

Situating ‘Trishanku’: Hybridity and Transnationality in Michael Ondaatje’s Fiction

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Abstract:

The ‘Trishanku location’ as appropriated in Diaspora studies signifies the ‘in-between position’, one’s sense of oscillation between nations and cultures, as well as the ‘third space’ where people acquire a hybrid and transnational identity. Uma Parameswaran draws an analogy between Trihanku’s heaven and the diasporic position. With the concern of Diaspora studies for ‘in-betweenness’ and ‘hybridity’ experienced by diasporic persons, Trishanku has become a metaphor for diasporic position. In the fictional memoir *Running in the Family* (1982) Michael Ondaatje’s Trishanku experience is delineated through his oscillating senses of belonging to homeland. The author’s settlement in Canada against his attempt of re-rooting in Sri Lanka is presented in the memoir. In *Anil’s Ghost*, the involvement of Anil in investigating ‘extrajudicial execution’ of her native country on the one hand and the circumstances that force her to leave Sri Lanka depicts a Trishanku situation. With the dual and oscillating sense of belonging to both home and host nations/cultures and being products of the east and the west, Ondaatje as well as his fictional self achieve hybridity and transnationality with their relocation in Trishanku’s heaven.

Key words: Diaspora, Trishanku location, in-betweenness, Hybridity, Transnationality
Running in the Family, Anil’s Ghost.

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The ‘Trishanku location’ as appropriated in Diaspora studies signifies the ‘in-between position’, one’s sense of oscillation between nations and cultures, as well as the ‘third space’ where people acquire a hybrid and transnational identity. The term ‘Trishanku’ originates from the Hindu myth of Trishanku’s heaven that relates the story of the creation of a new heaven by the great Sage Viswamitra for the mortal king Trishanku who the sage sent to heaven alive but who being denied the entry, came downward to earth. The sage stopped Trishanku midway and created some heavenly bodies amidst which Trishanku ruled as a king with his posture upside down. The king in the myth lived between heaven and earth. In this way, Trishanku’s location refers to a place which is neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’, but ‘in-between’. Uma Parameswaran in *Trishanku and other poems* while expressing the immigrant experience of rootlessness and search for identity draws an analogy between Trishanku’s heaven and the diasporic position. With the concern of Diaspora studies for ‘in-betweenness’, ‘hybridity’ and the homely houselessness/homelessly housed situations experienced by diasporic persons, Trishanku has become a metaphor for diasporic position. The present paper is an attempt to elucidate the Trishanku position of the Booker winner Michael Ondaatje, the Sri Lankan-Canadian diasporic writer and his characters as delineated in his fictional works *Running in the Family* (1982) and *Anil’s Ghost* (2000).

To begin with, the Trishanku location succinctly signifies the position of a wish fulfilled but desires unsatisfied. This is a situation faced by the immigrants as they are forced to straddle two societies, two cultures and two entirely different new worlds. The diasporic people often experience a situation of ‘exile’, ‘unhoused’ and ‘decentred’ (Said *Culture* 403). The position of the diasporic individual can be said to be a hybrid one since, in Bhaba’s opinion, hybridization is the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism. Bhabha observes that colonial histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present, thereby lead to the formation of new identities. Bhabha challenges the essentialist construction of identity as a ‘finished product’ (Bhaba 73), highlights the hybrid identity of the diaspora and observes that identity of the diaspora can be situated in the ‘in-between’ spaces that initiate ‘new signs of identity’ (Bhaba 2). This state of fluidity forms the core of diasporic identity since displacement and dislocation of the individual often result in the loss of original identity and the formation of a new identity as well. Bhabha posits hybridity as a form of liminal or in-between space, where the ‘cutting edge of translation and negotiation’ occurs and which he terms the third space. (Rutherford 221). Diasporic identities have become at once local and

global and being so, diasporic people achieve a 'plural identity', often showcasing transnational and trans-cultural affiliations.

