CHAPTER - IV
THE CRISIS FOR IDENTITY IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S FICTION

IV. I: Introduction:

Sri Lankan born Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje’s work represents in many ways the best of contemporary Asian Canadian literature in English in the Canadian context as well as in the international scenario. Ondaatje is an expatriate writer. As he states in an interview in 1977:

_In a way I am very displaced person. I really envy roots._ (qtd. in Bolland, 1)

Steven Totosy de Zepetnek in his introduction to his book _Comparative Cultural Studies_ observes: “Ondaatje is an immigrant to Canada and that much of his writing is about identity, history and about people of in-between.” (Zepetnek, 1)

Ondaatje inherits the several types of hybridities such as racial, ethnic and socio-cultural hybridities. He belongs to the Sri Lankan Burgher community which is fusion of the Portuguese, Dutch, English, Sinhalese and Tamil ancestries. That’s why Ondaatje possesses a hybrid identity. His status in Canada as a migrant causes crisis for identity. His novels and poems mainly focus on the issue related to identity crisis. Ondaatje depicts the nature of his being in-between and hybrid identity in his family memoire _Running in the Family_. In this autobiographical novel, he has revealed the hybridity of his identity:

My own ancestor arriving 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 a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language. And when his Dutch wife died, marrying a Sinhalese woman, having nine children, and remaining. _Here At the centre of the rumour. At this point on the map._

(Ondaatje, 64)

His creative writing is influenced by the aspects of his life such as his migration to England and later to the Canada, his journeys across the continents, his alienation, his exile and his individual experiences. Most of his novels and poems explore the theme of identity crisis. However, his writing also speaks for his entire
community. Ondaatje focuses on how the cross-cultural clashes cause the identity crisis.

IV.II: Crisis for Identity in Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming through Slaughter*:

Ondaatje’s first novel *Coming through Slaughter* (1976) portrays the protagonist’s madness and self destruction. Ondaatje creates the fictional biography of a legendary figure Charles Buddy Bolden who was a very famous jazz cornetist. He lived during the period of 1876 to 1931. He was a historic figure, the black man of Afro- American ancestry and regarded as key figure in the development of the 20th century New Orleans style of rag time which later came to be known as jazz. However Ondaatje is not concerned with the actual life story of Bolden but highlights how Bolden’s schizophrenia makes him invisible to the outside world and how he keeps himself far from the fame of the 20th century game of fame, causing crisis in his identity. Being a jazz novel the text is deeply rooted in jazz tradition. Surprisingly there are very less material evidences are available to write a biography of Bolden. Ondaatje confesses that there are no records of Bolden in the history.

Bolden symbolically represents at the center of the community, in the brothel district of Storyville, of New Orleans, where people make and lose money. The world portrays here is inhabited by people who are living at the margins of the society, pimps whore, barber, musicians playing in bars. While representing the identity of Storyville, district Ondaatje narrates, People make and lose money to whores and for watching Oyster Dances. When whores lay naked on the stage, the loud, vibrant, sensuous and passionate music in the background is played. There are no talks about morality and no rules governing civilized society. “This is N. Joseph’s Shaving Parlor, the barber shop where Buddy Bolden worked.” (Ondaatje 1993, 7)

Michael Ondaatje represents the people who are always deprived from occupying the historical space, who face identity crisis. Ondaatje aptly says, “And to the left of canal are also the various home of Bolden, still here today, away from the recorded history.” (Ondaatje, 7) In the beginning of the novel Bolden’s world is described as clam and sound. He cuts hair of the people, passes time with Nora and his children and after dinner he goes to Masonic hall or the Globe to play jazz. His daily life is described in the following lines:

*He cut hair till 4 and, then walked home and slept with Nara*  
till 8, the two of them loving each other when they woke. And
after dinner leaving for Masonic hall or the Globe or wherever he was playing on to the stage.

(Ondaatje, 11)

While in shop he collects gossip from his customer’s news for ‘The Cricket’ the tabloid or the newspaper he edits, “A barber publisher of the cricket, a cornet player, good husband and father, and infamous man about town.” (Ondaatje, 11) But his performance in New Orleans club at night makes him the brightest star of New Orleans:

Unconcerned with crack of the lip he threw out and held immense notes, could reach a force on the first note that attacked the ear. He was obsessed with magic of air, those smells that turned neuter as they revolved in his lung then spat out in the chosen key...He could see the air. Could tell where it was freshest in room by the color.

(Ondaatje, 11)

He works hard on his cornet without concerning the crack of lip with great passion. But he is not professional: “He is the best and the loud and most beloved jazzman of his time but never professional in the brain.” (Ondaatje, 11) Bolden, the editor of a scandalous newspaper ‘The Cricket’ exists between 1899 and 1905, lacks the control of his own limits and strength. It may be physical, psychical or material. The narrator observes:

There was no control except the mood of his power... It was just as important to watch him, stretch and wheel around on the last notes or watch nerves jumping under the sweat of his head.

(Ondaatje, 39)

Frank Lewis, one of Bolden band’s member, Bolden’s companion knows more about Bolden. He stays away from publicity. He observes:

Then you should never have heard him at all. He was never recorded. He stayed away while others moved into wax history, electronic history.

(Ondaatje, 39)

No recordings are available or Bolden is never a part of electronic history. His music echoes the top of his life. When he plays he loses and hunts for right accidental notes.
Bolden always drinks heavily. So his mind becomes more and more obliterate. His common law wife Nora Bass has a love affair with Tom Pickett, one of the great hustlers and most beautiful man in the notorious red light district. When Pickett starts to heckle Bolden about his and Nora’s relationship, Bolden doubts Nora as:

*If Nora had been with Pickett. Had really been with Pickett as he said. Had jumped off Bolden’s cock and sat down half an hour later on Tom Pickett’s mouth on Canal Street. Then the certainties he loathed and needed were liquid at the root.*

(Ondaatje, 88)

Ondaatje focuses on the issue of the infidelity. How this infidelity remains as a curse and confuses the man causing the identity crisis. During this drunken bloody fight, terrible violence takes place. Bolden nearly kills Pickett. In this murky world alcohol and sex are the causes of all pains. The Pickett incident makes Bolden to lose popularity and grace Bolden can’t leave at the peak of his glory when he goes on playing fine. Brock Mumford one of Bolden band’s members aptly says “If you are the peak you don’t have time to think about stopping you just build up and up and up.” (Ondaatje, 86)

After the Tom Pickett incident Bolden disappears without a trace for two years. At the height of his musical career he loses himself. He runs away from ‘the Cricket’ the band and the kids. Nora tells Webb that, “Buddy went disappeared, got lost, I don’t know Webb but he’s gone.” (Ondaatje, 17) Webb, the detective and Bolden’s friend also discovers that Bolden never speaks about his past. Webb explains to the people that he is a musician who arrives in the city at the age of twenty-two. Webb knows Bolden’s identity crisis. Nothing is known about him. Bolden’s disappearance suggests erasing of his existing identity and just ‘wiping out his past.’ It is a type of escape from the world of audiences to the world of fraudulence which is offered by Bellocq to him. His mysterious disappearance is a casual gesture of ‘Landscape suicide.’ But Webb knows him since fifteen. It is only Webb who can find out Bolden. Ondaatje observes, “So perhaps the only clue to Bolden’s body was in Webb’s brain.” (Ondaatje, 21)

After disappearance Bolden stays with the Brewitt couple who are very much part of the Shell Beach music world. They are good but small musicians. When Bolden meets Robin Brewitt first time, Ondaatje describes that he is nearly fainted. In Robin’s house Bolden first time has used his cornet like jewelry to seduce Robin.
Perhaps Bolden loses control of his heart. Bolden and Robin’s love making in closed room suddenly transforms into an open field. Kamboureli in “the Poetics of Geography in Michael Ondaatje’s Coming through Slaughter” writes:

>This is the new geography of passion and escape, which complicates but does not deny the reading of Robin’s and Jaelin’s names as implying “a sense of enclosed space” and of Bolden being “robbed of his mobile state of mind” and “jailed” in her husband’s house.

(Kamboureli, 123)

Bolden is robbed due to his mobile state of mind and jailed in Jaelin’s house. His spatial identity, related to space is erased. It is Bellocq who tempts Bolden towards the art of pain and love but Jaelin creates the actual pain with the help of his piano. Jaelin stays at the downstairs when Buddy and Robin go to bed and wait for half an hour as dog waits for masters. In this way Bolden passes his days with Brewitts. Webb wants to search Bolden and needs Bolden’s photograph. In his mind Bolden is just an outline and music which is his true identity. Webb says, “I’d recognize you but in my mind you’re just on outline and music.” (Ondaatje, 53)

Webb finds picture of Bolden band from Bellocq. Bellocq is also a historical figure. He is a commercial photographer. Bellocq’s pictures are like windows. He photographs New Orleans prostitutes and portraits of marginalized individual at night. He never shot landscapes but shoots mostly portraits. Bellocq, the little deformed man has collection of the photographs of city prostitutes. He captures all the paradox, irony and paths of their shattered beauty. Webb wants to see Bolden as a public figure. But Bellocq’s friendship restricts Bolden to go in his own way. Douglas Barbour in his book ‘Michael Ondaatje’ aptly comments, “Webb’s possessive friendship opposes Bellocq’s willingness to let Bolden go in his own way.” (Barbour, 112)

Bellocq is a marginal figure in Bolden’s life story. He is hardly taller than his camera stand. Ondaatje describes Bellocq’s character “The making and destroying coming from same source, same lust, and same surgery his brain was capable of.” (Ondaatje, 59) Bellocq is not interested in Bolden’s music. He wants to push his imagination into Buddy’s brain. Bolden is enviably public figure, it is Bellocq who tempts Bolden away from audience into world of silence. Bellocq is one of the causes of Bolden’s identity crisis. Someone asks Bolden, who is Bellocq? Bolden says, he can’t summarize him for them.
As Bellocq lived at the age in any case he was at ease there and as Buddy did not he moved on past him like a naïve explore looking for footholds.

(Onaatje, 70)

Bellocq gives Bolden Band’s photograph to Webb. After Webb’s departure Bellocq dropped the negative into the acid. And the photo bleaches out grey from black and white to grey that signifies the lack of certainty, erasure of Bolden’s identity like the negative. This black man needs white privacy. Bellocq thinks:

Then he dropped the negative into the acid tray and watched it bleach out to grey. Goodbye. Hope he don’t find you.

(Onaatje, 56)

Bellocq allows Bolden to sink into indefinite sanity like the negative which bleaches to grey. Bellocq doesn’t wish Webb to find disappeared Bolden. It is Bellocq’s friendship which introduces Bolden to other path. Bellocq gives photograph to Webb and commits suicide by the fire around him. He kills himself in a fire with most of his negatives. Bellocq’s suicide, his absence is seen after the absence of Bolden’s photograph. E.J. Bellocq, a historical figure, a secret character photographer, is also not recorded in history. There are no prizes for the artist like them. His pictures are not available to see. Like Bolden he also experiences identity crisis.

Webb receives Photograph and thinks that the search for his friend finally ends. Webb observes in the photograph all are serious except for the smile on Bolden’s face:

The friend who in reality had reversed the process and gone back into white, who in this bad film seemed to have already half-receded with that smile which may not have been a smile at all, which may have been his mad dignity.

(Onaatje, 56)

Webb finally searches Bolden at Brewitts home. Bolden loses himself there. Bolden lives isolated life. He does not love Robin, he really loves Nora, but he thinks Nora still loves Tom Pickett. He is alienated there. However, music is his true identity. Since the disappearance he has not played a single note within these two years. “Bolden haven’t played, note for nearly two years.” (Onaatje, 94) Bolden disappears and falls over the edge into permanent schizophrenia. He becomes invisible to the outside world, there in the ‘white privacy,’ causing identity crisis. He travels from
reputation to namelessness. Webb requests Buddy to come with him and be a public figure:

*why did you do all this Buddy, why don’t you come back,*
*what good are you here, you’re doing nothing, you’re wasting you’re.*

(Ondaatje, 94)

Webb convinces Bolden to come to New Orleans and not to waste life in this alien landscape. Finally his friend Webb reaches to him. Bolden thinks:

*God he talked and sucked me through his brain so I was puppet and she was a landscape so alien and so newly foreign that I was ridiculous here. He could reach me this far away, could tilt me upside down till he was directing me like wayward traffic back home.*

(Ondaatje, 97)

Here in Brewitt’s home he is alone in this alien landscape, without his music and identity. He says, “Here Where I am anonymous and alone in a white room with no history and no parading.” (Ondaatje, 97) The place where Brewitts lives is a nameless place without any history. The building where they live is also nameless. And Bolden is alone in this white room, without parading, without playing a single note. Bolden thinks about Webb, “He came here and placed my past and future on this table like a road.” (Ondaatje, 97) Brewitts brings him in this fearfulness with the ‘unimportant object.’ Bolden feels that Robin makes him weak, taking him away from his fame he thinks:

*Where I am king of Corners. And Robin who drained my body of its fame when I wanted to find that fear of certainties.*

(Ondaatje, 97)

Bolden’s condition is described as, he is the king of corners, that is the predicament from which a skillful, graceful escape of Bolden is impossible from Brewitts which is his self exile, which causes erasing his own existing identity as a musician, and the issue of promiscuity which becomes the reason of his self-destruction. Bolden lacks power to control him. Finally he agrees:

*I wouldn’t let my self control the world of my music because I had no power over anything else that went around me, in or around my body.*

(Ondaatje, 115)
So he questions Webb why he wants him to come back to Storyville and play music. However, Bolden does not detain with the fact that what happens around him and his body. He can’t control himself. He agrees the issue of concupiscence, the desire for sexual intimacy within him:

*I desire every woman I remember. Everything is clear here and still I feel my brain has walked away and is watching me.*

(Ondaatje, 116)

He remembers his visit with Crawley and with one of his girl fan. Bolden explains:

*I was watching her while he was playing and I wanted the horn in her skirt, I wanted her to sit with her skirt on my cock like a bandage.*

(Ondaatje, 118)

Webb encourages Bolden to come back and start to play music and use his talent. But Bolden doesn’t want to get up as a public figure. He is exhausted with his life. He says, “I am tired Webb. I don’t want to get up.” (Ondaatje, 119) At last Webb succeeds to bring back Buddy to his home at New Orleans. After Buddy’s disappearance Nora lives with Cornish, one of Bolden band’s member. But Buddy fails to distinguish between Cornish and his feelings. He recalls Robin’s behavior with him. It reasserts his loss. His self destruction begins when Webb forcefully takes him back from his self exile. He says, “I had wanted to be the reservoir where engines and people drank, Blood sperm music pouring out and getting hooked in someone’s ear.” (Ondaatje, 129)

In the final parade performance Bolden is fascinated by the ideal girl audience. He finds a person who will be the ‘right audience.’ She captures his rhythm. Bolden’s self is immersed into music, that he forgets the audiences:

*For something’s fallen in my body and I can’t hear the music as I play it… She hitting each note with her body before it is even out so I know what I do through her. God this is what I wanted to play for, if no, one else I always guessed there would be this, this mirror somewhere.*

(Ondaatje, 152-53)

In that musical interaction in the final parade the girl audience echoes the sound of his cornet with her body and Bolden reflect the dancing of her body:
It comes up flooding past my heart in a mad parade, it is coming through my teeth, it is into the cornet, god can’t stop god can’t stop it can’t stop the air the red force coming up can’t remove it from my mouth … I can’t choke it the music still pouring in a roughness I’ve never hit, watch it, listen it listen it, can’t see I CAN’T SEE.

