

“Memory, Identity and Empire in Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family”

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Empire seems largely missing from Michael Ondaatje's 1982 autobiographical work, Running in the Family. Critics have complained the book is too ahistorical, too sentimentally focused on the private and the familial, that it doesn't situate the story of the author's family within the wider framework of Sri Lanka's colonial and postcolonial history. Arun Mukherjee, for example, calls attention to “Ondaatje’s unwillingness or inability to place his family in a network of social relationships,” and insists that the book is written in a “sentimental tone” and lacks “perspective” (quoted in Barbour, p.229).

Although Running in the Family is a beautiful and moving book, I think this assessment is largely accurate. The book is certainly preoccupied with memory and the construction of identity -- as Ondaatje seeks out stories, gives them multiple voices, and struggles to glimpse how they are linked to his own identity. However, this struggle almost always gets played out within the limited context of family. Memories in the book are almost always personal, and identity for Ondaatje seems largely a function of coming to terms with family experiences in general, and in particular his own connection with his father. Although one could quibble with Mukherjee’s sweeping assertion that the book ignores social relationships per se, the discourse of memory in the book doesn't seem to include the memory of colonization, and the exploration of personal identity

largely ignores the long historical role British colonization played in the formation of colonial and post-colonial identities in Sri Lanka.

In what follows, I want to explore some of the reasons why the book is open to the kind of criticism we get from Mukherjee and others. I also want to argue, however, that the book does engage colonialism in some important, if fleeting ways, and that these moments need to be incorporated in any general assessment of the book . Finally, I want to argue that Running in the Family is most usefully read within the wider context of Ondaatje's work as a fiction writer, where we can see him progressively coming to terms with the history and effects of colonialism.

It seems to me Running in the Family largely ignores questions of empire and focuses its attention in a rather sentimental (though very moving) way on the personal and the familial because as an autobiographical text it is dominated by the generic codes of western autobiography: the search for identity in one's familial, personal past in a narrative shaped by reminiscence and the allusion to key western writers and texts. For this reason, the self that emerges in its pages is a familiar one to the western reader: the immigrant returns home, intrigued about his family's past and the sources of his own identity buried in it, he scouts out locations and characters that feed his thirst for knowledge, develops a conventional philosophical meditation on the phenomenon of memory, and eventually comes to know his family and himself a little bit better than before he started. References to the injustices and ravages of colonialism, or to the role empire played in the construction of his family's identity are missing because, for all intents and purposes, Ondaatje's is a western autobiography, not a postcolonial one.

Because it follows the forms and conventions of western autobiography it lacks an engagement with, let alone a critique of, empire. The subject of the autobiography seems largely a construction of the west, and so the text is written as western text.

We can observe this, as I suggested earlier, in the literary references that appear throughout the book. For example, late in the book Ondaatje writes that

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)

Ondaatje's observation here is without irony. His Sri Lankan family has lived through a *Jacobean tragedy* (both words are significant) and to write its history requires the cool and dispassionate distance we associate with western forms of analysis. While Ondaatje notes in passing early on in his autobiography that the Ondaatje's have a "weakness for pretending to be 'English,'" he misses the extent to which his own text mimics English autobiography. Sprinkled with references to Shakespeare's King Lear (188), to Lawrence (203) and Beethoven (203), it tends to ground his own and his family's experiences within the context of western literary and cultural references. The only time that "empire" enters the text is when Ondaatje uses it as a metaphor for his family:

[His sister] Gillian remembered some of the places where [his father] hid bottles. *Here* she said, *and here*. Her family and my family walked around the house, through the depressed garden of guava trees, plantains, old forgotten flowerbeds. Whatever 'empire' my grandfather had fought for had to all purposes disappeared. (60)

If Running in the Family largely follows the conventions of western autobiography and therefore reproduces the outlines of a western approach to subjectivity, this is not to say

that it lacks altogether a critical meditation on colonialism and empire. The problem, rather, is that this meditation comes in disparate bits and pieces. They never become integrated in a way that leads Ondaatje to anything like a postcolonial analysis of identity. He acknowledges, for example, the hybrid, creolized nature of Sri Lankan identity in passages like the following:

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. My father always claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, though that was probably more valid about three centuries earlier.
(41)

However, such passages never figure in his own self-reflection, never become integral to his exploration of social, cultural, and political constituents of his identity that transcend the personal. He is much more interested in dissecting his parent's marriage and his father's alcoholism than he is in exploring his mixed identity or the role Anglophilia and colonialism might have played in the family (c.f. Chako in Roy's The God of Small Things).

