

Migrancy and Urban Memory: Immigrant Identities in *In the Skin of a Lion*

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Abstract: In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Michael Ondaatje reinvents the past of Toronto in the early period of the twentieth century by reconstituting the lives of forgotten immigrants, with an alternate history to the official history of the city. Ondaatje has often been criticized by observers for the application of the technique of a fragmented narrative as a method of counter-memory, of historicized archival fact combined with lyrical imagination as a way of restoring the voice of the silenced working classes. The paper analyses the idea of migrancy and the idea of urban memory based on a close analysis of the gradual political awakening of Patrick Lewis, embodied craft on the Prince Edward Viaduct, and Radical pedagogy by Alice Gull, and marginal but connected figures of Clara Dickens, Hana and Caravaggio (as well as in *The English Patient*). According to scholars, Ondaatje turns the city into a palimpsest, in which locations like the R. C. Harris Water Treatment Plant become mnemonic points of departure of immigrant hardship and sense of belonging. The novel brings in historical minutia and oral history as a way of revealing the fact that, socially speaking, racialized workers do not belong, even though they constructed Canada in the literal sense. The repetition of the image of skin shedding is an indication of identity as performative and translational, which is formed in the context of displacement and work. It is through such covert histories that this paper believes *In the Skin of a Lion* reconfigures the concept of migrancy as othering experience, but as an underpinning of urban modernity, providing an ethically charged exemplification of literary memory.

Keywords- Migrancy; Urban Memory; Immigrant Labour; Counter-Memory; Toronto; Identity Formation; Postcolonial Fiction

INTRODUCTION

In the Skin of a Lion, published in 1987 by McClelland and Stewart, is an event in the annals of Canadian literature. The novel is authored by the Canadian-Sri Lankan writer, Michael Ondaatje and it recreates the early twentieth-century Toronto through a foreground of the immigrant workers who literally created the modern city but were not recorded as a part of it. (Fortier, 2020) Ondaatje seeks out bridge workers, tunnel diggers, anarchists, and migrant families as an alternative to telling the story of the city via the political leaders, industrial magnates, and the monuments and statues that impart some sense of identity to it. By doing

this he transforms the historical imagination that was known to monumental memory to labouring bodies. (Cosma, 2019)

The issue that leaps this paper is the disappearance of institutional historiography of immigrant labour. The Prince Edward Viaduct and the R. C. Harris Water Treatment Plant are iconic buildings in Toronto and architectural landmarks of progress and modernization. Nevertheless, Ondaatje himself in his course of archival research has found that the migrant workers, who lived riskily to build these landmarks, rarely feature in the civic celebrations. The novel interrupts this silence by reconstituting an array of fragments of archival evidence, oral testimony and imaginative reconstruction. It thus carries out what critic's term as a method of counter-memory; a literary practice that challenges dominant narratives by digging up lost histories. ("Crossing Border and Identity," 2016)

This intervention is consistent with the idea of historiographic metafiction suggested by Linda Hutcheon, according to which the postmodern novels install and subsequently blur the boundary between fiction and history. Ondaatje does not merely reproduce archival text, but he reveals how history is made. The novel uses real historical events i.e. the disappearance of the Ambrose Small, the murder of the labour organizers Rosvall and Voutilainen, and the political strife surrounding Police Chief Draper, but these events are mediated with the use of fragmented narration and multiplied points of view. Viewing the factual traces as part and parcel of lyrical narrative, Ondaatje proves that even history is mediated, selective, and power-shaped. (Cosma, 2020, Motahane, 2022)

The core of the revisionary movement in the novel is that migrancy is demonstrated as being both spatial and epistemological periphery. The immigrant characters in the story are located in a part of cultural hybridity that Homi Bhabha calls the in-between. They are a material agent of the development of Canada yet they are social peripherals. Nicholas Temelcoff represents this contradiction in the person of the Macedonian bridge worker. When he rescues a falling nun when building the Viaduct, this is a heroic act, which is not given a single public measurement of recognition. (Savsar, 2018) His city swallows up his work and not his person. Ondaatje enacted the clash between civic monumentality and migrant anonymity through Nicholas.

The main consciousness of the novel Patrick Lewis does not belong to elite or immigrant society at first. His progressive drowning into the life of workers and radicals helps him appear as a witness of lost histories. (Turner-Holmes, 2024) A narrator like Patrick has no role of an

authoritative historian but instead, listener and mediator. Winfried Siemerling writes that Ondaatje writes between gaps, and he pointed out the defaultness of historical knowledge. The life of evolving awareness to Patrick reflects the process of the reader, the progression to ignorance to realization, which affirms the ethical aspect of narrative recovery.