(Ondaatje, 154)

Thus the gorgeous dancer pushes him to further limit, leading to his destruction and Bolden ends his career. He give away his brain there. He becomes unvoiced:

The career beginning in this street of the paint less wood to where he gave his brains away. The place of his music is totally silent.

(Ondaatje, 156)

Buddy Bolden becomes totally insane in the parade, “Buddy Bolden who become a legend when he went berserk in parade.”(Ondaatje, 157) Gorge Bowering in his essay, “A Great Northward Darkness,” aptly writes:

Now how do you write the story of Storyville? How do you tell about jazz in the first place, and how do you tell about a legendary jazz trumpeter who could not write notes and who never went on record or made one? That is a very appealing problem for a postmodernist writer. How can you write a historical novel with no historical document?

(Bowering, 8)

Bolden is not recorded in history, his identity is erased. He becomes an unrecorded legend. He becomes mad in the performances and destroys his great talent. Bolden goes mad trying to play the devils music and the hymns at the same time. At Lincoln Park with Eagle Band by Bunk Johnson, Bolden starts to play with his cornet. He is frustrated there. Here Ondaatje portrays Bolden’s despairing attitude with his life:

I knew his blues before, and the hymns at funerals, but what he is playing now is real strange and I listen careful for he’s playing something that sounds like both. I cannot make out the tune and then I catch on. He’s mixing them up. He’s playing the blues and the hymn sadder than the blues and then the
blues sadder than the hymn. This is the first time I ever heard hymns and blues cooked up together.

(Ondaatje, 91)

Armstrong tells historians that Bolden becomes mad by playing too hard and too often drunk, too wild too crazy. He has thrown away his life during the parade. He has removed himself away from the fame and publicity.

You went mad by playing too hard and too often drunk too wild too crazy. The excess could up the page. There were the climes of the parade and then you removed yourself from the 20th century game of fame, the rest of your life a desert of facts.
Cut them open and spread them out like garbage.

(Ondaatje, 158)

Bolden’s removal from the fame of the 20th century game of fame causes his identity crisis. And his identity is spread like garbage. Bolden’s character reflects Ondaatje’s self and his past. Both Bolden and Ondaatje experience crisis of identity and alienation. Ondaatje expresses his identity crisis through the character of Bolden:

What was there in that, before I knew your nation your color your age that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body, and you like a weather bird arcing round in the middle of your life to exact opposites and burning your brains out...

(Ondaatje, 157)

Both Bolden and Ondaatje’s identities as Asian, Afro Caribbean, Canadian, American or as a musician, writer are collapsed. Ondaatje reveals Bolden as crisis for identity and his story of despair, loneliness, high art, struggle, miseries. Ondaatje further writes “When he went mad he was the same age as I am now.” (Ondaatje, 156)

On June 1907 Bolden is admitted to asylum in the East Louisiana State Hospital. Bolden’s journey towards asylum where he spends the rest of life, T Jones observes:

And all the day the river at our side, Mississippi, like a friend travelling with him, like an audience watching Huck Finn going by train to hell.

(Ondaatje, 183)
Bolden’s journey towards asylum is compared to the Huck Finn’s journey to hell. Bolden’s journey suggests self destruction, journey to hell.

Ondaatje suggests that there can be no prizes for the artists like Bolden who pushes his art to the point of self destruction. And finally Bolden is died in November, 1931 in the ache of unfaithfulness. He is slaughtered causing his identity erasure. Ondaatje is not a particular type of writer. He wishes to wander in all genre of the literature. In his successive novel, he emerges with the issue of, excluding of immigrants, from the official history of Canada.

IV.III: Crisis for Identity in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*:

Michael Ondaatje continues to write novels on the crisis for identity. His novel *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) portrays the life of the poor immigrant laborers who come to Canada, Ondaatje’s adopted home in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Many of them lose their lives. The construction of the city of Toronto is done by a group of European immigrants, but they are systematically unrecorded in the official history of the Canada. Smaro Kamboureli, in her recent anthology “Making a difference,” notes about Ondaatje’s immigrant status. She also speaks about his identification with a generation of writers that, “was the first real migrant tradition …of writers of our time - Rushdie, Ishiguro, Ben Okri, Rohintan Mistry.” (Kamboureli, 194) The issues of nationality and conventional of identity is problematical in Ondaatje’s work. While discussing his research work on the Bloor Street Viaduct with Barbara turners, Ondaatje states:

> I can tell you exactly how many buckets of sand were used, because this is Toronto history, but the people who actually built the god-damn bridge were unspoken of. They are unhistorical!

(Barbara Turner, 21)

Avinash Jodha in the *Michael Ondaatje’s fiction: Poetics of Exile* rightly comments on immigration, either voluntary or forced it is always a complex act. In this context immigrants have to discover and negotiate with his or her identity in respect to belongings:

> The primary concern of the novel is migration and metamorphosis, the challenges faced by the immigrant communities as they struggle to find a footing in the adopted
home, and the systematic elimination of their roll in the building of the nation from the nation’s history. Immigration is whether forced or voluntary, a complexes act. It involves multiple dislocation- of geo-political spaces, culture, sensibilities and forces the hitherto unquestioning individual to discover and negotiate his or her own identity in terms of belonging.

(Jodha Avinash, 81)

The immigrants in Toronto are from different countries, found the unknown, unmarked region within the country, in order to escape from economic depravity or political harassment at home. Here in the host land they face the problems like cultural differences and language barriers causing identity crisis. In the novel the immigrants are not only the ‘outsiders’ but the native Canadian ‘insiders’ like Patrick Lewis and Commissioner Harris.

Patrick Lewis, the protagonist of the novel, is an immigrant in his own country and faces the problem of identity crisis. The narrator tells us that Patrick Lewis “was born into a region which did not appear on a map until 1910, though his family had worked therefore twenty years and the land had been homesteaded since 1816.” (Ondaatje 1997, 10) Patrick sees his birthplace in his school atlas as the place that is pale green and nameless. The narrator states:

In the school atlas the place is pale green and nameless…only because of logging, will eventually be called Depot Creek.

“Deep Eau.”

(Ondaatje, 11)

Patrick’s birth place is small, rural logging town of Ontario, Canada, which is not appeared on the map till 1910. Patrick feels that he is denied to interact with the world and remains exotic in his own homeland. The narrator observes:

He sits down at the long table and looks into his school geography books with the maps of the world, the white sweep of currents, testing the names to himself, mouthing out the exotic. Caspian. Nepal. Durango. He closes the book and brushes it with his palms, feeling the texture of the pebbled cover and its colored dyes which create a map of Canada.

(Ondaatje, 9)
Patrick whispers the exotic names of countries which are unknown to his world. He creates a map of Canada in his imagination because very less knowledge of the world is available to him. Patrick is unknown about the history of his country. Sometime he sees the “collection of strangers”, which are the companions to Patrick during the months of winters. ‘This strange community’ makes Patrick aware of the presence of the immigrants who came as loggers, in the winters and disappears like the moths. Patrick observes their presence which is declared by their axes that bangs into the cold wood and the procession early in the morning with lanterns: “No one in the town of Bellrock really knows where the men have come from.” (Ondaatje, 8)

Patrick’s childhood imagination is captured by loggers and the moths who are the alternative companions of Patrick in his childhood days. He is the only silent observer of the logger and the moths. He studies insects attached to the kitchen light, and gives them fictional names, and records in his notebook. Patrick observes the life as an outsider:

Perhaps he can haunt these creatures. Perhaps they are not mute at all; it is just a lack of range in his hearing. (When he was nine his father discovered him lying on the ground, his ear against the hard shell of cow shit inside which he could hear several bugs flapping and knocking.) He knows the robust call from the small bodies of cicadas, but he wants conversation - the language of damsel flies who need something to translate their breath the way he uses the ocarina to give himself a voice, something to leap with over the wall of this place.

(Ondaatje, 10)

Patrick wants to breakout the silence. He wants to talk but what makes him silence is his inability to use language effectively. Patrick is an empty outline which is drawn with green chalk by his father, and tacked with wires to test explosive. Patrick’s father “Hazen Lewis was an abashed man, withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his own focus.” (Ondaatje, 15) Hazen Lewis is the moody man even in the company of his son. He works as a logger and doesn’t acquire a land. He is a dynamite explorer, hired as a dynamiter, in the feldspar mines. The narrator observes:
Hazen Lewis did not teach his son anything, no legend, no base of theory...He was a man who with his few props had become self-sufficient, as invisible as possible.

(Ondaatje, 18)

Hazen Lewis is an unemotional and silent man. He has not taught his son any legend or any base theory. The boy Patrick grows on the farm as ‘working on day and resting at night’, but now at the age of twelfth he wishes to join “these strangers of another language.” (Ondaatje, 22) He longs to hold their hands and skate with them along the frozen river. But he fears to communicate with them. Patrick cannot understand the language they speak. He cannot trust either himself or these strangers of another language even though he is able to “step forward and join them.” (Ondaatje, 22) However Patrick’s early years passes in the isolation and the silence. He is alienated in his own country. Patrick is away from the social and the cultural world. The immigrant loggers and moths are only his companions. His lack of knowledge of his own language and the culture indicates his lack of identity. Both immigrants and inhabitants are aware of the boundaries that diffuse the novel and both respond to it in different ways.

Patrick Lewis arrives in the city of Toronto after his father’s death and he feels as if “it were land after years at sea.” (Ondaatje, 53) And now, a twenty-one year’s Patrick steps into his new life as:

Now, at twenty-one, he had been drawn out from that small town like a piece of metal and dropped under the vast arches of Union Station to begin his life once more... He was an immigrant to the city.

(Ondaatje, 53)

Patrick’s rural, provincial background makes him perceive himself as an immigrant. He knows little history about his nation. In his own country Patrick is an immigrant to the city. He hates the “whiteness stepping into the warm brown universe of barns.” (Ondaatje, 53) And “now, in the city, he was new even to himself, the past locked away.” (Ondaatje, 54)

Ambrose Small, the millionaire, theatre owner is disappeared. Patrick knows nothing about this country and he is appointed to search the lost millionaire:

On December 16, 1919, Ambrose Small failed to keep an appointment. A million dollars had been taken from his bank
account. He had either been murdered or was missing. His body, alive or dead, was never found.

(Ondaatje, 58)

In order to become invisible Small deliberately uses pseudonyms, and wishes to erase his identity a man who is socially and economically well positioned desires to erase his own identity. Patrick is assigned the task of the finding out the missing millionaire:

*He has always been alien, the third person in the picture. He is the one born in this country who knows nothing of the place… searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country, a blind man dressing the heroine.*

(Ondaatje, 156-57)

During his journey to find Small Patrick meets Clara Dickens, the radio actress and wife of Ambrose Small in Paris. He dazzles by her long white arms, the faint hair on the back of her neck nearly wounds him. Patrick thinks she is “The rare lover,” “the perfect woman.” (Ondaatje, 61) She is dressed up, like a “damsel fly.” Clara who is Small’s lover, Stump’s lover and now Patrick is at this hour in the spell of her body within the complex architecture of her past. During these days Patrick is interested only in her:

*He loved the eroticism of her history, the knowledge of where she sat in school rooms, her favorite brand of pencil at the age of nine. Details flooded his heart….he found he had become interested only in her, her childhood, her radio work, this landscape in which she had grown up.*

(Ondaatje, 69)

Patrick listens Clara’s past and learns her personal history, or her personal identity. “When he spoke of his own past he was not calm like her.” (Ondaatje, 71) His personal identity is in crisis:

*He defended himself for most of the time with the habit of vagueness. There was a wall in him that no one reached… A tiny stone swallowed years back that had grown with him and which he carried around because he could not shed it…Patrick and his small unimportant stone. It had entered him at the wrong time in his life.*

(Ondaatje, 71)
Patrick is an isolated person without any friend except Clara. She has not told him where Small is. She demands not to follow her after they drive to Toronto. Clara tells him, “I’ll leave you, for Ambrose and never follow me.” (Ondaatje, 72) He still doesn’t know who she is. After all Clara disappears from his life leaving him a blind “iguana.” The theme of disappearance is rightly pointed out by Michael Greenstein as:

*Ambrose is missing, Patrick disappears into Clara who got lost in piano music, Nicholas looks for his absent nun, and the readers become another searcher refilling historical absence.*

(Greenstein, 123)

Disappearance and absence cause erasure of identity. After Clara’s exit from Patrick’s life, he works in lumber-yard as a labour in the city, and Alice, Clara’s friend finds Patrick still heartbroken over Clara. Alice suggests Patrick to heal himself of Clara. Patrick lives a life of silent, for two years broken hearted and finds Clara in his own hometown of Depot Lake, Ontario. He waits for Clara and finds Ambrose, tries to burn him. Injured Patrick stays in a hotel where Clara comes to visit him and treats his wound; makes love and leave while he sleeps. Once again he loses Clara.

