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## **Transnational Migration in the Selected Fiction of Michael Ondaatje**

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### **Abstract:**

Transnationalism may roughly be defined as the process by which people establish and maintain socio-cultural connections across geopolitical borders. Such interconnections across the borders form the very experience of international migration, since migrants often perform transnational interactions between their states of origin and their states of settlement. Differentiating between the diasporic and transnational approaches to migration, this paper analyzes the transformation brought about in the contemporary perspective of migration research as a result of transnationalism. Further, there is a discussion of such interactions as found in the three select prose works of the Srilankan-Canadian migrant author Michael Ondaatje.

**Keywords: Transnationalism, migration, diasporic, Michael Ondaatje**

### **Introduction**

The history of human civilization is closely intertwined with that of human migration—first in Africa, then across Asia and Europe and finally to the Americas. More than any other social phenomenon, migration has induced global events of far-reaching consequences throughout the history. As a result, it has become an interdisciplinary research interest, sprawling across the academics of history, geography, economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, literature, cultural studies and so on. However, the advent of transnationalism in the late 1980s brought about a transformation in the concept of migration. The present paper offers to study this new phase of migration along with its implications in the political, economic and socio-cultural domains of human existence. Further, I would like to analyze how these transnational migrant practices feature in the three select novels of the Sri Lankan-Canadian migrant author Michael Ondaatje.

### **Migration: Old Phase**

During the pre-agricultural nomadic days, migration was a part of human life as much as that of many birds and animals. Human tribes wandered great distances in search of water, food and better living conditions; to escape natural calamities, attacks of wild

animals and fellow tribesmen. After the discovery of agriculture and the commencement of settled life, human mass migrations became rarer. Such episodes, whenever occurred, were viewed with anxiety both by the participants and the observers. In *International Migration: A Very Short Introduction*, Khalid Koser points out that most of the old and new world colonization and expansion depended upon migration, both voluntary and involuntary, like the Greek colonization, the Roman expansion, the Viking attacks, the Crusades, the European colonization in Asia and Africa, the voluntary settlements in America, the trans-Atlantic African slave trade and the post Second World War migrations to the United States and Canada (1-3). To this one may add the forcible and traumatic migrations such as the dispersions of the Jews, the Armenians, the Irish and the recent Palestinians, commonly designated as the “diaspora”.

Etymology informs us that the term “diaspora” originated from the Greek word *diaspeirein* meaning “to scatter about” or “to disperse” as in the case of seeds that are sown in cultivation. It is a known fact that all types of migration involves a certain degree of deculturation and acculturation; in other words, “uprooting” oneself from the familiar, known world and “transplanting” oneself into the foreign soil. Robin Cohen, the diaspora theorist, observes that the recurrence of agricultural and vegetative images in migration discourses is not accidental. It endorses man’s attachment to the tilled land that makes migration unbearable for him since the agricultural stage of his social evolution.

Diaspora, the much politicized version of migration, has been a popular term in both academic circles and public discourses. Originally referring to the dispersal of Jews outside Israel (Deuteronomy 28:25), it soon extended to mean all kinds of religious expulsions of a people out of their homeland. The Jewish experience of migration, characterized by dispossession and homelessness, remained indelible in the public memory so much that these traits were applied to the other experiences of migrations as well. Thus, “diaspora” soon became a buzz word and a synonym of migration. It resulted in the homogenization of many diverse experiences of migration into a monolithic whole under the hegemony of diaspora. Apart from the reification and essentialization of the notion of migration, the hegemony of diaspora had other implications also.

Following the Jewish experience, the migrants came to be classified as a group of ethnic minorities victimized by a traumatic event and exiled from their homeland to which they yearn to return although unable to do so. Cohen himself defines diasporic migration as the “dispersal from an original centre often accompanied by the memory of a single traumatic event that provides the folk memory of the great historic injustice that binds the group together” (6). It is also understood that the members of such a group remain as unassimilated social aliens in their states of residence and are identified by their dispossession and inability to reclaim their state of origin, which they call their original homeland. Thus the traditional notions of migration employed a diasporic lens and emphasized upon a forced dispersal, a nostalgic desire to return to the homeland (real or imagined) and a lack of integration into the country of settlement.

