . . . I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover. (54)

The combination of urgency and self-consciousness is central to the work, for it defines the elusive tone of the book, points to the difficulty of attaching labels —

“travelogue,” “autobiography,” “fiction” — all of which seem to be both true and false. That Ondaatje wanted to be truthful can hardly be doubted. In an interview with Sam Solecki, he speaks of having sent copies of the manuscript to various relatives before the publication of the book, to make certain that truth had not been misrepresented. He also mentions that “*Running* was difficult to write” (Solecki 331). The issue, then, is less with sincerity of motive than with representation of reality, of the manner in which a consciousness probes its own past. Ondaatje’s work can hardly be entirely nostalgic or vituperative, and that explains the impulse to subvert expectations, mix genres and fuse a self-conscious narrative mode with a strikingly mimetic surface.

Ondaatje’s preoccupation with history and the validity of what purports to be historical truth is evident at the outset. The two epigraphs with which the work begins, the first a statement by Oderic, a Franciscan friar of the 14th century and the second by Douglas Amerasekara in 1978 express the two ends of historical perception in relation to Sri Lanka. The first, clearly Orientalist and exotic, transforms the reality of a country into one that suggests myth and fable; the second, neo-colonial and self-deprecating, expresses a world view conditioned by centuries of colonial domination. Myths persist to shape the present. Ondaatje draws attention to enduring misconceptions: “From Sellyan to Paradise is forty miles,” says a legend, “the sounds of the fountains of Paradise is heard there” (81). However, for Robert Knox, who was held captive in the island for twenty years in the 17th century, the experience was one of desolation: “Thus was I left Desolate, Sick and in Captivity, having no earthly comforter, none but only He who looks down from Heaven to hear the groaning of the prisoners” (81). Ironically, his writings become a primary source for Daniel Defoe who then shapes his novel into a master narrative of colonial hegemony and binary structure. Ondaatje is aware that seventy years before him an Englishman called Leonard Woolf wrote a wonderful novel called *The Village in the Jungle* which avoids both the exoticism of traditional accounts and the colonial cringe of the more recent ones in its projection of a village gradually destroyed by nature and an uncomprehending British administration.

His own views must recognize these contraries. Ondaatje’s tangential relation to this “wife of many marriages” requires a careful balancing act. He is the prodigal who is constantly drawn to the words “sea,” “harbour,” and “estuary” and who loves the song “Harbour Lights.” He is aware that in the blistering heat that accompanies New Year festivities, people enjoy themselves climbing grease poles, throwing water on passing cyclists. For his family, the experience is very different: “But my kids, as we drove towards lowland heat, growing belligerent and yelling at each other to shut up, shut up” (80). Even what appears to be most “primitive” or “exotic” has its use, while the cultural allegiance of his community lies in far off cultures.

The devil dances cured sickness, catarrh, deafness, aloneness. Here the gramophone accompanied a seduction or an arousal, it spoke of meadows and "little Spanish towns" or "a small hotel," a "blue room." (52)

On the other hand, when at Kuttapitiya, the author's daughter says, "if we lived here it would be perfect" (146) he wholeheartedly agrees. About the task of writing the work itself, he says, "I just had to say to myself that I thought I was writing the book with enough love, that if it was me it would be ok" (Solecki 331). It is the dual awareness of closeness and distance, of fictions that masquerade as truth and truth that hides behind fantasy that leads to the experiment of his work. The foregrounding of "architecture," of conflicting voices that cancel each other out, the juxtaposition of the public and the private, the claim to be universalist and representative and the insistence on the personal and the family are thus inevitable for one whose identities — Burgher, Sri Lankan, Canadian etc. — make the task of retrieving the past all the more complex. The work's singular achievement lies in the manner in which it projects the claims of both "History" in the national sense and "history" in the private sense to express what is at once a profound personal quest and a statement about the country that has chosen to remain, in many ways, oblivious of the realities that edge its complacent vision of itself.

The strategies that shape the narrative are subtle enough to maintain the precarious balance that this work requires. Thus a section like "The Honeymoon" says very little about the honeymoon itself, but provides a collage, a quick survey of information that resembles a skimming of headlines and column titles from a newspaper, possibly on a day during the honeymoon. The tangential relation between the two acquires depth through the manner of selection and the distribution of emphasis. The juxtaposition of "Fighting in Manchuria," and the films at the local cinema, namely, "Love Birds" and "Caught Cheating" drives home dichotomies that lie beyond the referential surface. Leslie Mundwiler's comment that "even if narrative deceives, offers entertaining illusions in contrast with the straight medicine of reality, there is a kind of narrative which can transcend this limitation" (Mundwiler 136) accurately defines the strategies that inform this work.