The text itself is an urban space, which functions as a mnemonic archive. It implicitly draws upon what Pierre Nora describes as lieux de mémoire or places of memory crystallization by making bridges, waterworks, and abandoned buildings one storehouse of collective experience in the novel. The city is one that is overlain on top of forgotten labour. We find in the socially constructed space of Henri Lefebvre that the very fact of the physical space of Toronto is not created as a non-social infrastructure but as migrant work and migrant sacrifice. Ondaatje literally engraves the presence of immigrants onto the urban map by narrativizing these spaces. (Sarkowsky, 2018)

The epigraph of the title of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is, I will wander through the wilderness *In the Skin of a Lion*, further contextualizes both the thematic issue of identity in the novel as the aspect of change. The lion skin is an indicator of disguise and strength, indicating that migrant identity is one of adaptation. The concept of identity as a process of becoming, as formulated by Stuart Hall, comes in place especially. As they descend into exclusion and fit in, the characters in Ondaatje change and adopt the personas that they shed. Migrancy is thus not the simple Geographic movement but a continuous process of self-negotiation in an imbalanced power relation.

Some critics have interpreted the technique of Ondaatje as a self-conscious historical revisionism. A concept related to historiographic metafiction by Linda Hutcheon is constantly mentioned as an explanation of the mixture of documentary material and fantasy reconstruction in the novel; as Hutcheon posits in general:

The authority of history is challenged by such texts in highlighting historical discourses as forms of construction and contingency. This framework can be applied to Ondaatje in which episodic form and intertextual epigraphs make the official history of Toronto tentative, and subject to challenge.

This is elaborated on in an influential essay by Winfried Siemerling, called *Oral History and the Writing of the other*, which demonstrates how Ondaatje employs oral traces and archival

lacunae as a source of narrative, as opposed to an obstacle. Siemerling interprets episodic vignettes of the novel in the genre of writing the other that is,

*Creating the signs of marginal lives through fragmentary evidence and at the same time realizing the unavoidable omissions and silences. In this attitude, **In the Skin of a Lion** is not so much a naked recuperation as a tautological process of recovering the dead: the book plays the scene of a wish to render decent audible what was never heard and does not allow its performances to be entirely recuperated.*

Very closely associated is the line of criticism that looks at the question of race and labour within the urban imagination of Ondaatje. In the essay The Representation of the concept of race in Ondaatje's book *In the Skin of a Lion*, Glen Lowry states that the novel rewrites the Canadian racial histories by highlighting a multicultural working-class within Canadian history that has been suppressed by the official historical records. (Ramsey-Kurz, 2017) Lowry interprets the migrant characters of Ondaatje to reveal how national memory tends to naturalize some set of racial hierarchies, and makes others into invisible ones; in her words, the novel is preposterous of what she describes as the problematic construction of whiteness in the Australian narrative. These kinds of interventions render the text a valuable resource to scholars who associate literary form with socio-racial erasure.

Other critics of the Canadian-studies, Smaro Kamboureli, develop the line of thought conceptualizing the city that Ondaatje describes as a palimpsest, a stratified location, in which official commemorations are overlaid on repressed immigrant history. The work of Kamboureli on the multicultural literatures of Canada discusses novels such as the novel of Ondaatje as the works of assembling another family, of trying to bring together the dispersed and silent lives into a new, relational civic memory. Readings based on this focus on relationality form the basis of a communal restitutionally ethical purpose in the novel that is explicitly opposed to individual heroization. (Shah, 2020)

The archival and spatial theory is also applied by memory scholars. The idea of lieux de mémoire (sites of memory) that Pierre Nora developed is especially appropriate:

The Viaduct and the R. C. Harris plant act as mnemonic anchors in which the official meanings of the two structures mask the labour, which made them. The critics of the convergence between memory studies and urban historiography thus insist that

Ondaatje play a dual move in his fiction by naming places that are replicated as civic memory, and also by rewriting the place with the pastoral histories of migrant labourers. This corollary enables academics to shift close reading of the text to implications of public-history (how cities remember, commemorate, or forget).

In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Michael Ondaatje employs narrative fragmentation, polyphony, and archival reconstruction as a conscious mode of bringing back the history of immigrants who are excluded in official histories of Toronto development. (James, 2019) The novel is not chronological; it advances in episodic recollections, changing focalization, lyrical innuendos. This dislocation in form reflects the disintegrated selves of migrant subjects whose lives will always be peri-historiographic to the mainstream historiography. As Linda Hutcheon observes:

The historiographic metafiction attempts to problematize the power of knowledge of history by predicting its construction as narratives. The technique of Ondaatje can be seen as an example of this principle as he mixes real events described, the Prince Edward Viaduct, the R. C. Harris Waterworks, the disappearance of Ambrose Small, with a re-creation. The politics of retrieval is at work, most on file, via Patrick Lewis, who becomes a moral witness and initially an absent man. The author writes:

He had lived in the country of silence. The invisibility of immigrant work is marked by Patrick being isolated earlier in his life. His subsequent responsiveness to listening to other people, the bridge Jobs of Nicholas Temelcoff, the activism of such distinguished figures of the time as Alice Gull, is the raising of the solitary alienation to the communal memory. Winfried Siemerling also says that Ondaatje writes between documents and walls of silence, not the archives sewn over.