**Migration: New Phase**

In 2005, the United Nations estimated the number of international migrants worldwide to be about 200 million. Historical events such as the Second World War, the fall of the British Empire and the subsequent migration from the erstwhile colonies to the west had considerably influenced the migratory patterns in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was further accelerated by the emergence of totalitarian regimes and technological advancements (Frank 1). In his “Step Across This Line” Salman Rushdie observes that mass migration and mass displacement form the distinguishing characteristics of the present generation (425). Similarly, Stephen Castles and Mark Miller point out that migration has become a “universal experience” that touches the majority of people across the world. As a result, the present age could rightly be called the “Age of Migration” (5).

If the orthodox and diasporic notions of migration were structured upon the triangular relationship among the ethnic migrant group, its connections with the state of origin and that of residence, the modern and contemporary notions emphasized upon the numerous exchanges and practices that mushroomed across the world irrespective of the constrictions of time and space. In other words, by the end of the last century, the planet witnessed a sudden intensification of trans-national and cross-border activities that were unhindered by physical distances and governmental regulations of various nation-states. Such networks are the products of the new technological advancements in transport and telecommunication, marked by their speed, efficiency and cheaper availability. As a result, new transnational communities sprang up (in the place of victim diasporas) that maintained simultaneous social, political, economic and cultural links with their home and host societies.

Transnationalism, as we know, is a much contested term in the globalized world of today, owing to its inflated overuse across the disciplines. It is “a multifaceted, multi-local process” (Guarnizo & Smith 6) that broadly denotes the “processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 6). Theorists like Portes argue that transnational practices are performed by non-institutional actors such as individual migrants and civil society actors “outside the realms of state regulation and control” (qtd. in Morales and Jorba 269). Although such connections and exchanges did exist in the past, they have been accelerated by globalization and the resultant developments in trade, transport and communication systems across the world.

It should be noted that transnationalism is discernible in non-state agents such as global corporations, media and communication networks, criminal and terrorist groups as well. For the US Department of Defense at least, “transnationalism means terrorists, insurgents, opposing factions in civil wars conducting operations outside their country of origin and members of criminal groups” (qtd in “Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism” 4). However, connectivity between source and destination being an inherent trait of migration, transnational practices are most evident in the migrant lifestyles and the individual migrants form the crucial and prominent agents of the transnationalist practices.

In other words, transnationalism is used here as a lens to explore the migrant connections. This transnationalist perspective has brought about transformations in the notion of migration. As a result, the triangular relationship among the migrant and his home and host societies (already discussed) changed into a multi-angular relationship. The emphasis of migration research shifted from a “forced dispersal” to voluntary, temporary and permanent migrations; from a “nostalgic desire to return to homeland” to intense cross-border linkages, circular exchanges and transnational mobility; and from “cultural distinctiveness” within the state of residence to “cultural innovation” (Faist 12-13).

### **The Selected Fiction of Michael Ondaatje**

Michael Ondaatje, the winner of the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 1992, is an internationally known poet and novelist born in Sri Lanka in 1943. In 1954 he migrated to Britain and in 1962 to Canada where he lives now as a naturalized citizen. His major prose works include *Coming Through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost (AG)*, *Running in the Family (RF)*, *The Cat's Table (CT)*, along with books on poetry such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Rat Jelly*, *Tin Roof*, *The Cinnamon Peeler* and *Handwriting*. He is also the recipient of the Toronto Book Award, the Trillium Book Award and the Best Paperback in English Award. Ondaatje was made an officer of the Order of Canada in 1988 and also received the Sri Lanka Ratna in 2005 from the Government of Sri Lanka for his outstanding service to the nation as a non-citizen.

For the purpose of my paper, I have selected three prose works of Michael Ondaatje, namely, *Running in the Family* (1982), *Anil's Ghost* (2000) and *The Cat's Table* (2011). All these works refer to Sri Lanka, his state of origin, not as a nostalgic site for a diasporic return but as a point of reference to the transnational identity of the migrant author. Taken together, these three books narrate the story of the author's migration, his search for a Sri Lanka that existed only in “scattered acts and memories” (*RF* 228) of an eleven year old and a forensic investigation of the Sri Lankan Civil War.