Patrick works in the tunnel. The workers working in a tunnel are from different countries and they don’t speak to one another. Patrick lives among the immigrant communities. Patrick can’t understand the language of immigrants and perceives himself as an immigrant. The Canadian Patrick lives in silence, “with noise and conversation all around him.” (Ondaatje, 138) He is only passive watcher. Finally Patrick situates himself within Toronto’s Macedonian communities. “He had discovered the Macedonian word for iguana, “goosther” and finally used it to explain his requests each evening at the fruit stall for clover and vetch.” (Ondaatje, 112) Macedonian’s active communal presence makes this area as ‘Macedonian territory.’ Patrick feels stranger among them in his own country and realizes “his street, their street, for he was their alien.” (Ondaatje, 113) In his own homeland he feels alienated.

His cultural identity is crashed among these immigrant communities. Cultural identity is according to Stuart Hall, “the idea of one shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry held in common” (http://www.jstor.org/stable/2122404)
Here both native and alien share only silence and not culture. Patrick is accepted by the Macedonian community. And Kosta invites Patrick for “the waterworks’ gathering.” Patrick is alone among the strangers.

In the puppet show the puppets cannot help each other. Patrick becomes panic and rushes to the stage to help the puppet and recognizes her as Alice Gull, Clara’s friend. Alice, the nun while walking on the bridge falls off the bridge and miraculously has caught in the midair by the man. And the man finds himself a moment later holding the figure against him dearly’ is ‘Nicholas Temelcoff. Alice goes with Temelcoff into Ohrida Lake Restaurant run by the Macedonian immigrant Kosta. She is speechless and completely alien to the place. “This is the first time she has sat in a Macedonian bar, in any bar with a drinking man.” (Ondaatje, 37) She realizes that strange place has a meaning. These moments transforms Alice forever. Her former identity as a nun is erased. “She is the woman whose hair was showing illicit.” (Ondaatje, 38)

She laid her face on the cold zinc ... The zinc was an edge of another country. She put her ear against the grey ocean of it.

It’s memory of a day’s glasses. The spill and the wiping cloth.
Confessional. Tabula Rasa.

(Ondaatje, 39)

Patrick and Clara visits Alice’s fragile farmhouse in Paris. Patrick and Clara speak about their past. But it is Alice who “reveals no past, remain source less, like those statues of men with wrapped heads who symbolize undiscovered rivers” (Ondaatje, 74). Clara calls her as “My pale friend.” (Ondaatje, 75) Alice doesn’t want to reveal who she is, like the undiscovered rivers. Patrick thinks about Alice as:

Even in the farmhouse at Paris Plains there had been a silence about her youth, Even with Cato she gave out only his war name. If Alice Gull had been a nun? A Rosary, a sumac bracelet...

(Ondaatje, 146)

Alice visits Patrick, when he is isolated and heartbreak after Clara’s departure to Ambrose Small. She consoles Patrick and suggests meeting Clara’s mother. Clara’s mother knows about of Clara and Ambrose. She asks, “You must remove Clara’s shadow from you.” (Ondaatje, 89) Patrick meets Alice accidentally, after a long time, with immigrants’ community, where Alice is performing puppet show in lead role.
She brings Patrick into the Immigrant community. Patrick and Alice began a love affair. However, Patrick’s love affair doesn’t last long due to the death of Alice.

Alice’s sudden death shocks Patrick. Alice’s death is a sense of loss for Patrick. The novelist gives description of Patrick’s condition after Alice’s death in the Epigraph of the novel as: “The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness In the Skin of Lion.” (Ondaatje, unnumbered) Alice expects from Patrick to destroy the power. Her sudden death makes Patrick wander in wilderness to take the revenge of Alice’s death, against the rich. Patrick dreams to attack Muskoka Hotel, which he sets on a fire. Patrick’s journey from an observer or a watcher to a criminal indicates his identity is in confused. After all, Patrick commits this crime, knowing to be caught. Finally he is caught and put in the prison. There he comes in contact with the enigma the “neighborhood thief” Caravaggio. In order to rescue from the prison Caravaggio has painted himself blue. He knows the dictum “Demarcation that is all we need to remember.” (Ondaatje, 179)

Alice’s nine years old daughter Hana lives without parents. Hana’s father Cato a Finland born union activist who is murdered by his logging employers in the north, in his own country. “Cato is an activist who brings with him the inheritance of struggle against exploitation from his home country into Canada.” (Jodha Avinash, 82) He is unknown to the planned strike of the loggers. In this ‘open snow country’ Cato tries to save himself:

*Four men on horseback attempt to capture Cato over the next week. But Cato knows snow country, he was born into it. He can, it seems, disappear under the surface of it …While he is cutting a whole in the ice at Union Lake, Cato sees the men. They ride out of the trees and execute him.*

(Ondaatje, 155)

Cato’s body is burnt dispose beneath the ice. They try to erase his identity, and to make his disappearance unreal. The violent action by worker to dispose Cato’s body is an attempt to erase Cato’s identity that is as equal to erase the names of workers on the official records from Canadian history.

Patrick though native likes to live among strangers, a stranger among stranger, feels comfortable in alien landscape. His ethnic identity is in crisis. Joseph E.Trimble
quotes Yuet Cheung’s (1993) definition of ethnic identity as, “the psychological attachment to an ethnic group or heritage.”

At the same way Patrick easily attaches himself with Clara, Alice, Nicholas, Small, and Hana.

   And he himself was nothing but a prism that refracted their lives... He was an abashed man, an inheritance from his father. Born in Abashed, Ontario.

   (Ondaatje, 157)

Alice tells Patrick about a play in which each character changes the skin of wild animals which indicates the voluntary assumption of responsibilities. Skin color and the language is the marker of one’s cultural identity:

   Alice had once described a play to him in which several actresses shared the role of the heroine. After half an hour the powerful matriarch removed her large coat from which animal pelts dangled and she passed it, along with her strength, to one of the minor characters. In this way even a silent daughter could put on the cloak and be able to break through her chrysalis into language. Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story.

   (Ondaatje, 157)

Here Ondaatje attempts to show the act of transformation through the wearing of the skin of wild animal. The original cultural identity of the immigrants is crushed. Immigrants need to change themselves or ‘break through their chrysalis into language’ in order to survive in the host land. Gamlin Gordon rightly writes, “in Ondaatje’s novel, In the Skin of a Lion suggests the acquisition of previously, foreign attributes and qualities so that ‘one’s skin [becomes] emblematic of the gaining of a new cultural identity.’”(Gordon Gamlin, 72) In the novel skins are to be used as a medium to disguise, a metamorphosis, a shared responsibility and escape of one’s true self to another.

   Dyers are the men who colour the leather. “Nobody could last in that job more than six months and only the desperate took it.” (Ondaatje, 131) While working, the skin colour of the dyers change, they deep in the colour. Only their brains are free of it. During work they erase their cultural identity along with their skin colour, “the
colour disrobed itself from the body, fell in one piece to their ankles, and they stepped out, in the erotica of being made free.” (Ondaatje, 132) They never get the smell of their bodies. Ondaatje’s protagonists are laborers, doing filthy jobs in the city, immigrants who work in tanneries or slaughter houses a thief, prisoner and anarchist, who are displaced outsiders:

…the labour agent giving them all English names. Charlie, Johnson and Nick Parker. They remembered the strange foreign syllables like a number.

(Ondaatje, 132)

The workers are known by the names. The workers find it very difficult to remind foreign syllables, so the worker minds the names as like reminding the numbers. And their cultural identity is crushed into pieces. Immigrant needs to convert themselves like a chameleon, like Patrick. Patrick’s life is not a single story but a part of mural:

His own life was not a single story but part of mural, which was a falling together of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous night web -all of these fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of the day. A nun or a bridge, a daredevil who was unable to sleep without drink, a boy watching a fire from his bed at night, an actress who ran away with a millionaire- the detritus and chaos-of the age was realigned

(Ondaatje, 145)

Like a prism Patrick’s life refracts various stories; one of them is the story of a daredevil, Nicholas Temelcoff. Nicholas Temelcoff is a famous man on the bridge, called as a daredevil. He is one of the immigrants in the city. He saves a nun in the mid air. A tentative man charms with the childhood stories of Upper America by the Judas goats. It’s a ‘spell of language’ that brings Nicholas to Canada without passport in 1914, “a great journey made in silence.” (Ondaatje, 43) He comes with his friends to Canada:

Nicholas was twenty-five years old when war in the Balkans began. After his village was burned he left with three friends on horseback.

(Ondaatje, 45)
Nicholas Temelcoff is a real figure in Macedonian community. Ondaatje in an interview with Garvie states:

…this figure in an unpublished socio-historical thesis and had to decide whether or not [he] was going to use [Temelcoff] real name… It becomes very important to me to use his real name.

(Ondaatje with Garvie, 932)

During the war in Balkan, Nicholas Temelcoff migrates to Canada. He knows very well the importance of learning English.

Nicholas had no passport, he could not speak a word of English...After six months he went to Sault Ste. Marie. He still could hardly speak English and decided to go to school, working nights in another Macedonian bakery. If he did not learn the language he would be lost.

(Ondaatje, 46)

Nicholas Temelcoff never looks back. Nicholas settles into the air with no fear, a solitary man.’ It is difficult to find him in an archive photographs. His encounter with a nun transforms him

He has no portrait of himself. So he appears to Harris and other as a boy … (Ondaatje, 42)

For Nicholas “language is much more difficult than what he does in space” (Ondaatje, 43), and thus faces the identity crisis.

Like Patrick, Rowland Harries, Commissioner of Public Works, is also a Canadian born citizen. He is the man with vision for the bridge. He loves these Viaducts and as a head of public work viaduct project is said to be his first child. Water is Harris passion. Harris vision regarding viaduct is as:

It was Harris who envisioned that it could carry not just cars but trains on lower trestle. It could also transport water from the east-end plants to the centre of the city… He wanted giant water mains travelling across the valley as part of the viaduct.

(Ondaatje, 29)

In order to take revenge of Alice’s death, Patrick threatens Harris to destroy the building. He also dreams to attack ‘Muskoka Hotel.’ Patrick paints himself as black to look unidentifiable. Harris begins to defend himself. Harries know how
many workers suffer death during the construction of the building. What Harris has done is his personal vision of beauty. Harris realizes the danger in Patrick’s entry in the building. “My God, he swam here …What vision, what dream was that?” (Ondaatje, 241) Harris talks with Patrick until daylight, but Patrick falls asleep with the blasting box in his lap. Patrick chooses Harris, because, the narrator observes:

.... he was one of the few in power who had something tangible around him. But those with real power had nothing to show for themselves.

(Ondaatje, 241-242)

Rosalind Maria Jennings in a dissertation writes about Patrick’s affinity towards Macedonian community rather than the people belongs his own country:

*Certainly Patrick discovers he has more affinity with the Macedonian workers than he does with the Canadian-born Commissioner. Nationality may divide not unite people living within the same borders. Ondaatje describes Canada as a country of metamorphosis, where we… put on new clothes. To assimilate properly into a new environment, one needs to be prepared to let down one’s barriers to risk jumping out of one’s old skin into a new identity.*

(Jennings Rosalind, 204)

In short the novel depicts Patrick’s identity crisis in his own culture as a cultural outsider. In order to assimilate properly into the new environment one needs to overcome the barriers and be able to survive in the adopted country. While doing such act one has to concern for his identity.


Ondaatje in his next award winning novel *The English Patient* deals with the problem of displacement due to the World War II. Michael Ondaatje’s Booker Prize winning novel *The English Patient* (1992) seeks to explore the problems of identity and displacement experienced both by the colonizer and colonized and the way in which boundaries affect the national and personal identities. It is an antiwar novel. It opens in 1944 at Tuscan Villa San Girolamo in the Central Italy at the end of the World War II. Initially the villa has served as a military hospital for the Allied forces but after the shifting of the war to the north, it is evacuated. Later it is inhabited by
Hana, a Canadian nurse of mixed parentage. She volunteers for the war services and she is posted here in Italy. She stays in the villa to nurse a dying, burnt English accented Hungarian man named English Patient. The third member of the villa is Kirpal Singh or Kip, an Indian Sikh, a sapper in the British army. The fourth member who joined them into villa is Caravaggio, a friend of Hana’s father, a Canadian-Italian thief and a spy and captive of German.