Ondaatje's references to place and location tend to be personal as well. Specific houses, buildings, and other structures important to his family history figure prominently in the book, but Ondaatje rarely takes the time to explore Sri Lanka's location as a colonial island and its connection to other locations of British colonialism. One exception is the short chapter entitled "Tabula Asiae" (pp. 63-4). Here Ondaatje recalls the "false maps" of Ceylon his brother has on the walls of his Toronto apartment. They are, he explains

The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations . . . growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy. . . The maps reveal rumours of topography, routes for invasion and trade, and the dark mad mind of travellers' tales appears throughout Arab and Chinese medieval records. The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. . . And so its name changed, as well as its shape . . . the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language. (63-4)

The island, he continues, finally “became a mirror,” pretending to “reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities” (64). Although Ondaatje briefly links his own ancestry to this history, like his references to the hybridity of Sri Lankan identity or to “empire,” this history doesn’t become integral to the historical construction of identity he traces in the book.

Ondaatje’s most sustained engagement with colonialism in Running in the Family comes in the chapter he calls “Karapothas” (literally a kind of beetle, but, more significantly, his aunt’s term for foreigners – “people who stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the ‘inquisitive natives’ and left” [80]). Where in other sections of the book Ondaatje’s literary references unselfconsciously reinforce his own identification with the literary culture of the west, he begins this section of his autobiography with a representative set of derogatory quotes about Ceylon/Sri Lanka from Edward Lear, D.H. Lawrence, and Leonard Woolf. For Lear, the Ceylonese are “odiously inquisitive and bother-idiotic,” “savages” who grin and chatter with one another. For Lawrence, Ceylon is “the negation of what we ourselves stand for and are,” an “experience – but heavens, not a permanent one.” While to Lear, at least, the countryside is “picturesque,” Woolf insists that “all jungles are evil.” (all quotes on p.78). This is one of the few moments in the book when Ondaatje moves from personal reminiscence and the exploration of his family roots to a meditation on the colonialist mentality. However, Ondaatje doesn’t set out here to simply condemn the colonialist mentality represented by the foreigners he

quotes. He is partly interested in exploring his *identification* with this mentality. The chapter begins, “I sit in a house on Buller’s Road. I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (79). Doubly displaced (his ancestry was Dutch and he left Sri Lanka for Canada), Ondaatje relates both to the experience of colonialist violence and the point of view of western-educated cultural outsiders like Lear, Lawrence and Woolf. Where in other sections of the book Ondaatje’s status as a cultural outsider dominates his point of view and determines the structural character of his autobiography, here Ondaatje is clear – if brief -- about the ravages of colonialism in Sri Lanka:

The island was a paradise to be sacked. Every conceivable thing was collected and shipped back to Europe: cardamoms, pepper, silk, ginger, sandalwood, mustard oil, palmyrah root, tamarind, wild indigo, deers’ horns, elephant tusks, hog lard, calamander, coral, seven kinds of cinnamon, pearl and cochineal. (81)

The roughly indigenous point of view Ondaatje stakes out here is reinforced at the end of this brief chapter when he recounts coming across the poetry of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, who, Ondaatje recalls, was just two years ahead of him at St. Thomas’s College in Uva Province. They had, it turned out, studied together “in the same classrooms and with the same teachers” (85). Wikkramasinha clearly surfaces here as the local, Ceylonese writer Ondaatje might have become if he’d stayed on the island. If Lear, Lawrence and Woolf represent the part of himself who has become a cultural outsider in his own country, Wikkramasinha’s work is invoked at the end of the chapter as a kind of rebuke to the outsider and what he has done to his country. Here is the quote from his poetry which ends the chapter:

Don’t talk to me about Matisse . . .
the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio
where the nude woman reclines forever
on a sheet of blood
Talk to me instead of the culture generally –

how the murderers were sustained
by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote
villages the painters came, and our white-washed
mud-huts were splattered with gunfire. (85-6)

I've been arguing that Running in the Family is dominated by the conventions of western autobiography, and that these conventions most often figure the writer as a cultural outsider in Sri Lanka, an autobiographical figure whose identity seems fundamentally shaped by the west. Outside a few moments like the ones I've just discussed, Ondaatje's text isn't much concerned with the history of colonialism and empire in Sri Lanka, especially as it contributed to the construction of his own identity. As an autobiography, it remains pretty firmly focused on family reminiscence and the self's struggle to come to terms with a personal past whose meaning always lies just beyond understanding. There is no dramatic moment of recognition in the book, one in which Ondaatje comes face-to-face with the paradoxes and contradictions of colonialism as they have structured his identity, his commitments, and his work as a writer. I don't mean to be implying that Ondaatje ought to admit to making some kind of mistake in coming to the west, or that in his text he ought to plead guilty to allowing himself to be co-opted by the culture and politics of the west. That would be presumptuous and wrong. Rather, I'm simply suggesting what what's missing in the book is a struggle with these contradictions, moments in which Ondaatje turns away from the personal and the familial to confront the paradoxes of his own identity, structured as it is by the west and its cultural values but rooted as it also is in a country conquered and systematically exploited by them.

It isn't until The English Patient (1993) that we get such a confrontation, of course. Reading Running in the Family I was haunted by Kip, the sapper from Sri Lanka who

spends most of the novel dutifully working for the British against the wishes of his brother, who rails against the injustices of the Raj and what he sees as the hypocrisy of South Asians working in support of the English. Kip awakens to this hypocrisy very late in the book (and not at all in the movie version, which elides this story-line altogether) when he hears a radio report about the bombing of Hiroshima. For Kip, the bombing represents a huge betrayal, an attack on “the brown races of the world” (286) to which he belongs. Confronting Almasy, who he thinks is English, Kip explodes:

I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from *your* country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished, if I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out. Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and printing presses? . . . My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. . . . What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For *this* to happen? (283-5).

Kip is a literary character, of course, playing his part in a densely complicated work of fiction. He isn't Ondaatje, and this is far from autobiography. Still, it seems to me that Kip's monologue is a measure of how Ondaatje's perspective on his own postcolonial condition has changed over the 10 years between the publication of Running in the Family and his writing of The English Patient. If we're genuinely interested in the evolution of Ondaatje's thinking about his own postcolonial condition, then Kip's critique gives us an important vantage point from which to think about the limitations of Ondaatje's explorations of identity in Running in the Family. Kip gives voice to an element of Ondaatje's own subjectivity that, for whatever reason, remains largely unexplored in his memoir. Perhaps Ondaatje's thinking about his own post-colonial condition has evolved during this 10-year period. Perhaps, with the times, it has become

more pressing. Or it may be that, as a fictional character, Kip allows Ondaatje to voice perspectives he couldn't articulate in his autobiography. Whatever the reason, Ondaatje is able, through Kip, to extend into much more volatile – and in the end, much more productive – territory, his long exploration of the past, the complicated threads of family experience, cultural syncretism, and national ideologies that construct all our subjectivities.

Running in the Family, then, gives us only a partial glimpse, limited glimpse of Ondaatje's life-long engagement with the relationship between post-colonialism, identity and empire. Reading his autobiography within the larger context of his output as a fiction writer, we can more clearly observe his evolution as a writer and his vexed relationship to post-colonialism, and the myriad identities it produces.