*Running in the Family* is a semi-autobiographic fictional narrative, a “concoction of a memoir, travelogue, poetry and intriguing fiction” (Jodha 66) in which the author searches for his roots, his family, his parentage, the social, cultural, political and economic affiliations of his family tree. As the author himself acknowledges, it is the product of his two journeys to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980, when he stayed for several months collecting stories, gossips, rumours, recollections of relatives, archival evidence, oral and recorded history, photographs, poems and newspapers to understand the attitudes, virtues, vices, strengths and weaknesses of his genealogy. In short, it is an attempt to understand a world (Sri Lanka) which he had known rather vaguely during his early childhood.

The story of his migration as an unaccompanied 11 year old in the ship *Oronsay* features in *The Cat's Table*, where both fact and fiction merge impalpably. As a child, the author was unaware of the excitement and possible dangers of his trans-continental

voyage of 21 days from Colombo to Tilbury, halting at Aden, Port Said and Gibraltar, in a ship having seven levels, holding more than six hundred people and crossing two oceans and the Suez Canal. It was only later that the scope of adventure in such a journey posed itself to the author so that he seasoned his real-life experience with a number of interesting incidents and personalities, thus shaping it into a coming-of-age story. The novel is a description of the physical journey of the ship from the perspective of the narrator, the eleven year old boy Michael, nicknamed as “Mynah” and his exploits in the company of two other boys roughly of his age, Ramadhin and Cassius, whom he befriends in the ship. Much of that which had eluded him in his tender age is grasped later in retrospective from the point of view of the adult Michael who grew up to be a writer.

In his *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje once again takes us back to Sri Lanka, this time to the post Civil war political world to which the International Centre for Human Rights of UN had sent a consultant forensic pathologist to investigate the “organized campaigns of murder on the island” (AG 16). The UN consultant is a young Sri Lankan-born transnational woman named Anil Tissera who had left the island fifteen years ago when she was eighteen, who returns now not as a “diasporic subject”, but as a “Westernized outsider who can no longer fluently speak her mother tongue” (Burrows 167). She was to work on a seven-week project in the company of Mr. Sarath Diyasena, the government-chosen archeologist from Colombo and submit her report. The truth they unravel and the repercussions of their investigation form the theme of the novel which reveals Sri Lanka as a grim reality unlike the exotic and half-humorous island world portrayed by *Running in the Family*.

In “Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism”, Steven Vertovec argues that migrant transnationalism is grounded on six concepts, namely, social morphology, a type of consciousness, a mode of cultural reproduction, an avenue of capital, a site of political engagement and a reconstruction of place or locality. These six concepts broadly fall into three categories—political, economic and socio-cultural—which form the framework of my paper. Vertovec’s concepts of transnationalism are applied to the three select works of Michael Ondaatje to identify the cross-border practices and exchanges established by the migrants in the political, economic and socio-cultural domains of the state of origin.

### **Political**

Transnational migration has radically altered the conventional conceptualization of nation-state built upon the inclusion and exclusion of certain social, linguistic and cultural groups. In fact, Held et al. define states and nations as “institutions and cross-class connectivities which share a sense of identity and collective political fate on the basis of real, imagined and constructed cultural, linguistic and historical commonalities” (48). The identity of a nation-state and its people are demarcated by the borders of that state, within which the state and its government machinery exercise their sovereignty and jurisdiction. It is this conventional model that is upset by the contemporary transnational migrant practices. Martin Heisler observes that identities have become fluid, partial, reversible and temporary in the modern Western democratic state owing to transnational

mobility (236). Vertovec argues that new identities emerge out of the confluence between transnational practices of the migrants and the government policies of border-control.