In fact, all the inhabitants of the villa are displaced individuals, both the Westerners and colonized natives. They are exiles and experience loss of identity due to geographical and cultural differences. They are wounded in the war. The issues of nationality and nationalism are explored in the novel. The novel subverts the concept of homogeneous cultural identity on which nationalism is founded. (“Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the other to oneself.”) In the villa all the displaced inhabitants have found their new identities as temporary. Ondaatje in an interview with Wachtel states about the displaced inhabitants of the villa as:

*In The English Patient everyone is fearful of go home. Hana’s fearful, and the patient hates the idea of home and nations, and Kirpal Singh have been befriended and is enamored of certain English things for a while. They don’t want to go back to where they were from.*

(Ondaatje with Wachtel, 260)

Ondaatje situates this novel at the time when the British Empire collapsed and its status as a colonial center came in question. It is set in the villa which is bombed ruined and is surrounded by fragmented remainder of the luxurious European past. Ondaatje introduces a complex and confused fabric of inter relationship between his four main characters in the novel. John Bolland in his book *The English Patient: A Reader’s Guide* explains aptly about the identity determination as:

*Cultural theory has recognized that the identity does not emerge from a spontaneous essential selfhood, but that it is largely determined by the relationship between self and other. You identify yourself as the member of an ethnic group or nation through your difference from perceived ‘foreigner,’ as member of a class through difference from an “outsider.”*

(Bolland, 30)
Identity is largely determined by the relationship between the self and other. So identity is a social construct. We identify ourselves as a member of an ethnic groups or nation which provides us with a sense of belonging. The individuals are parts of one collective body known as a nation. Everyone has a nationality. This idea is defined by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. He states “It is an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” (Anderson, 6) Nation provides the people, the sense of belonging and identity through a shared territory which they won. So the people of that particular nation have a right to separate from the other people on the basis of the borders. In this context, Anderson’s theory may be useful while discussing the belonging of the character to their imagined community that is the villa San Girolamo. According to John Bolland the characters in the villa are victims of the war and their complex heritage causes the identity crisis. He observes:

*Nationalism is implicated in their suffering in a number of ways: they are victims of the violence of a war pursued for nationalistic ends; their complex heritage causes problems of identification and allegiance; their stories are linked by the theme of betrayal, which exemplifies the conflict between personal commitment to individual or group and the more abstract allegiance to nationhood and state.*

(Bolland, 30)

The novel exemplifies the conflict between personal commitment to individual or group and how the cultural identities and sense of belonging are crashed. According to Stuart Hall cultural identity:

*It is a matter “becoming” as well as of “being.” It belongs to future as much as to the past.* (Hall, 112)

Cultural identity has an origin and history. It also changes in time as people develop and acquire new preferences. It is not only about ‘being’ in the past but also about ‘becoming’ in the future. The characters in the villa are from different countries and having different nationalities and different cultural backgrounds. But here in the villa their nationalism and personal identities are crushed. Their belonging to the new place and their newly formed identities are confused.

The novel attempts to investigate the context and the background of the World War II and the newly formed community in the villa. Each character is affected by the
issue of identity crisis. Nicholas B. Dirks in an essay “In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century’ discuses the symbol of ruins in ‘The English Patient,” he writes “The ruin was a sign of loss, of absence, stood for wholes that could never again be achieved if even conceived.” (Nicholas, 8) However the ruin is a sign of loss or absence and in the same way character’s identities are also in ruins and lost.

The centre of the novel is the protagonist English patient who is burned beyond the recognition and lost the memory of who he is or from where he comes. His personal identity erases along with his burned skin colour. His loss of memory shows his crushed identities. He is not properly identified because the colour of his skin as a racial mark is burnt away. He is Hungarian yet mistaken as an Englishman who hates the English. Due to his English dress and manners and vaguely European accent and his talk about, “flower beds in Gloucestershire,” (Ondaatje 1993, 163) he is considered as The English Patient. Hana, a Canadian nurse who takes care of the burnt man in the Pisa hospital comes across The English Patient, as a man without identity:

In the Pisa hospital she had seen the English patient for the first time. A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eyes was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet. There was nothing to recognize in him.

(Ondaatje, 48)

English patient looks like a burned animal taut and dark and a pool for Hana. He is the last patient in the villa San Girolamo. He has with him a copy of Herodotus, which reminds him his own loss of identity.

And in his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus’ Histories, are other fragments—maps, diary, entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All that is missing is his own name. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless without rank or battalion or squadron.

(Ondaatje, 96)
Bolland also comments on the character of the patient as “his physical appearance, images the erasure of national identities.” (Bolland, 32) He works for Western project and possesses the unmapped desert resulted in the destruction of his own features, the map of his identities.

After the plane crash, the English patient lies in the villa under the care of Hana. Hana is a twenty years old Canadian nurse. She is torn between her youth and maturity and has suffered psychologically. She has lost her father during the war and also the father of her unborn child. She cannot bring her child into such world. She has aborted. These psychological stress and sufferings make her life confusing one. She loses the meaning of her life; “she would remain with the one burned man they called the English patient.” (Ondaatje, 51) She tries to seek some kind of meaning in her life. Instead of going to home in Canada to her step mother Clara, she prefers to stay in Italy, cares for the burned patient, the father figure, and her despairing saint.

Rufus Cook in an article “Imploding Time and Geography” rightly states: “Hana was not there when her father died and consequently could not take care of him.” (Cook Rufus, 117) In order to realize the father-daughter relationship, she decides to live with the English patient in this ruined villa she starts to nurse the patient and crushes her identity. She is nomadic in the villa. She sees villa as her cell. Nursing a patient is a kind of healing for Hana.

The issue of identity crisis is also presented in the novel through the character of Kip, the sapper. He is the only non-English member in the villa. His real name is Kirpal Singh. Like the patient, Kirpal is a young Sikh and also a sapper in the British army. Both of these characters represent the cultural hybridity which reject the national borders. By rejecting his family traditions and contrasting with his more anti-colonial brother, he joins the British army in England and becomes a part of an Engineer unit. In England he finds a new family in the bomb disposal squad. It is commanded by Lord Suffolk who becomes a surrogate father to Kirpal. Lord Suffolk has a technological knowledge, a sense of discipline and courage in bomb defusing, which help Kirpal in establishing his sense of identity in the adopted land. Lord Suffolk’s nicknaming to Kirpal Singh as Kip shows the attempts of the English to colonize him and to make him more English:

The name had attached itself to him curiously. In his first bomb disposal report in England some better had marked his
paper, and the officer had exclaimed, “What’s this? Kipper grease?” and laughter surrounded him. He had no idea what a Kipper was, but the young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish. Within a week his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten. He hadn’t minded this. Lord Suffolk and his demolition team took to calling him by his nickname.

(Ondaatje, 87)

Kirpal willingly accepts his nickname which indicates his assimilation into the British culture. His cultural identity rooted in the Indian heritage is damaged and is forced to act in a way the Englishmen behave. Kip realizes that the British will never accept him truly, it doesn’t matter for them how truly he has assimilate into the English culture. This feeling leads him to alienation. The British wants Indians to fight from their side but are unwilling to communicate with them. Kip thinks that The English expect Indians to fight for them but won’t talk to the Indians. Kip’s hybrid nature suits with what Homi Bhabha refers to in The Location of culture as ‘The Third Space.’ He notes:

*Remember that it is the ... in between space that carries the burden of the meaning of a culture....By exploring the Third space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.*

(Bhabha, 38-39)

This in-between position makes Kip impossible to accept alien culture and emerge as the other in the host culture.

After the death of his mentor Lord Suffolk, Kip joins the sappers in the Italian campaign. Here he discovers Hana caring for her patient in the dangerously ruined villa which is abandoned by the Allied forces. Kip’s humming of the Western songs, which his friend Hardy used to sing while diffusing a bomb, indicates his mimicry of the English culture. Kip listens the sound of Hana’s piano-playing as he steps into the villa to search the pencil bombs in the musical instrument kept by the enemy. Hana watches Kip’s darker brown colour of his body and his turban. Hana feels that these marks on Kip’s body are symbolic of his Eastern identity:

*When he steps into the seemingly empty villa he is noisy. He is the only one of them who has remained in uniform. Immaculate, buckles shined, the sapper appears out of his tent,
his turban symmetrically layered, the boots clean and banging into the word or stone floors of the house.

(Onaatje, 74)

Most of the residents become aware of Kip’s presence in the villa. David Caravaggio is a Canadian Italian thief, the captive of Germany and has amputated his both thumbs by the enemy. He is troubled by the memories of his torture. He is a man with bandaged hands. However, all the individuals in the villa suffer from the psychological or physical wounds. Ondaatje in an interview with Wachtel writes:

_It is a book about very tentative healing among a group of people. I think it is that most of all, “and the villa” was an Eden, an escape, a cul-de –sac during the war and this was where the healing began._

(Onaatje Wachtel 253)

The English Patient teases to Caravaggio, as his name sounds very absurd, Caravaggio replies, “At least I have a name.” (Onaatje, 116) It is better to have a name or identity than having no name or no identity. Hana forms a close affinity with Indian Kip. They share their cultural kinship Even they celebrate Hana’s twenty-first birthday. Caravaggio watches the English patient and wants to reveal English patient’s identity for Hana’s sake.

From the beginning of the novel, the English patient’s identity never comes to a final definition, as Bolland observes: “The central image of The English Patient is a figure whose identity is physically erased, made up of composite cultural influences and continually resistant to final definition.” (Bolland, 37) His identity is erased and he becomes the anonymous English patient. Caravaggio gives morphine to the English patient, the patient rides on the boat of morphine. The effect of morphine makes the patient to tell the stories of the Almasy (himself) desert explorer. For Caravaggio “English patient is not English.” (Onaatje, 163) He is a Count Ladislaus de Almasy, a Hungarian who worked for the Germans and British during the war. John Bolland in his book _The English Patient: A Readers Guide_, writes in this connection:

_He had joined the group of German, English, Hungarian and African explorers in the early 1930s searching for the lost Oasis of Zerzura. They were an “Oasis society.”_

(Bolland, 28)
The desert explorers who belong to the different nationalities, from England, Hungarians, German, Africa, are insignificant to the Bedouins. Almasy hates the nations and nationalities. Almasy states:

*By 1932, Bagnold was finished and Madox and the rest of us were everywhere. Looking for the lost army of Cambyses. Looking for Zerzura. 1932 and 1933 and 1934. Not seeing each other for months. Just the Bedouins and us, crisscrossing the Forty Days Road. There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I’ve met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African—all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we become motionless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations.*

(Ondaatje, 138)

Madox is one of the members of their exploration team. Like Almasy Madox’s identity is also crushed. He kills himself because he is disappointed by the English nationalism and national identity. He hates such kind of nationalism which respects the war than the civilization. Like Madox, Almasy is also betrayed by his English social identity which is based on the western nationalism. Almasy knows that mapping of the desert is an instrument of colonial domination and power:

*The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their spear of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other first step by a white man across a great rive, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever.*

(Ondaatje, 141)

Colonizers establish oppressive structures of servants and slaves in the new land. But the territorial claims of the Europe cannot be established. Almasy knows that the desert cannot be claimed or dominated for colonialism. Almasy agrees:

*The desert could not be claimed and owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East.*

(Ondaatje, 138-39)
The European mapmakers obsessively carve their names on sand, trees and on fossils for possessiveness. But Almasy wants to erase his name and place. He wants to erase his identity that he got from Britishers.

*I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation.*

(Ondaatje, 139)

Almasy hates the names and national borders which he acquires from the Britishers. Ondaatje here focuses on the English colonialism as act of naming.

In the novel Michael Ondaatje presents the extreme colonialist British character through Geoffrey Clifton who shows obsession with naming and sexual possessiveness. While on expedition, Clifton tries to domesticate the exotic things. He names the base camp site as Bir Messaha Country Club without the consent of natives. He says, “I name this site the Bir Messaha Country Club” (Ondaatje, 142) “He has named his plane Rupurt Bear.” (Ondaatje, 143) He even constantly praises his wife’s beauty with words. The perfect British colonialist Geoffrey Clifton always controls the situation through names and language. It is a type of colonial domination by the colonizer. John Bolland aptly observes “From the beginning of the English colonialism, of course, sexual and territorial discovery and possession have been archly equated by the British male.” (Bolland, 41) Geoffrey Clifton, the British Intelligence, knows that the desert may be some day is a theatre of war. Naming and mapping are the signs of the power and a tool of colonialism. So, he supports the naming. But in contrast, Almasy hates the naming. He thinks that the desert constantly changes and names do not last long there. Colonizers try to colonize the deserts. Almasy considers Clifton as a man rooted in the English machine. Clifton cares for the family genealogy. He has a family genealogy going back to Canute. Katherine Clifton also hates to die without name:

*Just as she loved family traditions and courteous ceremony and old memorized poems. She would have hated to die without a name.*

(Ondaatje, 170)

After the plane crash, Bedouins saves the English patient on a condition to name each of the guns and weapons they have from different countries. Geoffrey
Clifton along with his newly married wife Katharine Clifton joins with the south Cairo expedition team. Katharine develops a love affair with Almasy. Their relation is based on the sex only, when Clifton comes to know about Almasy and Katharine’s relationship, he tries to kill both of them in a plane crash. Unfortunately Geoffrey Clifton dies in the crash and Katharine gets injured badly. Almasy buries Geoffrey and carries her up into the Cave of Swimmers. But before the plane crash incident their intimate affair comes to an end because of Almasy’s rejection of ownership.

You slide past everything with your fear and hate of ownership, of owing of being owned, of being named. You think this is a virtue. I think you are inhuman. If I leave you, who will you go to? Would you find another lover?

(Ondaatje, 238)

Almasy wants to save Katharine after the plane crash. He needs the help to cure her, but fails to reveal her true identity and denies her origin to the British soldiers. So Bitishers reject to help him. “While the denial of her origin is in keeping with Ondaatje’s frequently expressed sympathy for outsider, there is a selfishness and sterility in Almasy’s refusal to acknowledge relational ties.” (Bolland, 42) To Almasy there is no escape from his own responsibility for the death of Katharine and her husband.

