

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

12<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed  
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. 12, Issue - 5 (October 2021)

Editor-In-Chief : Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor : Dr. Madhuri Bite



www.the-criterion.com



AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Interrogating History in Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*

**Kumkum Ray**

Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
Banaras Hindu University,  
Varanasi -221005  
&

Assistant Professor,  
Ganga Singh College,  
Chhapra, Bihar-841301

**Article History:** Submitted-08/10/2021, Revised-22/10/2021, Accepted-28/10/2021, Published-31/10/2021.

### **Abstract:**

The prime focus of the paper is the celebration of non-linear history and marginalization of the migrated people in Canada from different places. While living in a post-colonial society, the author's concern is not new here. In most of his novels, he interrogates history and explore the other side of history of civilization which is very different from the official history or the main-stream history. The author has taken an historical perspective as the background of this novel when the Toronto city was taking its shape and most of its important architectures were built. All these major architectures were built by the people who were migrated from different places and in spite of their contribution they remain excluded from the society they are working hard to build up. The official history of Toronto city does not bother to attribute any identity to these people. They remain the marginalized, subaltern class who do not have any voice to speak for their own self and living in a "third space" in Bhabha's term. To represent the history of these marginalized people Ondaatje has taken the help of historiographic metafiction. This paper will focus mainly on the characters in the novel "*In The Skin Of A Lion*" who suffers from the search for identity in a "liminal space" and marginalization during the early 1900s postcolonial society of Canada.

**Keywords:** Historiographic Metafiction, Liminal Space, Nonlinear History, Marginal Identity.

Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lanka born Canadian author is a celebrated craftsman of marginal voices. The present paper is an attempt to discern Ondaatje's remarkable standpoint in excavating the unpopular history of marginal people within the framework of his novel *In*

*the Skin of a Lion*. Almost all his novels encapsulate the counter history from margins from various time frames. Official history forms a linear disposition of facts without accepting the alternative voices and the voices that are suppressed and silenced. Ondaatje in his fictional world created an alternative space and placed the vantage points in the margin. His fictional world is a universe that centers around the periphery and brings forth the unrecognized voices. *In the Skin of a Lion*, published in 1987, is one such novel, where Ondaatje explored the immigrant contribution in the nation building of Toronto city.

The novel is set in Toronto city during early twentieth century after the post World War I scenario. Due to the disruptions of WWI across the world, Canada emerged as a new land of hope and prosperity. People from various countries migrated to Canada, including people from Europe and non-white Asians along with the Americans, in search of better living condition and livelihood. The migrated population formed the major labor force in the process of urbanization, during the post World War I great economic depression, that damaged the production-based economy and to sustain the economy major focus was shifted towards the infrastructural development. The authority needed a large number of unskilled and cheap laborers to execute these infrastructural designs. As N. G. Roxana has rightly said "Canada as a nation is built on immigrant labor" (N.G, 474). The main protagonist of the novel, a Canadian citizen from British descent, Patrick Lewis, came to Toronto due to "native off-farm migration" (Porter) from the country side of Ontario. Patrick the landless proletariat, joined the immigrant community after migrating to Toronto. Ondaatje explored the marginal inhabitation of these migrant workers living in the ghettos devoid of any recognition from the city's civic authority through Patrick's experience. The novel begins with a prelude from John Berger "Never again will a single story be told as though it be the only one". To set the tone of the novel that will sing the bravery of the unsung hero, the nameless mass that built the major artifices of the city.

The novel opens up with the description of the toil and risk involved in the job of a logger – how the loggers work under the unfavorable weather amid the snowfall living in the 'shanty camps'. Before the day breaks the men were working through the worse storms in the weather far below zero and they finished at six. These loggers are the main suppliers to meet the need of the city's wood for the lavish lifestyle. The whole wintry season, these people gather wooden logs by making pyramid like shape at the center of the frozen lake with bare minimum amenities. The unpredictable impending danger and death is part of common knowledge "A twenty-foot long log suddenly leaping out of the water and side-sweeping a man, breaking his chest." (Ondaatje17). If these people manage to survive the accidents, long