This is what Glen Lowry terms the anonymous infrastructure of immigrant labour that Nicholas Temelcoff in his act of saving the falling nun, an event not formally recognised in the process of memorialization, becomes symbolic. In this case, the critic and the writer Premila Paul writes:

Ondaatje is not building the city out of her monuments, but rather building it with parts of bodies hanging on scaffolds, the unnamed hands that formed its skyline. This focus on embodied work turns architecture into a memory

mnemonic place, which fits the description of lieux de mémoire by Pierre Nora, the spaces that memory has become crystallized because history has forgotten them.

The same motif of masks and the shedding of skin emphasise identity as constitutive and in between. This epigraph of Gilgamesh presents migration as wandering in the skin of another, suggesting the theory of hybridity suggested by Homi Bhabha and of the in-between space. By using the narrative multiplicity, the denial of the omniscient authority, Ondaatje does not take the voices of the migrants and uses his narration as collaborative recovery rather than appropriation. (Harris, 2016)

In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Michael Ondaatje does not build his characters as people but as dynamic memory of urban migrants. All of the central characters emerge as representatives of various aspects of displacement, labour and historical erasure and make the novel what many critics see as a counter-history of Toronto. Patrick Lewis plays the role of the mediating consciousness in which oppressed immigrant stories emerge. Depending on the countryside at the beginning of his life and being estranged by the city in the end, Patrick embodies what the author asserts:

Of a searcher, In the dark, towards the voices. His slow change as a detached observer to a politically aware actor reflects the shift of the reader towards the ethical awareness. Patrick does not take over the story, but unlike, he listens. According to the author, the novel is concerned with the putting on and taking off of masks and Patrick is growing up to realize that he was a fool who was not aware of immigrant struggles. His last resists represent a call of enlightenment into the mass urban memory.

Nicholas Temelcoff, the Macedonian bridge worker, is the same as the invisibility of immigrant labour. His physical acumen on the Prince Edward Viaduct, and his big-stage rescue of the plunging nun are prefigurations of the magical agnosticism of migrant contribution: heroic yet unremarked. This works by critic and writer Premila Paul:

His body becomes an element of the architecture of the city, but the name does not appear in its ornaments. Ondaatje reinstates agency on the people who have been forgotten (historically) through Nicholas. This bridge, itself, becomes a symbol of endurance, or rather the endurance of migrants, it is built by unknown hands and history does not remember them.

Alice Gull brings out the dynamics of radical activism and solidarity. Anarchist tendencies and acting sides join the private and the political revolt. The catalyst of his ethical transformation is Alice, as one critic notes, the emotional and ideological awakening of Patrick. Her demise highlights the susceptibility of the opposing voices of dissenting migrants in the tales controlled by the state. But without her she continues to exist as memory and she influences Patrick in terms of consciousness and affirming the novel that remembrance is political. (Nijhawan, 2024)

The thief and shapeshifter, Caravaggio, scouts the streets of the city with subversive cunning. He represents creative survival in systems of marginality. A critic notes that:

Caravaggio occupies the space of the law and the belongings, showing other Toronto maps which are not seen by the authorities. His mobility is in contrast to the rigidity of institutions, which implies that migrant identity is mobile and not fixed.

Hana, another character who re-emerges in *The English Patient*, represents heroic transmission of memory. Ondaatje uses her to make the memory of migrants' urban migrations reach more than a single historical moment. Together, these characters make of fiction an ethical vault, that the labouring bodies that made the city, are part of its remembered narrative. (Norris, 2019)

In *In the Skin of a Lion*, the city space is used as a space of retrieval, a mnemonic warehouse that recreates the past of the immigrant lives, redrawing them on its walls. The bridges, waterworks, hotels, and peripheral towns in Toronto are turned into memory locations that question the historical points of view underneath the authorities. The Prince Edward Viaduct and R. C. Harris Water Treatment Plant monuments of civic pride are re conceptualised as depends on migrant labour. The author writes:

"The bridge is rising in a dream... there is a life of a laborer on every gap of the bridge. This figurative etching of labour in architecture presupposes what Pierre Nora calls lieux de mémoire or organs of memory, spaces where memory condenses itself and spurts forth.