Almasy tries to obtain Katharine violently from the social controls and wants to reach a self that is outside the stereotypes of class and gender and the social condition of the past. Ondaatje describes the love story of Almasy and Katharine as:

A love story is not about those who lose their heart but about those who find that sullen inhabitant who, when it is stumbled upon, means the body can fool no one, can fool nothing—not the wisdom of sleep or the habit of social graces. It is a consuming of oneself and the past.

(Ondaatje, 97)

English patient announces that he and Kip are international bastards. In the international migration Kip erases his cultural identity and possess a new hybrid identity. The English patient is also burned beyond the recognition and found nameless without any identity.

At the end of the novel Kip hears the news from the radio that the atom bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Kip angrily almost kills the English patient:
“Although he is the man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following the codes of Westerners like a dutiful son.” (Ondaatje, 217)

Kip participates in the war on behalf of England like a dutiful son. He has not trusted his brother and by breaking his family tradition. Kip angrily addresses to the English patient as a representative of the West. He says:

I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from your country. Your fragile white island that with costumes and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world.

(Ondaatje, 283)

Kip’s identity is crushed into pieces. He starts to revise his relationship with the West. He agrees with his more anti-colonial brother’s views about the westerners:

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. But we, oh, we were easily impressed -by speeches and medals and your ceremonies. What I have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For this to happen?

(Ondaatje, 284-85)

Kip comes to know from Caravaggio that the English patient is not an Englishman, he is Hungarian spy. But Kip thinks that he may be the American, French or Hungarian. When they bombed on brown race, he becomes an Englishman. Kip angrily says:

American, French, I don’t care. When you start on bombing the brown races of the world, you are an Englishman.

(Ondaatje, 286)

Finally Kip leaves the villa San Girolamo without any food or water and without the consent of Hana. Kip gazes towards the photograph of his family and notices: “His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here.” (Ondaatje, 287)

He leaves the villa forever. Maggie Morgan in an article, “From Fiction to Reel” agrees with Kip’s anger over the West. He reacts in anger against the injustice done to the brown races. Morgan comments:
For those in the Italian Monastery, including the “English patient were also victims of colonialism and war. Therefore it becomes clear that although Ondaatje was inserting the colonized’s voice into the discourse on World War II. He was vocalizing the anger of the colonized in order to initiate a process of healing.

(Maggie Morgan, 164)

However, the novel differentiates Kip as a racial outsider. He faces the problem of identity crisis. The issues of identity crisis and sexual desire are explored through the relationship between Almasy and Katharine. The English patient is a nameless and faceless man without having identity and who wants to erase name, and hates nations and borders. He works as a spy and a map marker. He is also colonized by British intelligence spy Geoffrey Clifton. Katharine hates to die without a name but she also dies without a name. Though a colonizer, her identity is also crushed. Hana is psychologically wounded and faces the identity crisis this novel. In an interview with Garvie about ‘The English Patient,’ Ondaatje responds in the following way:

When I began this book I wasn’t sure who the nurse was, any more that I know who the patient was. The book really started with who the patient was, and I thought that was going to be the main story ...Then there was this nurse who was damaged subtly, and I realized it was Hana. As they merged turned up on the scene it seemed that... I was really writing and discovering new people. It felt very new to me.

(Ondaatje with Garvie 1992, 932)

IV.V: Crisis for Identity in Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost:

Michael Ondaatje’s complex cultural background encourages him to write frequently the literature of dislocation and displacement. His recent novel, Anil’s Ghost (2000), is about the identity crisis due to the cultural clashes. Todd Hoffman in his review of Anil’s Ghost writes about the novel as a “mystery of identity.” (Hoffman 449) The novel tells us the story of Anil Tissera, a young woman and forensic anthropologist born in Sri Lanka and educated in the West. She is working for International Human Rights group. She returns to her homeland for the first time
after fifteen years to identify the victims of the political violence. Sri Lankan government appoints Mr. Diyasena, the local archaeologist of Colombo to work with her in Human Rights Investigation for the seven weeks project.

Anil lands in Sri Lanka (Katunayake airport) in early March. A young official approaches Anil and asks her about her identity in Sri Lankan English,

*How long has it been? You were born here no?*

*Fifteen years.' You still speak Sinhala? “A little.”*  

(Ondaatje, 5)

Spending fifteen years in the West, she is returned to her homeland westernized, living in abroad with westernized outlook, she interprets her native land with a long distance gaze. Though lives in Sri Lanka for 18 years she no longer speaks Sinhala fluently. While in Sri Lanka she was a swimmer. She wants to erase her former identity as a swimmer. She wants people from Sri Lanka; identify her as a Geneva Organization’s forensic specialist. In her first visit with Sarath Diyasena, she warns him:

*Mr. Diyasena …let’s not mention swimming again, okay? A lot of blood under the bridge since then.*  

(Ondaatje, 12)

Sandeep Sanghera in his article “Touching the Language of Citizenship in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*” in Zeptnek’s *Comparative Cultural Study* examines Anil’s identity and raises the questions posits by Ondaatje about her identity crisis:

*…just who is Anil? Is she a foreigner? If so, is she American (for that is where she studied and lives “mostly”), or is she British (for that is the passport she carries). Or as a representative of an international human rights centre based in Geneva, is she a mishmash citizen of all things Western? In that context then, how does Sri Lanka fit in, since after all that was her first home? That was the space where she first learned to walk and talk. So could she be hyphenated? But then is she a Sri Lankan-American or a Sri Lankan British or is she just a generic Eastern – Western mix?*  

(Sanghera Sandeep, 83)
Born in Sri Lanka, studied in and lives mostly in America Anil carries with her a British passport so she possesses a hyphenated identity. Her identity is shaped in Sri Lanka, England and United states. Berger and Luckmann rightly points out:

_Indeed identity is objectively defined as location in a certain world and can be subjectively appropriated only along with that world ….A coherent identity in corporate within itself all the various internalized roles and attitudes._

(Berger and Luckmann, 132)

Anil is a global traveler. She has no fixed identity. Her identity has undergone changes with time and place. Anil visits Lalita, her old ayah in Sri Lanka. The only connection she has with Sri Lanka is Lalita. “Lalita was the only person who taught her real things as a child.” (Ondaatje, 20) When Anil visits Lalita, she barely communicates in Sinhala with Lalita. Lalita’s granddaughter speaks in Tamil but Anil can understand only few words, she has to depend on Lalita’s granddaughter, who speaks only in primary English.

When Anil enters in Kynsey Road Hospital, Dr Perera asks her about her Sri-Lankan background. Dr. Perera points out her Western costume, “Your dress is Western, I see…You’re the swimmer, no?” (Ondaatje, 22) She wants to erase her former identity as a swimmer. Anil and her married lover, Cullies a science fiction writer brings out the problem of identity faced by the protagonist Anil in her own homeland.

_Do you speak French? he asked. ‘No. Just English. I can write some Sinhala.’ Is that your background? A no-name plaza appeared on the side of the highway, and she parked beneath the blinking lights of a Bowlerama. ‘I live here,’ she said. ‘In the West.’_

(Ondaatje, 32)

Anil mostly lives in abroad and becomes one with Western culture. So she can speak only English and she can write some Sinhala. Though educated in foreign language and culture, Anil’s upbringing in Sri Lanka makes her not to forget her native culture. She agrees, her living place is only the West and not the Sri Lanka. She has an influence of western education and thoughts on her. Manav Ratti, comments on Anil’s behavior regarding location, as: “removed her from the thickness of location”
(Ratti, 136). She feels better when Chitra Abeysekera identified her as a woman from Geneva. Chitra asks Anil what she likes about West. Anil answers:

> Oh- what do I like? Most of all I think I like that I can do things on my own terms. Nothing is anonymous here, is it. I miss my privacy.

(Ondaatje, 68)

Anil is rebellious girl of 12 year when she lives in Sri Lanka. “She knew herself to be, and was known to others as, a determined creature.” (Ondaatje, 63) She renames herself using her brother’s unused second name. She wants more masculine name and identity for herself. By changing name, she has rejected her feminine identity. The narrator points out:

> Her name had not always been Anil. 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. He would not commit himself to the trade though he knew she wanted the name more than anything else. After that she allowed no other first names on her passports or school reports or application form. 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 haunted down the desired name like a specific lover she had seen and wanted, tempted by nothing else along the way.

(Ondaatje, 63-64)

She adopts a name Anil, and becomes stranger to her past life. This acceptance of muscular name makes her easier to adapt western identity. And this adaptation of western identity leads her to alienation. McClintock refers Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry and points out that:

> In Bhabha’s schema mimicry is a flawed identity imposed on colonized people who are obliged to mirror back an image of the colonials but in imperfect form: ‘almost the same but not white.’

(MacClintock, 62)
Anil leaves Sri Lanka at an early age of eighteen for her higher education is studied in England, and in United States, works as a forensic anthropologist. She feels comfort in the western identity and her masculine naming. But the mimicry of western identity leads to a flawed, imposed, ill-fitting identity. These ill-fitting identities lead to alienation, and this alienation causes an identity crisis.

Victoria Cook in her article, “Exploring Transnational Identities in Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost” Cook comments on Ondaatje’s construction of Anil as:

Closer examination of Ondaatje’s construction of Anil Tissera raises number of points, such as: she is Westernizes. She has an adopted masculine name, which we learnt, she “brought” for herself from her brother. She is a scientist and spokesperson for the United Nations-a combination of factors which render her the antithesis of Gayatri Spivak’s “subaltern women.”

(Cook Victoria, 7)

Cook’s examination of Anil, make us come to know about all these factors of her identity renders her, as the title of Gayatri Spivak’s subaltern woman. Anil in exchange of her brother’s second unused name pays ‘sexual favour’ demanded by her brother, which makes her subaltern woman. The narrator observes:

She gave her brother one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favour he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse.

(Ondaatje, 63-64)

Anil’s desire to change name and possess a masculine name indicates, “She has rejected her Sri Lankan culture, finding its strong communal ties oppressive.” (Bolland, 107) Anil’s buying her brother’s name shows her rejection of Sri Lankan culture as well as of common ethos. She refuses to accept her initially given name. It also indicates erasure of her gender identity.

On her expedition of seven week’s project in Sri Lanka Anil as a forensic investigator, perceives the situation of ethnic conflict and violence in the country from Sarath Diyasena. In this unofficial war, killing and disappearance takes place. No one can tell who the victims are. People get disappeared while performing the small acts of daily living. It’s a Hundred Year’s war with modern weaponry. “The reason for
war was war.” (Ondaatje, 39) Ondaatje in an interview with Maya Jaggi gives his impression of the novel:

...worried me is that this book would be taken as representative; I do back flips to avoid that there is a tendency with us in Canada to say, this is a book ‘about Sri Lanka.’ But it isn’t a statement about the war, as if it is the ‘true and only story.’ It is my individual take on four or five characters, a personal tunneling into it.

(Ondaatje with Jaggi, 6)

Ondaatje does not focus on the war but tries to give the background of the war and the impact of the political violence committed by government, antigovernment insurgents and separatist guerrillas on the main characters in the novel. Sarath and Anil finds three skeletons in Bandarawela caves. No one is hopeful of Anil’s investigation. Sarath informed her that ‘law is on the side of power and not truth.’ You can’t just slip in, make a discovery and leave or like a visiting journalist who files reports about flies and scabs. Sarath knows the actual truth of his country. In the government protected archaeological preserves in Bandarawela region. These are complete skeletons; one of these skeletons is not prehistoric. It is new, a proof of a murder by the government. This skeleton is moved from somewhere else and is reburied in this government protected area to make sure that it may not be discovered. Anil and Sarath name it as ‘Sailor’ and other three as ‘Tinker’, ‘Tailor’ and ‘Soldier’. Sailor is found at sacred historical site, a site that is constantly, under government or police supervision.

Anil wants to reveal the truth. Sarath thinks it’s harmful to reveal truth. “He also warns her ‘be careful what you reveal.” (Ondaatj, 40) He says, “You are six hours away from Colombo and you are whispering think about that.” (Ondaatje, 50) During her European and North American education she loves foreignness but here her own country she feels uncertain:

In her years abroad, during her European and North American education Anil had courted foreignness, was at ease whether on the Bakerloo line or the highways around Santa Fe. She felt complete abroad. (Even now her brain held the area codes of Denver and Portland). And she had come to expect clearly marked roads. But here, on this island, she
realized she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere.

(Ondaatje, 50)

Even in an island Anil’s brain holds the area code of Denver and Portland. Both, at the West and the East, she is alienated, she is rootless. This leads her identity crisis.

Anil knows the fact that violence loses power, and identity of the human being. Ethnic conflict within the nation causes the crisis of the national identity.

_She used to believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear. But she saw that those who were slammed and stained by the violence lost the power of language and logic._

(Ondaatje, 52)

Number of disappearance, death, murder, the human loss is unavoidable in such nation where violence is stained and slammed and result is loss of power and identity.

Anil names the skeleton as ‘Sailor’ the victim of the government Anil wants to represent ‘all those lost voices, and tries to find justice to all the victims of the civil war. She says:

_Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest._

(Ondaatje, 52)

She remembers her teacher in Oklahoma, “One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims.”(Ondaatje, 172) Anil is suspicious about Sarath’s identity. Sarath helps Anil in her project:

_Sarath’s daily path as a professional archaeologist in this world, she guessed, involved commissions and the favours of the ministers, involved waiting politely for hours in their office lobbies. Information was made public with diversions and subtexts-as if the truth would not be of interest when given directly, without waltzing backwards._

(Ondaatje, 51)

Sarath is involved in commissions and the favours of the ministers. He always seems tortured. There is always a rivalry between him and his brother. His wife has committed suicide.
During their investigation Anil works without hunger or thirst or desire for a friend, foe or lover’s company. She wants to reach the truth to bring about justices, for the nameless victims of the war. So Anil and Sarath visit Sarath’s former teacher, Palipana an epigraphist. He is the best archaeological theorist in the country. “As a historian and a scientist he has approached every problem with many hands.” (Ibid 78) But he has not received any respect according to his career.