Michael Ondaatje's fiction abound with people of multiple identities and consciousness such as Anil Tissera, born in Sri Lanka, educated in England, living and working in America, traveling with a British passport and identifying herself as a westerner. The author himself has had a transnational existence until he settled in Canada. He describes the cross-border travels of his siblings and himself thus: "Gillian stayed in Ceylon with me, Christopher and Janet went to England. I went to England, Christopher went to Canada, Gillian came to England, Janet went to America, Gillian returned to Ceylon, Janet returned to England, I went to Canada" (*RF* 190-191). Similarly, the ship *Oronsay* itself is a transnational entity hosting passengers of multiple identities like Miss Lasqueti, Mr Mazappa, Mr Nevil, Mr Hastie, Sir Hector, the narrator and his friends, his cousin Emily who finally settled in the Gulf Island, Niemeyer the criminal and so on.

Besides the characters, the nation-state of Sri Lanka also is portrayed as a transnational space in Ondaatje's fiction. Quite early in *RF*, when Ondaatje reveals his plans for a return journey, he introduces us to the map of Sri Lanka and the possible routes to be taken. The same book discusses the "false maps" of Sri Lanka in his brother's Toronto home that reveal the island that welcomed multiple nationalities. Some of them stayed there and intermarried like the author's ancestor, a Tamil doctor who arrived in 1600 to cure the residing governor's daughter with a strange herb. On his success, he "was rewarded with land, a foreign wife and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje" (*RF* 60). Upon the death of his Dutch wife, he married a Sinhalese woman and thus started the Ondaatje family. The child narrator of *CT* also has a map of the world with him which he had traced from a book. However, this is a truly transnational map as he "had forgotten to put names on it" (39).

The political aspect of transnational migration can be perceived in *AG* where the very act of Anil's investigation by a non-governmental international agency becomes an attempt to transcend state-borders. Anil's sense of righteousness and confidence in proving her case stem from her pride of working for an international agency which relieves her from answering to the national government. Another instance comes from *RF* when the author sees a book of charcoal drawings done by an insurgent. To evade the censorship laws the book had to be published in Switzerland, which, according to a librarian is necessary "to keep the facts straight, the legends uncovered" (*RF* 85-86). Ondaatje seems to be ambivalent regarding the impact of transnational migrant practices in the political domain. There are references in *AG* to armchair rebels from abroad causing trouble, appropriation of truth by foreign press resulting in new vendettas and war sponsorship from the west.

At the same time, the government safeguards its boundaries by means of surveillance. In *AG*, despite giving permission for an international investigation, little interest is shown in the revelation of truth. The state that appears unconcerned about maintaining peace and order is interested in suppressing truth, embarrassing investigators

like Anil through physical checks and confiscating her papers and chemicals. Anil is forced to leave the island with none of the evidence she had laboriously collected and is able to save nothing except her own life. Yet, the author refuses to take sides with the government forces, the Tamils or the insurgents. He aesthetically expresses the suffering of the common man, the politically neutral millions who were killed, silenced and mutilated through a comparison of the violence in Sri Lanka to the transnational sites of historical violence in Pompeii, Laetoli, Hiroshima and Vesuvius (AG 55).

### **Economic**

The economic aspect of transnational migration becomes evident mostly through the remittances that migrants send to their home societies, for the maintenance of their families back home or for the development of their home towns through charities and hometown associations. Such remittances often help in improving the standards of living in the family and the society that sent the migrant abroad. Migrants also build transnational networks through which further migration becomes possible. The communities of origin benefit socially, economically, environmentally and technologically. Provision of foreign education is another aspect of economic transnationalism whereby families send their youngsters abroad, to study in the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford so that on completing their education they get better placements either abroad or back home.

The author has noted that his mother worked as housekeeper in hotels in Ceylon and England till her death in order to support her children through their school education (RF 190). Many of the ship's passengers in *CT* are economic transnationals like Mr. Nevil a retired ship dismantler returning to England after his service in the east, Mr. Fonseka in search of a teaching position in England, the narrator, his two friends and his cousin Emily to resume education in English schools. In *RF* the author mentions that his father Mervyn Ondaatje was sent to Cambridge University for his higher studies. However, not all transnational activities were beneficial to the state of origin as in the case of the guerrillas who "had international weaponry smuggled into the country by arms dealers" (AG 118) and the funds received from abroad to continue the civil war.