working hours in an adverse weather made them seriously ill: “the sweat moves between their hard bodies and cold clothes. Some die of pneumonia or from the sulfur in their lungs from the mills they work during other seasons.” (Ondaatje8). In spite of their immense contribution these people failed to make their place in the demographical map of the nation. By describing the childhood experiences of Patrick, Ondaatje explored the various layers of unmarked places and the condition of these downtrodden people of that space. Patrick’s father was a dynamiter in the feldspar mines, a man who “has withdrawn from the world uninterested in the habit of civilization outside his own focus.” (Ondaatje15). Patrick’s migration to the city from the country side reflects the core truth of the capitalists’ industrialization where the landless farmers became homeless migratory laborers in the city. They worked in the heart of the city in various urbanization projects and with the day’s end they disappeared to the slum areas of the outskirts city.

History is, as conventionally acknowledged is a factual recognition of human civilization. History thus, acts as a chronological depiction of human race. Every aspect of knowledge constantly refers to its past information or realization, the history. Therefore, the world of fictions stands quite in the binary opposition to the historical world. Historical fiction, thus, bridges the gap between fiction and history by creating a counter narrative. In Ondaatje’s fictional world, he has blurred the boundary of facts and fiction in a metafictional self-reflective manner. In the postmodern world, the collapse of grand-narrative and the rise of meta-narrative has bed the soil of such masterpieces of literature where history is not been seen as a monolithic structure of empirical truth rather being questioned. Ondaatje in his novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, has criticized the officially recorded history of the city of Toronto for being on the side of the powerful and took the grand endeavor to narrate a perceivable counter history.

Ondaatje has deconstructed history by using Historiographic Metafiction. As Linda Hutcheon has defined Historiographic Metafiction as the category of fictions that establish “... themselves within historical discourse, while refusing to surrender their autonomy as fiction.” (Hutcheon124). In several interviews Ondaatje has expressed his keen interest in history, therefore being a writer of post-colonial modern era with shifted paradigm towards the margin, Ondaatje stood for ‘histories’ instead a single consolidated and unified form of history and much like many other contemporary writers, Ondaatje also questioned the linearity of history. Ondaatje in most of his novels has set the plot in a historical background with conflicting facts, exploring the multiple layers of historical events and incidents overlapping with truths and myths, thereby establishing the fluidity and plurality of truth.

Gradually with Patrick, the focus shifted towards the city of Toronto. The second chapter of the novel 'The Bridge' starts with authoritarian perspective of Commissioner Harris and his dreams and fantasies regarding the construction of the city. This dream involved lots of expensive machineries and the meagre life of the migrant laborers: "The giant centrifugal pump, more valuable than life ..." (Ondaatje113). Ondaatje has given a vivid description of the life and labors of these migrants with a predominant impersonal tone of subjectivity. A usual day breaks in a construction site as early as 5 AM with the arrival of a tar carrying truck through the half-built viaduct where work is on progress. The day's work starts as early as when the thin layer of frost is still around in the wind and gradually proceeds towards the hot humid day. The daily repetitive inhumane labor has reduced the laborers to mere instruments devoid of any feelings, emotions, and personal desires. As Ondaatje points out: "A man is an extension of hammer, drill, flame." (Ondaatje 28). Even death or fatal accidents can be easily compensated by money since the human body is equated with a piece of meat that can be sold and bought. The smell of the tar absorbed in the body through the skin, leaves a permanent black mark on them.

The working conditions of the construction sites are appalling and disturbing. The construction works involved digging tunnel forty feet under the largest lake in North America. The air around is murky and humid. Every blow against the stone wall, jerked the wrist and palm to the shoulder every time they hammer the walls. The ground where they had to stand and work for long hours is muddy and slippery: "All morning they slip in the wet clay unable to stand properly, pissing where they work, eating where someone else left shit." (Ondaatje110). Lack of fresh air and light made the tunnel a dungeon of hell. This terrible description of the working condition is a shameful blot on the human civilization. Eating, peeing and defecating the same place is nauseatingly unhygienic and detestful for any living creature. The dark and dusty environment of this human tunnel made the workers zombies who joined their work even before the day's light has broken out and get into the dungeon and comes out of the same in the dark of late evening like shadows. Coming back to their ghettos clad in moist dust. After reaching his Wyatte Avenue room, Patrick had to remove the hard clay from his boots and clothes with the help of his knife and eat his dinner and sleep just to wake up in the morning and follow the same tedious and mundane life schedule. The presence of the mules and the pit horses in the tunnel made the working conditions even more unbearable. This forceful coexistence with these creatures in such inhumane place has reduced the workers to some sub-human categories devoid of any tender humanly feelings. Even there is no humanly