*But he refused to give up what he claimed to have discovered and made no attempt to defend himself. Instead he retreated physically.*

(Ondaatje, 80)

No one can find the sentences Palipana has quoted and translated. He is a reclusive scholar, archaeologist, a father figure and exile in his own country. He prefers to live in a ‘Grove of Ascetics,’ after his brother Narada’s murder. He is a blind man and a marginal figure who has withdrawn from society. Palipana has reconstructed eras simply by looking at runes. He has not made any attempt to defend himself and face the problem of identity crisis. Even he is erased from new edition of Sinhala encyclopedia. He says:

*Ah. Yes, yes. You’re lucky you got hold of an old edition. I’m erased from the new one.*

(Ondaatje, 92)

Sarath and Anil shows the Sailor’s skull to Palipana and requests him to guide them about reconstructing Sailor’s head. Palipana suggests Ananda’s name to reconstruct the Sailor’s head.

Palipana’s brother Narada was a monk and Sarath’s teacher also. He has written some pamphlets in Sinhala. Narada lives near Hambantota. Palipana says:

*My brother entered temple life. He escaped the world and the world came after him.*

(Ondaatje, 99)

Narada is murdered and his identity as a Sri Lankan monk is crushed. Palipana lives like a hermit with his niece Lakama whose identity is also erased. The Civil War has made her orphan. Her parents were killed in war and she is unable to deal with the possible danger around her. So Palipana brings her to the Grove of Ascetics and the greatest epigraphist of the country educates her but the future of Lakama is not so bright after Palipana. Every character is affected by the trauma of Sri Lankan Civil
While returning from Palipana, Sarath and Anil come across a truck driver Gunesena who is crucifying alive on the road.

Anil and Sarath brings Gunesena to the base hospitals in the North central provinces. Gamini, a younger nomadic doctor and Sarath’s brother, works with the victims of violence in the base hospital in the North. He is also wounded psychologically. He speaks rarely, “It seemed he did not approach people unless they had a wound.” (Ondaatje, 207) His wife Chrishanti deserts him and he loses the connection to the world. He is collapsed. He works in exhausting shifts. His duty is to work for strangers and cut them open without knowing their names. He feels happy with talking intimately and with humor to stranger. “He remains invisible even to himself.” (Ondaatje, 219) Gamini has a love affair with Sarath’s wife.

A Colombo doctor a neurosurgeon in the private sector has kidnapped. He is living very hard life with insurgents. He has lost his identity as a reputed neurosurgeon of the country. He even forgets to shave and looks in the mirror. But there was no energy in him to be angry or insulted. Eight months later his wife and children come to meet him. The narrator observes:

When he came closer his wife saw blood on his smock and see hesitated. ‘It doesn’t matter’, he said, lifting her into an embrace. She touched his beard, which he had forgotten he had grown. There were no mirrors and he hadn’t seen it...‘Mmm Linus Corea laughed.’ ‘They keep me going ‘He paused and said ‘it’s my life’.

(Ondaatje, 121)

Life on island at the time of Civil War has not been safe. Everyone is facing traumatic experiences.

While Anil was studying at Guy’s Hospital in London as a trainee forensic scientist, she had heard a new word ‘amygdala’ “It sounds Sri Lankan name for some bad god.” (Ondaatje, 131) It means nothing but a location, Victoria Burrows in her article “The Heterotopic Spaces of Postcolonial Trauma in Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s ghost” writes how Anil is fascinated with sound and shape of this word which connects her to her homeland:

In much the same way, the amygdala also mediates the emotional responses to trauma that are encountered and revisited during the course of narratives. This seems intimates
**how location or place can overshadow the meaning of the word, how dark or fearful memories are connected to the physical. What begins for Anil as a fascination with the sound and shape of a word that connects her to her homeland turns into a habituated physical act, and intrinsic part of her investigative methodology as a reader of the intricacies of dead bodies.**

(Burrows Victoria, 161)

The anatomical term ‘amygdala’ reflects the emotional responses to trauma and how these emotional responses cause her identity crisis. While studying at Guy’s Hospital Anil finds herself in the smoke of one bad marriage. Anil feels attached to the Sri Lankan medical student who is the only seducer and does not prove as a good friend or a good husband:

*He was not shy. Within days of their meeting he focused his wits entirely on Anil a many armed seducer and note writer and flower bringer and telephone message leaver (he had quickly charmed her landlady).... She had the sense that he had never been lonely or alone before meeting her.*

(Ondaatje, 138)

Anil married quickly with him. But her lover makes their private acts public. Her father- in- law once has visited England. He tried to persuade them to return to Colombo and have his grand children. “He objected her to having full- time career, keeping her own name was annoyed at her talking back.” (Ondaatje, 139) And the next day her father-in – law set up with his son and fly back to Colombo. “After she escaped him she would never say his name out loud.” (Ondaatje, 140)

The married life of Anil proves failure. She was not happy. She was deceived by Colombian medical student. She starts to lead lonely life after her husband deserts her. Sarath comes to know that Anil’s journey towards the truth of island is dangerous. Sarath says, “There were dangerous in handing truth to an unsafe city around you.” (Ondaatje, 153)

Anil, Sarath and Ananda a ritual painter form a community, isolated from the rest of the country in order to find truth about sailor. Ananda has started working on Sailor’s skull and Anil continues to work on Sailor’s occupation. Anil cannot share information with Ananda. Both of them are not able to communicate with each other.
Language becomes the barrier between them. Anil put her hand on his shoulders, the language of touching and “for the next few days they went back to their mutual silence.” (Ondaatje, 167) According to Deng:

_identity is the way individual and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity religion, language and culture._

(Deng, 1)

In spite of having same ethnicity, religion, language and culture Anil and Ananda cannot communicate with each other. Anil lives for a long period in abroad and has lost her touch with Sri Lankan language through which she can identify herself as a member of Sri Lankan ethnic group. She cannot communicate verbally with Ananda and faces the problem of identity crisis in her homeland.

Ondaatje has depicted the everyday life on the island during the war and how the violence destroys the life of common Sri Lankan people during the war time. Ananda’s wife Sirissa has disappeared. Ananda has reconstructed the head of the Sailor which looks so peaceful. Like Ananda everyone on the island expect peace and safe life and a stable, fixed identity as Sri Lankan citizen which is lost due to ethnic conflict. Anil becomes panic and cries for Ananda’s plight, for his disappeared wife. She expresses her grief to Sarath:

_Ananda, Sailor, their lovers. Your brother working himself to death. There’s only a mad logic here, no resolving._

(Ondaatje, 182)

Every character has to face the problem of identity. Anil wants to speak for the truth on the island. So she believes on her teacher’s advice and wants to reveal the truth on the island, to give identity, to the Sailor and all those victims of the war.

Anil has met a woman in Arizona lab, a forensic pathologist named Leaf Niedecker. She is closest friend of Anil. Leaf is ill and suffers from Alzheimer. Leaf states:

_I just keep….forgetting things. I can diagnose myself, you see. I have Alzheimer’ I know I am too young for this, but I had encephalitis as a kid._

(Ondaatje, 252)
She has a bad asthma, so she moved into the desert for a year disappearing from Anil’s life. She starts to lose her memory, and fights for her life. Leaf’s losing memory indicates erasure of her identity as a forensic pathologist.

At last Anil and Sarath has identified Sailor at the Plumbago village. His name is Ruwan Kumar, a toddy tapper. Due to fatal wound in his leg break he works as a miner in the local mine. Anil has prepared the report about the political murder and returned to the laboratory. Finally Anil’s identity as a foreigner is erased. She identifies the victims of Civil War not as a stranger or outsider but belonging to Sri Lankan.

However, Anil’s fate to lose identity and suffering doesn’t have an ending. Her identity as an insider is not stable. Government officials tries to discredit her whole investigation, her truth, her belief that, “One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims.” (Ondaatje, 272) Anil wishes to reveal the truth of government, that some government forces have possibly murdered innocent people. But the government confiscate her reports and she is told to work on another skeleton and report within forty eight hours. She was carrying no briefcase. “No papers.” “No forensic equipments.” (Ondaatje, 278) She has given another ancient skeleton for forensic analysis, but when she cut the plastic she finds Sailor and tape recorder and the information from Sarath as:

\[
I \text{ am in the tunnel of the Armoury building. I have just a moment. As you can tell, this is not any skeleton but Sailor. It’s your twentieth century evidence, five years old in death. Erase my words here. Complete the report and be ready to leave at five tomorrow morning. There’s a seven-o-clock plane. Someone will drive you to the airport. I would like it to be me but it will probably be Gunesena. Do not leave the lab or call me.} \\
\text{(Ondaatje, 281)}
\]

Does Anil remember Sarath in the adopted country of her choice? She remembers about Sarath and Gamini in spite of everything. Both the brothers love their country very much.

Ananda and Anil always carry with them the ghost of Sarath. Anil enters in Sri Lanka with westernized outlook. She thinks it is easy for her to go to Sri Lanka, make a discovery and write a report for United Nation and fly away. But Sri Lankan
government confiscates her report and findings and asks for the forensic analysis of another skeleton, other than Sailor in forty-eight hours and forces her to leave the country. Hence Anil fails to discover the truth and her identity: “Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.” (Ondaatje, 283) Cusk writes about Anil’s identity as:

Her [Anil’s] return to Sri Lanka thus has all the hallmark of “personal quest” literature: a search for roots, memory and fulfillment. The novel sets out to confound her, and our, expectations. In Sri Lanka, she quickly finds herself among people who live and die for their work, who labour in an atmosphere of political terror, blood shade and mortal danger. Her plans to make contact with family connections fade away. Instead, she determines, following a different but equally American narrative tradition, to expose governmental corruption by proving that a skeletons she has found is an ancient burial site is in fact that of a recent victim of a political murder. In this, too, she is confounded: naïve, schooled in the redemptive mythology of the West, she condemns to suppression that which she seeks to expose.

(Cusk, 5)


IV.VI: Crisis for Identity in Michael Ondaatje’s *Divisadero*:

Michael Ondaatje’s more recent novel *Divisadero* (2007) explores the theme of identity crisis and division. Ondaatje in an interview with Waddell points out that, “*Divisadero* is about many things, but especially about identity and the mysteries of who exactly we are.” (http://quarterlyconversation.com) In the Northern California’s Petaluma farm a farmer and his eleven-years-old daughters, Anna and Claire live along with an enigmatic young man named Coop. The novel starts with the cruel beating on a ranch, in 1970s and an outburst of violence, drive Anna to move from California’s one of the Gold Rush, small settlements to Paris and then to Demu in Southern France. Anna decides to write the biography of the French writer Lucien Segura, Coop flees away to the Tahoe as a poker player, and Claire works in the public defender’s office in the San Francisco. Sofie De Smyter in her article on
*Divisadero* argues that Ondaatje, “foregrounds that both sign and subject are always already divided, split, double and in the process of becoming.” (http://journals.lib.unb.ca)

The novel opens with Anna as the protagonist and the narrator, narration of her painful story. She lives on one of the little settlement along the Petaluma road, a rural area in the Southern California, with her father and sister Claire and Cooper the hired hand. Three of them grow as siblings but Anna is the only biological daughter of her father. Further the Petaluma, a Cooper family lives with their hundred goats. Sometime they camp their goats in Anna’s field. The terrible violence destroys the peaceful life of Cooper family:

*The Cooper family was killed by a hired hand who beat them to death with a wooden board. At first no one knew who had committed such act, but their son had hidden in the crawl space under the floorboards of the house for several days. He was four years old and he came out eventually and told who had done it. We took the boy in to stay and work on the form.*

(Ondaatje 2007, 10)

Anna the biological daughter who loses her mother at birth, Claire an orphan adopted girl and Coop the hired hand and Anna’s father form a community in the farm house. Coop becomes one of the family members of Anna who listens and helps family to lead happy life: “Since the death of our mother it was Coop who listened to us complains and worries, and he allows us the stage when he thought we wished for it.” (Ondaatje, 9) Coop is at ease with his duties. His social removal is rooted in the horror of his parent’s murder. Still he feels that he come from nowhere. This trauma forces him to seek refuge in reading the stories “about gold camps and gold mines in the California northeast, about those who had risked everything at a river bend on a left turn and so discovered a fortune.”(Ondaatje, 9) Coop sees that gold mines offers him, “euphoria and chance,” a tall story that included a murder or mistaken identity or a love affair. Both Anna and Claire grow having their own separate identity. Anna is very conscious of her identity.

….we would now need to be distinctly Anna and distinctly Claire. It becomes important not to be known as the sisters of - or worse, mistaken for- the other.

(Ondaatje, 19)
Anna reminds ‘there is a border now between us, something we have never achieved in the series of photographs that keep the two of us arm in arm.’ This incident makes both sisters realize the need to be distinctly Anna and distinctly Claire. Elizabeth Waddell in her review of *Divisadero* rightly remarks:

> It is clear that the girls constantly seek out these distinctions only because they have no their separate identities. And knows herself identity is grounded in her relation to Claire.

(http://quarterlyconversation.com)

In one of terrible violence incident in the barn, Coop accidently calls Anna “Claire”, the problematic relationship between name and its bearer is emphasized by Derrida. As Derrida notes, “the proper name is a mark: something like confusion can occur at any time because the proper name bears confusion within itself.” (Derrida, 108)

Coop is in his late teens and he has other lives, “disappearing into the city, haunting pool halls, dances, and returning just in time to drive Claire into Nicasio for her piano lesson.” (Ondaatje, 15) Claire loves Coop’s minimal efforts towards whatever is around him. In those days Claire disappears on her horse and Anna disappears into a book. But the sisters share everything. Anna refers Lucien Freud’s assertion that ‘Everything is biographical’ as:

> What we make, why it is made, how we draw a dog, who it is we are drawn to, why we cannot forget. Everything is collage, even genetics. There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross.