The two selected works *Running in the Family* and *Anil's Ghost* are closely related as they tell the identical story of dispersion from Sri Lanka, the homeland to the West and revisits to the mother country as reclamation of root. While the former is a fictitious memoir, the latter is allegorically autobiographical. Again, while *Running in the Family* depicts the colonial history through reconstruction of family lineage, *Anil's Ghost* is concerned with the postcolonial disturbances in the country – the civil war in Sri Lanka 'from the Mid-1980s to the early 1990s' (*Anil's Ghost* Author's note)

As a diasporic writer Michael Ondaatje has many dualities associated with him – his blood, birth, sojourn and adoption. The Dutch Burgher ancestry, Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) nativity, western sojourns/Education and adoption of Canadian citizenship and yet the deep sense of attachments to the country of birth make Ondaatje's cultural position worth the study. As he says of himself and his work, "I am a mongrel of place. Of race. Of cultures. Of many genres." (Mc Crum). Ondaatje's own view of himself as a Sri Lankan as well as a Canadian is a pointer to the oscillations and double consciousness of the diasporic writers. His memoir *Running in the Family* brings to the fore his diasporic sensibility of the Trishanku position. Here Ondaatje chronicles his return to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) twenty-five years later, with a view to recapture the world of his parents, the Ceylon of his early childhood, of the early decades of the century. At the surface an autobiographical work, it is far from being a straightforward life story. Displaced Ondaatje displaces his genre and builds up his memoir with unstructured and randomly placed vignettes of varied lengths, while flavouring it with poetry and photographs of Ceylon and the family.

Ondaatje feels that the refusal of a role in history signifies the loss of identity, and hence, as already stated, his incessant attempt is to reclaim his identity by creating a niche for himself in the native land. In his search of root, he unearths his origin and recreates his family history: "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 Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje.... And when his Dutch wife died, marr(ied) a Sinhalese woman, having nine children, and remain(ed). Here." (60). The name (Ondaatje), hardly recognizable as Tamil or Sinhalese, with minor changes, means 'to become one'. (Kanaganayakam: 35).

Ondaatje's memoir captures the dilemma of the diasporic individual oscillating between feelings of belonging and not-belonging. In the spirit of Salman Rushdie's notion of the diaspora 'straddling two cultures' (Rushdie 15), Ondaatje writes, "We own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens and invaders ... (80). The leap from one imagination to the other can hardly be made. Ondaatje of course runs to Sri Lanka: "I was running to Asia and everything would change ...I would be travelling back to the family I had grown from ... (22). The map of Ceylon showing some of the places in Ondaatje's plan of trip is graphed with this: "During quiet afternoons I spread maps onto the floor and searched out possible routes to Ceylon" (22). But Ondaatje finds that the island of Ceylon which has been subjected to "the theories of sextant" (63) for centuries, now exerts a challenge Western cartography. In the chapter entitled "Tabula Asiae," Ondaatje enumerates the different historical names given

to Sri Lanka over the centuries (Serendip, Ratnadipa, Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon and Ceylon) and the various shapes accorded to the island. Ondaatje's narrative tries to reconstruct the 'fluid' map of his homeland. Ondaatje creates contingent maps of his island. Instead of evoking empirical elements of the landscape, Ondaatje recalls stories about his father and other family members. The fragmentary quality of the narrative reflects the fragmented yet distinct geographical landscape that constitutes home for Ondaatje.

Towards the last, Ondaatje's impressions of Ceylon differs and Ceylon becomes juxtaposed with Canada: "Now, and here, Canadian February, I write this in the kitchen and play that section of cassette to hear not just peacocks but all the noises of the night behind them—inaudible then because they were always there like breath. In this silent room (with its own unheard hum of fridge, fluorescent light) there are these frogs loud as river, grunting, the whistle of other birds brash and sleepy" (144). The two separate places are suddenly superimposed on one another. Ondaatje's construction of history of Ceylon is subconsciously affected by his dual consciousness or the fragmented soul.

Ondaatje in *Anil's Ghost* addresses issues of ethnicity and identity. The shifts in individual identity of the central character Anil Tissera constitutes the core of the novel which presents the problematic of one's ethnicity and identity in today's world. Sri Lanka born Tissera is a UN forensic scientist who has come back all the way from USA to investigate 'extrajudicial executions' (14).