It has been noted severally by critics that Ondaatje has built his city upon strands of sub plotted narratives. According to Linda Hutcheon, the novel is a construct of the so-called historiographic metafiction that challenges the expertise of history. Ondaatje disrupts the

impartiality of urban memory by incorporating fictional tales of immigrants into recognized physical locations. (Lozanovska, 2019) The city is turned into a palimpsest where contributions have been removed are made visible through narrating. This is what critic and writer Premila Paul has written:

Toronto by Ondaatje is not a definite geography but a reconstructed landscape haunted by those whose labour created it though their names are not found on its plaques. This observation of Paul explains why architecture in the novel does archival work-taking note of what the municipal records do not.

This is especially true of the suggestion put forth by Henri Lefebvre that space is produced socially. The Voduct is not but a piece of engineered situated just steel and it is a social product created by the bodies of the immigrants hanging at the top of the Don Valley. (Trinka, 2020)

Glen Lowry points out that the novel discloses: -

The anonymity of the labouring body that is right into national infrastructure. This absorption is actualized in the literal sense of Nicholas Temelcoff working on the scaffolding of his own creation as his identity becomes embedded in the structure he is constructing. His saving of the nun, a historically based set of events comes to symbolize informal heroism, which passes uncredited.

The fact that Patrick Lewis wanders in Toronto is yet another act of the theory by Michel de Certeau that portrays walking as a subversive re-strategy of space in the city. He reads the city contrary to its official script as he passes through hotels, immigrant neighbourhoods, and industrial areas. The author writes: He moved the limits of the city, tried to find the invisible. Such search is an indication of the moral command of recovery. (Masterson-Algar, 2016, (Al-Khanbashi, 2020)

Migrancy in *In the Skin of a Lion* is not only state of geographical supremacy, but an unlimited recurring process of identity production through translation-linguistic, cultural, and emotional. The immigrants in the novel exist in the ambiguous zone known by Homi Bhabha as the in-between that is neither fixed identity nor completely assimilated, but rather the zone of negotiation between two realms. (Altin, 2024) The novelist writes:

It is a novel about wearing and taking off masks; shedding on skin, about changes and translations of identity. This skin shedding metaphor, which anticipates identity, prefigures it as moving, tentative and staged instead of fundamental.

The experience of Patrick Lewis is one such expression of self-translation. Patterson started his life as a solitary character in the countryside, only to turn out as an interpreter of immigrants' histories in Toronto. His change also portrays what Stuart Hall refers to as identity as both a matter of being and becoming. Patrick is taught to translate, to not tell the stories of Nicholas Temelcoff and Alice Gull, but to hear them and put investigative pieces together. His moral development rests on his ability to put other viewpoints in his life without the obliteration of otherness. (Müller, 2018)

Because he is linguistically and culturally displaced, Nicholas Temelcoff, the Macedonian bridge worker, symbolizes this. He is not placed in control systems because of his initial failure to speak fluent English. But his embodied work--hanging in the Bloor Street Viaduct, working heights with the fine agility of an acrobat is still another mode of translation:

The bodily imprint of migrant existence on the city infrastructure. Language disenfranchises him, yet architecture maintains his anonymous authorship.

The critic and writer Premila Paul writes here:

According to Whichard, in Ondaatje, the figures of migrants live by the power of translation of names, of accents, of memory, of negotiation of identities which are irremovably under way. This observation of Paul emphasizes the fact that translation is a survival tactic and an existential situation in the novel. Characters change names, occupations and affiliations to bargain with urban modernity but inform of cultural dislocation.

Language in the novel is therefore political. Exclusion is pointed out by accents; resistance to silence. The constitutive form of narration reflects the instability of translation. Instead of describing a town that is harmonized with multicultural rhythms and gains a new identity, Ondaatje describes a city that is organized through the asymmetries of power in which migrants are forced to continuously redefine themselves under the frameworks of dominance.

CONCLUSION

This research has indicated that *In the Skin of a Lion* rewrites the early twentieth century history of Toronto in a politics of retrieval that prefigures the immigrant labour and other marginal identities. Through the use of fragmented narration, alternating focus, and possibilities of an archival reconstruction, Michael Ondaatje makes fiction a counter-historical announcement. Municipal memory is challenged in the novel through the re-appearances of the workers like Nicholas Temelcoff who help to build the city physically and yet does not feature in the civic celebration. The story emphasizes the significance of remembering pasts through the ethical awakening of Patrick Lewis as an act of engagement rather than passivity as many may tend to think about the practice of remembering pasts. The attempts of Ondaatje to destabilize historiographic authority and reinterpret the city as a palimpsest of silenced voices, have been justly criticized by critics. The urban monuments—the Viaduct and the Waterworks—are lieux de mémoire, whose recognition includes the general but often unrecognized contributions of immigrants. Finally, the principle that identity is extensively fluid, relational, and historically contingent is stated in the novel. Combining migrancy, space, and memory, Ondaatje provides a critical literary contribution into urban Canadian historiography, placing fiction as one of the crucial means of ethical memory and cultural redemption.

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