(Ondaatje, 16)

Anna is unknown about Coop and where about his true identity. She is not sure what he feels about Anna’s family. He is the endangered heir of a murder. Anna always thinks why Coop is not in their father’s photographs. Anna asks, recalling the abstract photographs her father had taken of shadows and reflection, “how many things could you throw your image against?” (Ondaatje, 20)

Coop begins to live in the grandfather’s cabin. While working on a tank, Coop attempts to recognize Anna’s or Claire’s character. He cannot differentiate between them:

> Anna and Claire were interchangeable, one yellow shirt, one green, and he would not have been able to tell who wore this
or that colour. And when he was back in the darkness of the water tank that was just a retrospective image of the two girls, a tree branch partially concealing their identities and their waving arms.

(Ondaatje, 23)

Elizabeth Waddell in her review on ‘Divisadero’ rightly observes Anna and Claire’s resemblance and equality in their identities as:

*The adoptive sisters were born the same week and are near-twins. They are compared to the panels of a Japanese screen autonomous, but reflecting different tones when placed together. Thus, it is only by defining “Claire that “Anna “can exist.*

(http:// quarterly conversation)

Coop is a ‘passive risk taker.’ Anna develops love for Coop. Anna thinks, “Was what happened a sin or a natural act?” (Ondaate, 25) She reads for Coop the stories of musketeer in Duma. The intimate love between Anna and Coop is described by the novelist as: “Thunder exploded over the deck while they were lying there, holding on to each others, as if it had come down a funnel onto their nakedness.” (Ondaatje, 30) Anna’s father becomes angry and beats Coop violently. Father violently attacks Coop’s face and body. Claire is unknown about this violent attack. Her father puts Anna in the truck and drives off. Claire is aware that “going after lost things is as uncertain as prayer.”(Ondaatje, 37) Claire is exposed to emotional trauma. She is unknown about Anna and their father. Coop leaves the cabin. Claire feels isolated, “She was alone, sixteen years old, on a horse that bristled with nervousness and temper.” (Ondaatje, 37) Brain Short in Fiction writer’s review of ‘Divisadero’ rightly remarks:

*Coop flees to the Tahoe area, where he transforms himself into a successful poker player and card sharp. Anna runs away to France, where she settles in the house of Lucien Segura, a minor poet from the early 20th century. And Claire lands in San Francisco, working for the public defender’s office; she lives on Divisadero Street, formerly the border between the old city and the fields of the Presidio. All the three find ways to avoid or burry their traumas: Coop in chance and risk, Claire*
in compassion, Anna in research and writing. New makeshift families replace abandoned ones, and it is this search for lost connection and wholeness that motivates each character in Divisadero, that pushes them towards the lives of isolation or service or danger.

(http://fiction writer’s review.com)

After the violence, on the deck all the three Anna, Claire and Coop have displaced from the small settlement of Petaluma and lost connection. This leads them to isolation, and the alienation.

Coop’s new life in Tahoe as a gambler is a “compulsive risk taker, dangerous even to himself” (Ondaatje, 44) and Coop’s group in Tahoe is like a provisional community:

_There was Dorn, Mancini, and ‘The Dauphin’, so named because he had been seen reading a European novel. They would enter gambling halls like royalty from Wyoming._

(Ondaatje, 43)

However, Coop’s self identity is in question. He reads poker cards properly but he is unable to read his own life, like the Great Russian author Leo Tolstoy:

_‘I am told that Tolstoy,’ he says, ‘was able to walk in to a room that held a small group of people and understand everything about them in fifteen minutes. The only person in the room he could not understand was himself. That’s what a good a good professional is like.’_

(Ondaatje, 51)

At the age of twenty-three Cooper arrives in Tahoe and has started new life as a gambler. He finds himself at ease with all these chaos and risk. Accidentally he meets the Claire in the Tahoe. Coop makes his living by gambling. But once again Claire loses Coop. He has left Claire by leaving his telephone number. “There was no desire in him to step back into his past.” (Ondaatje, 111) Coop is obsessed with a woman, a singer and drug addict Bridget. As he watches her he fears suddenly that she looks like Anna. She allows Coop to make her love only when she is intoxicated. Bridget suddenly disappears and Coop realizes that she is a part of a set up to bring him in Tahoe. Coop finds himself in the frame surrounded by the con. Bridget stabs syringe on his neck and beats him badly.
Coop in his second life falls in love with the woman, a jazz vocalist, drug addict and a dangerous kind of mermaid. Both love affairs Coop’s end up as a passive victim of fight. During the fight he has beaten badly causing amnesia. He loses his memory. Coop moves into his past memories on the farm with Anna and beating incident on the deck by their father. He remembers Anna’s saying to escape from fire which destroys him:

_cooper lay on his side by the fireplace, she was in santa maria, saying, ‘this is for you. there are five flags. the yellow one is earth, the green one is water, the red is fire - the one we must escape.’ he reminds nothing after that._

(ondaatje, 132)

Gotraskhalana is a term in sanskrit poetics for calling loved one by a wrong name, and means literally ‘stumbling on a name. “Carmen Concilio in an article on “Michael Ondaatje’s ‘Divisadero’ and photography” comments on the Gotraskhalana as:

_through this reference to sanskrit is exactly this looking back to a lost past, a lost culture, a lost love, a lost language. the simple, little linguistic slip/lapse._

(Carmen Concilio, 27)

Coop loses his past, his love, so he assumes Claire as Anna and says Claire “thank you Anna.” (ondaatje, 152)

Losing his love, past and language, he stumbles on a name of Claire as Anna, indicates Coop’s loss of identity. Due to amnesia his mind holds only a few distant things. Claire decides, to drive Coop towards Petaluma in the old farmhouse to meet her old isolated father. As they reach farmhouse Coop is in his amnesia, looking to his old world remembering nothing. His identity is crushed into pieces. Coop cannot remember his past life on the farm house but it is Anna who remembers Coop in distinct:

_he had grown up alongside these two sisters, an orphan, in our small desirous field....but when I reconstruct the arc of Coop’s life I can take it only as far as the knot of the moment when he, that shy alien one, became my secret lover, ironically at the very moment when he was exposing himself by this act of sharing._ (ondaatje, 139)
The story moves from Coop to Anna who is far from her American roots. Now fully adult, Anna migrates to France and starts to live in the house of French writer Lucien Segura. She spends her time in reading manuscripts and the handwritten journals of Lucien Segura.

Anna begins her new life in France. She meets ‘Rafael’ the son of the Roma musician family. Rafael’s father is a thief and he never wish to be Rafael as a thief. His father is not from the France. Anna cannot answer Rafael properly due to the lack of knowledge of French language. She is new in the French culture.

Anna desires the ‘smallest possible space’ to allow the truth of her life comes out only in places like this. Anna needs to hide in ‘Stranger’s landscape’ to get away from moments of violence of her bloodied naked self between her father and Coop, that deforms her and all of them. She was rendered rootless at home. Here in France ‘her past is hidden from everyone.’ Anna agrees, “She has never turned to a lover or friends when they speak about families (and she always inquires of their families) and spoken of her childhood.” (Ondaatje, 75) Anna never mentions her name to her lover. A wall of black light holds her away from the painful memories. “The past is always carried out into the present by small things.” (Ondaatje, 77) Rafael is also doubtful about Anna’s past and her identity. He thinks:

Who is she? This woman who has led him into this medicine cabinet of a room where most of her possession exist- books, journals, passport, a carefully folded map, archival tapes, even the soap she has brought with her from her other world.

As if this orderly collection of things is what she is. So we fall in love with ghosts.

(Ondaatje, 76)

Anna translates the sparse text by Lucien Segura, the man who is known to his countrymen as only a poet. His identity as an author of jeremiad about the Great War is crushed. Anna states:

For much of his life the man was unknown, says that he was the poet and later the author of jeremiad about the Great War. And in the years since his death, knowledge of him has sunk into the fabric and soil of this region, so he is almost forgotten by his countrymen.

(Ondaatje, 85)
Lucien Segura, a minor writer of the early 20th century is known only as a poet but his identity as an author of a jeremiad about the Great War is crashed and he is forgotten by his countryman.

Anna is not identified with her true identity. In France Anna has changed her cultural as well as personal identity. She is now a research scholar, giving seminar at Berkeley, living different cultural identity in other’s country. Anna finds “there had always been and perhaps always would be maze of unmarked roads between her and others.” (Ondaatje, 89) There is no permanence in the relationship between Anna and her lovers. Secretly Anna tries to patch on her identity. Anna always remembers her past and violent incidence, her praying for Coop’s breath beside him and “rest of her splintered at that moment with her becoming a creature of a hundred natures and voices and with a new name.” (Ondaatje, 90)

What is the identity of Rafael? In the village of Demu he is identified as ‘donkey boy’ or ‘Citron story.’ His encounter with a seventeen year old girl makes him silence. And now he becomes Anna’s lover. Rafael works as a bridge between Anna and Segura:

As a boy he had always felt that his musical lessons were a net for holding everything around him...as a collected gift, like a hand cupped with cold water held up to a friend.

(Ondaatje, 69)

In this old age Segura travels the region of Gers in horse drawn cart, search of a new home north of Marseille with three travelers-the old thief, his young wife and their son Rafael. They are also in search of caravan or location. The thief and his wife have no fixed or identifying names. The narrator states:

She is Romani, they have so many names. The secret name, which is never used but is her truest name, which only her mother knows, that is hidden to confuse supernatural spirits—it keeps the true identity of the child from them. And the second name, which is a Roma name, is usually used only by them. And that one is Aria.

(Ondaatje, 175)

But Rafael’s mother has chosen the only one which is ‘Aria’. Rafael’s father a thief has no real or permanent name. A thief is nameless. But Segura names him as a ‘Liebard’ which he used for a while. He announces that he is relinquished with the
name Liebard and now takes the name ‘Astolphe’. “Lucien realized the man used names like passwords, all of them with a brief lifespan.” (Ondaatje, 182) According to Rob Lapsley:

\[ \text{Naming gives rise to a sense of alienation. Although there is no self prior to the subject’s constitution within the signifying chain, prior to the conferral of an identity with its name, the subject feels that its true self has somehow been lost and betrayed.} \]

(Lapsley Rob, 75)

Rafael’s father changes names like a password. He is not satisfied with his names, like Rafael’s father Lucien Segura is also not satisfied with his name. Name creates the sense of alienation which causes fractured or fragmented identity.

The thief Liebard faces the identity crisis. The narrator says, “This is the only photographic capturing of Lucien’s friend Liebard, or Astophe, who turns on the photographer with a surprising belligerence when he heard the shutter begin to slip into place, turning so quickly that he was able to dissolve his appearance.” (Ondaatje, 187) As the thief is nameless, Coop has no first name, Cooper is his surname. Like the thief and his wife the card players and the card sharper are also presented with their nicknames such as ‘Hippie’, ‘the Brethren.’ Both Segura and Anna writes under pseudonyms. De Smyter remarks about pseudonym with respect to a person who bears pseudonyms:

\[ \text{He does not feel that he coincides wholly with himself or with the given name and the patronymic which he bears before the world. He may find who he is by pretending to be someone else, by taking another style, and wearing them as one wears a new suit of clothes on the assumption that “cloths make the man.”... [He hopes] to express obliquely some aspect of himself, or perhaps to take on a self where there was none before if the name and habit should happen to stick.} \]

(http://journals.lib.unb.ca)

Another character in the novel which faces the problem of identity crisis is Claire. After the violence on the deck Claire finds different way, from her previous self. She is horsewoman. The horse, Territorial is Claire’s closest ally. When she is on a horse she loses her limp and ‘is in charge of the universe, centaur.’ She thinks
someday “she will meet and marry a centaur.” (Ondaatje, 7) Now Claire lives two distinct lives. She works with the lawyer named Vea helping him in his research in the public Defender’s office in San Francisco. And at the weekend she spends time with her loving father, though “there was no closeness between him and Claire.” (Ondaatje, 104) She finds herself unable to save Coop, Anna and their father from their own nature but she saves a man from lethal injection. It is Claire who always rescues Coop and takes care of him in the following period.

*There in Tahoe she coincidently meets Coop she went to him
went up to him and embraced him…she is not expecting this
and the emotion of seeing Coop invaded her.*

(Ondaatje, 108)

Coop never thinks of Claire as someone with perfume. “She was a girl he had taught to fish, ride a horse, and drive a car.” (Ondaatje, 108) When Claire safely moves Coop at Hass, the place nestled in the hills, Coop is unable to recognize Claire, but a changeling Claire never dismantle herself from him. What is the purpose of Claire’s mission or purpose, Vea needs to know about it? The narrator observes: “In spite of her desire for a contained universe, her life felt scattered, full of many small moments, without great purpose.” (Ondaatje, 157) She believes her present only. She agrees with the fact that we revive stories and see ourselves only as the watcher or the listener. Really Claire’s life is full of many small moments without great purpose. Now she has with her a boy Coop with his amnesia, remembers nothing and her distant father without any conversation:

*She has only a distant father, and now Coop, like this, a boy
remembering nothing. She wanted to fold the two halves of her
life together like a map.*

(Ondaatje, 164)

The violence on the deck scatters the lives of the siblings, Anna questions, who recovers from such events? Anna refers the marvel Annie Dillard who writes in this connection:

*One fatal twin may absorb the other without malice, and
retrain in its body a loose relic or two of one of the absorbed
twins femurs. (The living twin grows and becomes an adult;
the femur stays fetal.) That marvel Annie Dillard, wrote that.
And perhaps this is the story of twin ship. I have smuggled*
myself away from who I was, and what I was. But am I the living twin in the story of our family? Or is it Claire? Who is stilled one?