Anil's Ghost exemplifies the problematic of ethnicity and identity. In fact, Anil's "in-between" location facilitates the ethical problematic reflecting Ondaatje's diasporic nationalist concerns. His discourse of human rights not only elicits political and ethical responses to Sri Lanka, but also shows frustration resulting from its application to a particular nation-state context. After Sri Lanka's independence, the Tamils and the Sinhalese found themselves engaged in "a tryst with destiny," whereas the local descendants felt marginalized and insecure. Anil is showcased as an agent and victim of colonial hegemony as well. She epitomizes the problematics of ethnicity and identity and tends to integrate her individual identity with Sri Lankan ethnicity to establish her role in the history of Sri Lanka. In her scheme of things, to be refused a role in history is to be denied the very basis of identity. The problematic arises in denying or endorsing Anil's claim of belongingness to the country of her root. Throughout the novel, Anil fights with an urge to be associated with the island which she cannot fully belong to; her association with the island is sometimes decided by herself and at other times by the native Sri Lankans. She articulates her sense of belongingness when she says to Sarath, "This isn't just "another job"! I decided to come back. I wanted to come back." (196). She positions herself with the island when she tries to make her case to the government on her discovery of the "Sailor". She says, "I think you murdered hundreds of us." (269) But immediately after the dialogue with the government officials when Anil senses danger, she concludes, 'she wouldn't be staying here much longer, there was no wish in her to be here anymore' (280). The unsolved question is- 'does Anil lack or is she forced to feel the lack of the sense of belongingness to Sri Lanka?'

Anil's attempt to establish her Sri Lankan identity explains Ondaatje's need to establish a niche for himself in Sri Lanka, which appears time and again with obsessive insistence in his work.

Ondaatje depicts Anil as someone who constantly rebels against categorization and restricting herself to one form of identity. As a forensic anthropologist, she is constantly on the move. The first move in this process is leaving Sri Lanka for England for her studies. It is stated that she has adopted the masculine name 'Anil' from her brother; that she was a well-known swimmer when she was young and resists being called/ identified by that label when she is back in the island. Ondaatje states:

"She had been given two entirely inappropriate names and very early began to desire 'Anil' which was her brother's unused second name. She had tried to buy it from him when she was twelve years old, offering to support him in all family arguments.... she wanted the name more than anything else....she stopped responding when called by either of her given names....finally the siblings worked out a trade between them After that she allowed no other first names on her passports or school reports or application forms. Later when she recalled her childhood, it was the hunger of not having that name and the joy of getting it that she remembered most. Everything about the name pleased her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its feminine air, even though it was considered a male name. Twenty years later she felt the same about it. She'd hunted down the desired name like a specific lover she had seen and wanted, tempted by nothing else along the way". (63-64).

Ondaatje has shown that Anil adopted the masculine name to rebel against categorization and blur the gender lines. By blurring the lines between masculinity and femininity, Anil seems to take on a syncretic gender construction that blurs the traditional ideas of gender. But Anil's dislike of her identity as the swimmer leads to an interrogation of her very sense of belongingness. The wish to go back to the west may indicate her relocation in the West.

From the elucidation of the two selected works of Ondaatje, certain analogical points of identity of Ondaatje and his diasporic self Anil have been noticed. The oscillating senses of belonging expressed by Ondaatje in the interview (Mc Crum), his settlement in Canada squared with his re-rooting in Sri Lanka as presented in *The Running in the Family* as well as the involvement of Anil in investigating 'extrajudicial execution' of her native country but her final decision to leave Sri Lanka- all these endorse the Trishanku position of Ondaatje the creator and hybridity and 'in-betweenness' of the creations of Ondaatje. Of course, whereas the Trishanku of the myth was denied entry into the new land (heaven), Anil is settled in the west and it is the native land which denies too much involvement of the diaspora Anil ["Doors that should be open are closed (40)]. But with the dual and oscillating sense of belonging to both home and host nations/cultures and being products of the east and the west, Ondaatje as well as his fictional self achieve hybridity and trans-nationality with their relocation in Trishanku's heaven.

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