communication among the laborers during this long working hours which further ripped them off from the basic human nature and diminished them to mere lifeless instruments. Any sort of recreation and refreshment wasn't there which did put a question mark on their living-selves. They have very little control over their life apart from going to work and earn little wage for survival. In order to maximize profit, the industrial capitalist authority exploited them to the level they were hardly left with any energy to raise their voice and ask for equal rights but to remain a profit-making machinery to the authority. Many workers died during the construction of the bridge and other artifices because of the high risk involved in the work and lack of life-saving support. As Turner observed that even though there are officially recorded accounts of "exactly how many buckets of sand were used" to build the Bloor Street viaduct or the water reservoir but "the people who actually built the god-dammed bridge were unspoken off" (Turner, 21). In other production units, like factories, mills and mines of the city, scenario of exploitation does not change rather become more intense. Ondaatje probed into details and has given a vivid description of the predicament faced by the laborers.

At Wickett and Craig's tannery, the nature of the work is more gruesome. Ondaatje has reflected that the workers of these tanneries has inhaled the most poisonous gas that any human being could possibly have gone through and as an unavoidable destiny, most of the workers suffered from Tuberculosis, arthritis, rheumatism and were subjected to early deaths: "They have consumed the most evil smell in the history ... a year from now they would have burp out the flavor." (Ondaatje 137). Working almost naked in the pool of dye, for long hours have changed their skin colors permanently. The unnatural skin color and the obnoxious smell from their body made them undesirable which further doomed them as a companionless lonely creature, "What remains in the dyer's skin was the odor that no woman in bed would ever lean towards." (Ondaatje 138). After such physically taxing work, the tannery workers were allowed to have only 10 seconds of water to bath and the dyers, were comparatively privileged to have hot water baths but the irony mentioned by the author to pin point that even the privilege is not adequate to respect their human entity since there is no visible change from the color. The life of these workers are actually sacrificed in the alter of civilization and to serve the fancy of the bourgeois class.

In the name acculturation, English was imposed on the non-Anglophonic people like the Greeks, Macedonians, Finn's, Lithuanians, Polish etc. Denying and thus rejecting their individual names and ethnic identities, the labour agent in Toronto imposed new English names on them with which they could never identify themselves and they remembered these foreign

syllables like numbers. This creates an ethno-cultural hegemony which obscures their linguistic differences which further endangered their individual identity. In spite of their contribution in the nation building, these migrants remained foreigners and various legal restrictions were imposed on them. Any form of social gatherings was restricted to the immigrant workers, therefore all their meetings even including the puppet show was "illegal gathering" (Ondaatje 120). Two noteworthy information given in the puppet show episode that since the immigrants are not allowed to gather together in a public space, the event took place in a half-built water work, a place that is hardly suitable for any kind of specialisation, and they had to cover their activities with the noise of the machines. Thus, the workers were reduced to mere instruments in the giant production units of the city, withered off any humanly attributes. Even if they managed to escape the anonymity like the cyclist who escape all the guards and cycle through the newly built bridge to claim the bridge as a representative of the people who built it, remain an unnamed trespasser.

Alice Gull presents the predicament of the immigrant labors and their insult and assault by the authority through her puppet shows that is commonly experienced by the workers. Being a stage artist, Alice gives the voiceless marginalized entities a representation and in her puppet show, she skillfully presented the anxiety and helplessness of these suppressed voices of the workers. From Alice, Patrick came to know about Cato, the logger. Cato's letters to Alice give a graphic description of the working conditions at the loggers' camp where the loggers are being exploited not only physically but also monetarily. Living in the camps that are like prison cells and the only source of heat in the camps in the forests are the drum stove that too burnt off at midnight and the loggers "wake with hairs frozen to damp icicles on the wall." (Ondaatje 160).