FOR A WORK THAT IS ostensibly linear in its overall conception of historical continuity, the structure is remarkably synchronic. Images, once they have been introduced, are abandoned for a period of time and then picked up at a later point, thereby drawing attention to the fictiveness of the construct and our perception of history. "Historical Relations," which, at best, is a superficial treatment of relatives then acquires a special significance in relation the memoirs of Robert Knox. The section on "The War Between Men and Women," hardly has anything to offer beyond an instance of perversion, but a later chapter focusses in-

tently on issues of gender in relation to the author's parents. Titles of sections, which at first seem deliberately misleading, gradually achieve their purpose of foregrounding the narrative, thereby asserting the fictiveness of both the literary construct and the episodes that are described. Such a process is of crucial significance in a work that seeks to decentre the "public" and install the "private" in its place.

The dense layering of intertextuality and self-reflexivity can hardly be missed in the work. References to Defoe, Shakespeare, Dickens, Lawrence and various other poets not only destabilize the realistic surface but also point to dimensions that are insistently personal and autobiographical. Dismissive of "anguished autobiographical novels," he records an instance of being bathed by a vicious woman named Maratina, and what might have accounted for childhood trauma hardly enters his consciousness. And yet the personal element is very much a part of the work. The ghosts of ancestors do not merely inhabit the governor's home in Jaffna. They are very much in the author's mind, for his journey to Sri Lanka is mainly a quest for his father, an attempt to exorcise feelings of guilt, of betrayal.

There is no attempt to sentimentalise or universalize the experience between the father and the son. The father is a dipsomaniac, a bully, a spendthrift. He is very much a colonial officer, who even in his drunkenness and moments of hallucination, perceives the need to be respectful to British officers. Recreating that history involves listening to unflattering accounts of his father's activities, visiting Sir John Kotelawala who refuses to refer to Mervyn by name and insists on calling him "that chap." But the dialogues of the latter part of the work change in tone to reveal a lonely, depressed and lovable man, who writes to his expatriate children that "he just wished that he could kiss [them] all once again" (178). To recognize such connections is to assert the significance of one's roots, one's ambivalent sense of belonging. It recalls for the author the predicament of Edgar, misunderstood and exiled, returning to make peace:

I long for the moment in the play where Edgar reveals himself to Gloucester and it never happens. Look I am the son who has grown up. I am the son you have made hazardous, who still loves you. . . . 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)

CLEARLY, ONDAATJE'S TASK in writing this work which straddles fiction and autobiography is to come to terms with a past that is both personal and collective. It involves looking back at a history that was formed three centuries ago and was all but terminated soon after the departure of the British in 1947. The work's weakness lies in its refusal to participate actively in the referential, in its reluctance to condemn or praise; in foregrounding the "narrative" at the expense of the "national," Ondaatje abandons a wonderful opportunity to

assert a much-needed sense of belonging. Those of his generation, the “Midnight’s children,” many of them exiles and expatriates, have felt the need to create experimental and metafictional structures. As Hussein explains, “our texts constantly explore the boundaries between fact and fiction, memory and imagination, individual and collective consciousness” (Hussein 107). And yet they never fail to confront the immediate and the political. Except for occasional moments, as in the discussion of the poetry of Lakdasa Wikramasinha, Ondaatje hardly ever shows signs of impassioned involvement with contemporary events. In his failure, Ondaatje shares the shortcomings of the majority of Sri Lankan writing in English which, for the most part, has stayed clear of the upheavals that have transformed a kindly, generous nation into a cruel and mindless battlefield.

Sri Lanka’s current dilemma is at least in part a result of forgetting the past, of creating identities that owe their origin to Eurocentric or nationalist fictions, of steadfastly refusing to perceive truths that lie behind the immediate and subjective. Ondaatje’s work is an attempt to articulate the complexity of a colonial inheritance, the need to transcend binary structures, to perceive dichotomies and continuities between the referential and the real. *Running* provides a salutary reminder of the need to see beyond fictions that take on the appearance of truth. His work is a far cry from the realism of Leonard Woolf, but it remains an authentic narrative, the voice of the expatriate, the exiled voice that it is both marginal and central, divided in its loyalties, but clear and unequivocal in its commitment to struggle with competing identities. As the author points out:

During certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. So our job becomes to keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with “the mercy of distance” write the histories. (179)

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WHY I CAN TALK OF THE ANGELIC QUALITIES OF THE RAVEN

Rienzi Cruz

Let's talk colors.
Start with BLACK,
that hallmark of the sun.
What else
is the eye of the hurricane, the colour
of magic night?
Is the Geisha, Geisha
without her black crown
against porcelain skin?
If the raven talks, listen.
It's God in winged disguise.

What's coloured
(blue, cinnabar, turquoise)
always throbs like a lover's heart.
The bougainvillea
under a Trinidad sun
holds the magic of metaphors,
sets off the quality
of our sunsets, our batik effusions,
our Gauguins, our murders.