It should also be kept in mind that not all those who were sent abroad returned in flying colours. Though Anil won a scholarship to study in the west, Mervyn Ondaatje failed in the entrance exam and both Cassius and Mynah had to take an exam consisting of mathematical questions on pounds and shillings, general knowledge questions on the members of Oxford rowing team and the House of Lords (*CT* 44). Such sending abroad was often caused by poor standards of living back home. For instance, Sir Hector has to travel in ship seeking medical treatment for rabies and Niemeyer is taken for trial in England. *AG* abounds with descriptions of the deplorable situation in Sri Lankan hospitals where even disposable needles are re-used (126) and the archeological department that uses primitive equipment like shovels, strings and stones (151). It is also worth mentioning that the Sri Lankan government agreed to the international investigation in order to "placate (their) trading partners in the West" (16).

### Socio-cultural

In the socio-cultural domain, transnationalist migration is discernible in the fluidity of constructed styles, social institutions and practices in the form of cultural translation and hybridity in fashion, music, film and visual arts. Such practices also encourage the creation of social fields that connect people in more than one nation. To this, Vertovec adds the individual migrant's sense of self and collective belonging, the ordering of personal and group memories, patterns of production and consumption of media and communication, the individual's relations with his/her geographically dislocated homes and home societies.

In Ondaatje's fiction, cultural translation and fluidity of styles often recur. This is revealed in the Sri Lankans' love of horse-racing, gambling, cricket, western dances, music, romance and "Ajoutha", the card game taught by the Portuguese. Similarly, many westerners who arrived in the island like Mr. Hastie were enthusiastic about sarong and toddy while celebrities like D H Lawrence, Leonard Wolf and Pablo Neruda found the place "stinking", "evil" and "oppressive" respectively (*RF* 77-80). When Ondaatje visits the island as a transnational adult, he is fearful of snakes and sub-aquatic monitors; at the same time he relishes a lunch of crab curry, while his children grow belligerent at the New Year's festivities in Sri Lanka (*RF* 79).

The hybridity and fluidity of transnational socio-cultural existence can be best viewed in the Sri Lankan preference for "the merging of classical first names with Sinhalese last names" as in "Socrates Gunewardena" (*CT* 42); appropriation of an English song by the boys of St. Thomas (*AG* 69-70) and the cotton thread of 'protection' on Anil's left wrist looking paler under her rubber glove (*AG* 18-19). As consumers, the migrants patronize both native and foreign products. For example, Anil comforts herself with western literature and music at times of crisis, her toxicologist-colleagues listen to cricket commentaries and rock and roll music, indulge in bowling wherever they go, Mr. Fonseka loves to take Sri Lankan spices and hemp with him to England, the entertainers from the Jankla Troup go on a European tour exhibiting their street theatre and acrobatics (*CT* 48) and Miss Lasqueti's former employer Horace Johnson is an American gentleman in possession of an Italian villa filled with tapestries from all over the world (234-6).

For many of the characters, media and telecommunication remain significant. Miss Lasqueti discovers Michael through a radio speech given by the latter on the topic "Youth" where he mentioned his voyage by *Oronsay*. The letter she posts at Carmarthenshire is forwarded to Michael by his English publisher (231). Similarly, Anil saves herself from the claustrophobia of the island world by seeking contact with the outer world, in the form of telephone calls to her American friend Leaf and to her father's friend Dr. Perera. Finally, the very act of writing these books and involvement in the processes of remembering the personal and group memories that constitute them are in themselves transnational cultural practices performed by Ondaatje the author.

### Conclusion

Transnationalism, as we have seen, has provided the scenario of migration studies with a new perspective that is most relevant in the globalized world of today. It has

helped to rescue migration theory from the victimhood of forced dispersal and has encouraged it to celebrate the hybridity, fluidity, mobility and cultural innovation inherent in migrant lifestyles. The ties and links that the migrants build across the national borders fall into three major domains, namely, that of political, economic and socio-cultural. Such practices can be traced in the literature written by transnational migrant authors like the Sri Lankan-born Canadian author Michael Ondaatje.

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