Ondaatje has documented all the exploitation of the workers by the factory owners. Long working hours amid the extreme conditions, low wages and amenities to survive pushing them into extreme poverty. Gradually, some of the labor unions were formed to protect themselves from the capitalists' profit-making system and to fight for the cause of the laborers. Cato was one such labour union leader who tried to unite the labourers for the common cause and to secure better wages and working conditions. Such labour unions were rising in every mills, mines and factories and were considered as an obstruction to capitalist system. But these rebels were brutally dominated by the capitalist bourgeois class by murdering most of the union leaders like Cato. This conflict between the 'haves and have-nots' created one of the major conflicts in the social fabric during the late twentieth century. But since "official histories and

news stories were always as soft rhetorics” (Ondaatje 151), these brutal murders remained unrecognized and unreported. The union leaders Cato were being chased and shot to death and they further tried to burn their bodies to wipe out all the evidences. Thus, the people who fought for equality and humanity were denied of life and liberty but there was no fleeting mention of any such incident in the recorded history of that time. In an interview to Catherine Bush in 1990, Ondaatje said, “I think reclaiming untold stories is an essential role for the writer. Especially in this country, where one can no longer trust the media. The newspapers have such power over the story and portrait of Canada. You can see newspapers moving in a certain politically right-wing direction, and this – before you know it – becomes the official voice of the country.” (Bush 247). Influenced by Alice when Patrick to Riverdale library to check for references the regarding the building of the Bloor Street viaduct. He gathers all available sources of information like the newspaper and journals. "The articles and illustrations he found in the Riverdale library depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of the concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge" (Ondaatje151). Ondaatje cited the famous sociologists and photographer Lewis Hine who revealed the naked truth of child labours in the United States through his photographs. By criticising one-sided representation of the official histories Ondaatje said, “Hein’s photography betrays official history and put together another family” (Ondaatje162). Ondaatje further strikingly point out for not including the stark reality of human civilization and representing only biased version of any incident in the past since official history “... is the story of the victors that usually gets told.” (Hutcheon72).

The migrants who built and appropriated the city space were denied any identity or right as a citizen. In 1938, before the WWII, the government of Canada started to deport these immigrants and disowned them “over 10,000 foreign workers had been deported out of the country” (Ondaatje219). Toronto City Police chief Dennis Draper established a new branch of city police which was modeled on ‘Red Squad’ of the United States to control the infiltration and rising voice of the trade unions in the unorganized labour sector by the communist union leaders like Cato. Thus, the labourers who were already living in the margins were further pushed to the liminal space.

Thus, Ondaatje busted the myth of “a fairy tale of Upper America” and reflected the counter narrative of the time. Ondaatje in his novels give recognition to the forgotten histories by acknowledging the individual and local histories by and takes an effort to counter balance the bias history that records the saga of the powerful. On the contrary he establishes a balance

between the center and the periphery and recreated a proletariat history in an anecdotal tone. Thus Ondaatje advocates a more inclusive history by not being restricted within the safe boundaries of popularized linear form of history.

### Works Cited:

Bush, Catherine. "Michael Ondaatje: An Interview. Essays on Canadian Writing." vol 53, 1994, pp. 238-250.

Gamlin, Gordon. "Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The Oral Narrative*." Canadian Literature. 1992 , pp. 168-77. [www.canlit.ca/archives.php?issuenumber=131](http://www.canlit.ca/archives.php?issuenumber=131).

Hutcheon, Linda. *Historiographic Metafiction: The Pastime of Past Time. A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* , Routledge, 1998a, pp. 105-123.

*Intertextuality, Parody, and The Discourses of History. A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Routledge, 1998a, pp. 124-140.

Ng, Roxana. *The Social Construction of 'Immigrant Women' in Canada. The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism*. Edited by. Roberta Hamilton and Michèle Barrett, Verso, 1986. p.p. 269-86.

Ondaatje, Michael. *In the Skin of a Lion: A Novel*. Vintage, 1987.

Porter, John. *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada*, University of Toronto Press, 1965.

Turner, Barbara. "In the Skin of Michael Ondaatje: Giving Voice to a Social Conscience." Quill and Quire, May 1987, p.p. 20-22.