(Ondaatje, 141)

Anna in her sixteen separated from her father, with Coop’s heart in her. Anna’s father put her in the truck and drives her, but she disappears. The person formerly known as Anna disappears and climbs into the passenger seat of vehicle going to south. She has crushed her cultural as well personal identity and entered in the unseen world. She agrees, “We were alone in the world, in nameless and new country” (Ondaatje, 136). Living in France Anna always remembers her past She says:

I am a person who discovers archival subtexts in history and art, where the spiraling among a handful of strangers tangles into a story. In my story the person I always begin with is Claire.

(Ondaatje, 137)

De Smyter in review, rightly comments:

Anna appears to be the most tenacious of the three, and her refusal to reveal her new name could be attributed to a desire to keep it as uncontaminated as possible and free from expectations. One could wonder, however, whether a truly secret name could still be called a name. As Niall Lucy remarks: If my name were truly proper, if it were truly mine exclusively, no one—including myself—would know how to say it, to repeat it, to exchange it. No one could even know it as a name. Even if someone had a name that had never been used before in history... it could function as a name only to the extent that it could be recognized as conforming to a code.

(http://journals.lib.unb.ca)

Anna has erased her personal identity in her new life and relinquishes her name which is a mask, exemplifies her identity crisis due to migration and the violence on the deck. Anna’s writing style is borrowed from her sister’s journal which she mentions, “in my work I sometimes borrow Claire’s nature, as well as her careful focus on the world.” (Ondaatje, 138) Anna erases her former identity and “under the
mask she could rewrite herself into any place, in any form.” (Ondaatje, 142) Anna takes shelter in foreign land, changes her name. She wears the authorial mask. She assimilates into the foreign culture, and from the distance, she looks for those, she has lost and feels them everywhere through her past memory. What is the identity of Anna? And from where she comes from? She narrates:

*What was the fictional street’s name? In a longer remember. I come from ‘Divisadero’ Street. Divisadero, from the Spanish word for ‘division’, the street that at one time was the dividing line between San Francisco and the fields of the Presidio. Or it might derive from the word ‘divisar’, meaning ‘to gaze at something from a distance.’ (There is a ‘height’ nearby called El Divisadero.) Thus a point from which you can look far into the distance.*

(Ondaatje, 142-43)

Anna is uncertain about why she looks deep into the archival ‘distance’ why she wishes to write Segura’s life story. She identifies Segura’s story with her own, as both have faced the problem of identity. She says:

*There was a sweet shadow and hesitance in Segura. It was like a ruined love, and it was familiar to me. Till then all I knew of his life was his odd departure from his family; that late in life, comfortable, successful, he had climbed into a horse-drawn cart, and disappeared.*

(Ondaatje, 143)

Anna narrates at the end of the novel that it is the hunger, what we do not have and which hold us together. Segura never knows about his children, whether he has nurtured them or damaged them:

*A girl travels down the long California valley in a commercial refrigeration truck, hardly able to speak, as a result of her fear or her bravery, listening to every word of the good stranger. Lucette in Paris sips absinthe with her lover. The boy Rafael will meet me, a woman from the World …And Coop? And Claire? Will these children, in their eventual cities, turn out to be the heroes of their own lives?*

(Ondaatje, 272-73)
Ondaatje’s next work, his fictional autobiography *The Cat’s Table* presents the voyage between East and West.

**IV.VII: Crisis for Identity in Michael Ondaatje’s *The Cat’s Table***:

Michael Ondaatje’s more recent novel *The Cat’s Table* (2011) is the narrative of displacement. The protagonist of the novel is an eleven-years-old Michael, nicknamed as a Mynah. This is the story, of voyage of the Michael and his shipmates, on ‘Oronsay’ from East to West. Michael embarks on a voyage, from Sri Lanka (Ceylon), his homeland to England by the passenger ship named as Oronsay to join his mother in England. During the voyage many characters share their life stories with the protagonist Michael or Mynah. The novel portrays how these adult characters reveal themselves and suffer the trauma of identity crisis.

Eleven- years-old Michael embarks on a voyage, and he, first time climbs abroad, the “first and only ship of his life” (Ondaatje 2012, 4), towards the unknown future. “He went up the gangplank, watching only the path of his feet-nothing ahead of him existed-and continue till he faced the dark harbor and sea.” (Ondaatje, 4) His relatives have brought him to the harbor, but Michael never goes back up on deck for a last look or to wave them. What is the identity of the boy before he embarks on a voyage? The narrator points out:

> I try to imagine who the boy on the ship was. Perhaps a sense of self is not even there in his nervous stillness in the narrow bunk, in this green grasshopper or little cricket, as if he has been smuggled away accidently, with no knowledge of the act, into the future.

(Ondaatje, 5)

Perhaps the sense of the self is still not present in the boy. The boy is unknown to his future act. *Quill and Quire* book review on Ondaatje’s *The Cat’s Table* describes the Mynah’s voyage as:

> The tale begins in the early 1950s when 11-year-old Ceylonese boy boards the Oronsay, which will sail across the Indian Ocean, through the Suez Canal, and into the Mediterranean, ultimately bound for England. The Oronsay is the floating castle, a world unto itself, with seven levels, nine cooks, a
veterinarian, several swimming pools, a jail, and more than 600 passengers.

(www.quillandquire.com/review/thecat’stable)

During the voyage the Oronsay has fixed its path across the Indian Ocean, through Suez Canal and into Mediterranean to England. Mynah recalls his childhood days in the Colombo. He thinks about himself as a boy without any outside impression of the world. The world of Oronsay contains number of passengers, cooks, powerful, rich or least privileged people, jail, prisoner, marginal characters, tricksters such as - the Hyderabad Mind and a Baron and his two friends of the same age of Michael, named Ramadhin and Cassius. During the voyage, Mynah thinks about his identity and childhood experience of ‘racing down the water channel again and again.’ in Sri Lanka. Mynah states:

What was I in those days? I recall no outside imprint, and therefore no perception of myself. If I had to invent one photograph of myself from childhood, it would be of a barefoot boy in a shorts and a cotton shirt, with a couple of friends from the village, running along the mildewed wall that separated the house and garden in Boralessamuwa from the traffic on the High Level Road. Or it would be of me alone, waiting for them, looking aware from the house to the dusty street.

(Ondaatje, 36)

The personal identity of the boy, Mynah is nothing more than a barefoot boy in shorts and cotton shirt having friends from the village, wandering on the street of Boralessamuwa, with no perception of himself. But on the Oronsay the boy gets the self perception and narrates:

What had there been before such a ship in my life? A dugout canoe on a river journey? A launch in a Trincomalee harbor...But now it had been arranged I would be travelling to England by ship, and that I would be making the journey alone.

(Ondaatje, 7)

On the board of the ship, a note assigns Mynah about the Table-76 for all his meals along with nine other people. The Table-76 is located far from the captain’s
The review of *The Cat’s Table* by “Quill and Quire” observes the position of the table-76 as:

*On board the ship, a note slipped under Mynah’s cabin door assigns him to table 76 for meals. Otherwise known as the Cat’s Table, the “least privileged place,” It sits at the opposite end of the dining room from the Captain’s Table. Though his position is lowly, Mynah meets a rogue’s gallery of adults who share their life stories.*

(www.quillandquire.com/review/thecat’stable)

The table-76 “the least privileged place,” (Ondaatje, 10) indicates social importance of Mynah. He is invisible to officials on the board. Mrs. Lasqueti remarks, “in the least privileged place” with no social importance that persuaded us into an accurate belief that we were invisible to officials, such as the Purser and the Head Steward, and the Captain.” (Ondaatje, 13) Position of the table-76 is opposite end of the dining room, which indicates the social identity of the members of the table-76. Wikipedia defines the social identity as, “the portion of an individual’s self-concept derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group.” (https://en.m.wickipedia.org/wicki/socialidentity) The social identity of the individuals on the table, who share their life stories, as they are placed in the least privileged place, indicates their low social status Mynah’s encounters with rogue’s gallery of adults and their life stories during the voyage indicates their identity crisis.

*In spite of this, our table’s status on the Oronsay continued to be minimal, while those at the Captain’s Table were constantly toasting one another’s significance. That was a small lesson I learned on the journey. What is interesting and important happens mostly in secret, in places where there is no power.*

(Ondaatje, 103)

Mr. Mazappa, most exciting one, is a pianist; Mazappa shares with the boys, the life’s wisdoms and warns Mynah about the risk from women. “He was half Sicilian, half something else.” (Ondaatje, 39) In the evening he plays with ship’s orchestra, and during afternoon he gives piano lessons. So he has a discount on his passage. He teaches Mynah and his two friends, Ramadhin and Cassius, the ‘Hong Kong Blues.’ Mynah comes to know about Mazappa’s secret, “though today I realize
that Max Mazappa loved the details of the structure and melody, for not all of his Stations of the Cross had to do with the failures of love.” (Ondaatje, 39) He states:

Listen my peculiar boy, women will sweet-talk, and give you the big eye...I am protecting you with what I know. But as an eleven–year-old I do not feel protected, I feel wounded in advance with possibilities.

(Ondaatje, 37)

But Michael, the eleven year old boy is not able to understand his wisdom about life. Instead the boy feels wounded in advance with its possibilities. Mynah and his two friends are “shy and awkward.” But it is Mazappa who teaches the boys to be curious during the journey. Mynah states:

Not one of us had made even a gesture of greeting to the other to until Mazappa took us under his wing and advised us to keep our eyes and ear open, that this voyage would be a great education.

(Ondaatje, 11)

Max Mazappa has a war name, “Sunny Meadows.” On the ship’s bulletin, Mazappa’s piano class is referred as ‘Sunny Meadows ‘or ‘Master of the Pianos.’ In order to avoid the Levantine quality of Mazappa’s name, his promoter has done printing error on poster, advertising his performance in France and from the time, Mazappa begins to use the new name and has got new identity for himself. Mynah observes:

Meadows were hardly words that could exist alongside his nature. There was not much that was optimistic or well trimmed about him.

(Ondaatje, 42)

Mr. Mazappa also gets off from the ship at Port Said and disappears from their lives. After Mazappa’s departure, it is revealed that “He was Homeric with his list of feminine charms...,” (Ondaatje, 231) and why he needs two names. All the members on the Cat’s Table have guessed that he has married several times in his life. Miss Lasqueti remarks, “When he dies there will be several widows.” (Ondaatje, 232) This is the identity of Mazappa who reveals it on the Cat’s Table.
Mynah is caught between opposing statuses, and feels havoc of fear and aloneness, he feels as if he is lost in Pettah market in Sri Lanka or adopting undiscovered rules at school. The boy feels:

*When I could not see the ocean, the fear was not there, but now the sea rose in the half dark, surrounding the ship, and coiled itself around me. No matter how scared I was, I remained there, adjacent to the passing darkness, half wanting to pull myself back, half desiring to leap towards it.*

(Ondaatje, 46)

Mr. Nevil, a retired ship dismantler, returns to England. He has a detailed structure of ships. Mynah is away from Colombo, his sense of loneliness and alienation is reflected. And the boy Mynah “reinvented himself in this seemingly imaginary world.” (Ondaatje, 17) Mynah feels unsafe and alone on the C Deck. But it is Mr. Nevil who understands the fear of the boy and makes him sure that “Our ship is safer. Nevil’s depiction of warship gives comfort to Mynah. Mr. Nevil speaks about the dangerous profession of dismantling the ship.

*He works all over the world from Bangkok to Barking. Now he was sitting with me, remembering the harbour he had inhabited at one time or another, rolling a piece of blue chalk in his fingers, suddenly meditative.*

(Ondaatje, 98)

Mr. Nevil a retired man remembers only, memories about his ‘dangerous profession’ and faces identity crisis.

Larry Daniel is one of the members of the Cat’s Table. He is botanist and born to a burgher family in Kandy. He has spent his adult life studying forest and plant cultures in Sumatra and Borneo and first time he travels to Europe. He has great grip on Mynah’s cousin, Emily. So he befriended with Mynah, and has showed his ‘garden’ on the ship to Mynah and his two friends, to know Emily’s likes and dislikes. Daniel wishes Mynah to speak only about Emily and nothing else. Mynah has informed Daniel that Emily wishes to go to the theatre, “to be an actress.” (Ondaatje, 59) It is Mr. Daniel who introduces himself to the Jankla Troup, entertainer’s members, and says, “He had a good friend, Miss Emily de Saram, a very talented young lady who loved the theatre, and perhaps she could watch them rehearse if he brought her along?” (Ondaatje, 62) Mynah is enjoying the company of Mr.
Daniel on the bottom level of the hold. This is the ‘garden’ that Mr. Daniel is going to transport to Europe. He introduces the boys with a garden on a ship. He also informs the boys about the poisonous plant in his garden. But later Mr. Daniel becomes aware that Emily is not interested in him or his world of plants. He feels lonely and isolated.

Mynah finds his ‘distant cousin’ Emily de Saram unexpectedly on the board, but she is not assigned the Cat’s Table. “She is honest about what she likes and did not like, and as she was older than I was, I modeled myself on her judgments.” (Ondaatje, 13) Mynah is connected with her on account of her ‘record collection.’ Both have same childhood experiences. Mynah Points out that our parents were either scattered or unreliable. Mynah observes Emily as:

_There was no secure map that Emily could rely on, so I suppose she invented herself. She had a free spirit, a wildness. I loved, though she risked herself in various adventures._

(Ondaatje, 14)

Emily meets the Hyderabad Mind, the trickster figure, Sunil and “went on to live a life different from the one that was expected.” (Ondaatje, 62) The Hyderabad Mind is an acrobat, a circus performer. Mynah observes:

_I suppose it was his more adult self that fascinated and then tempted my cousin. I could always recognize Sunil from a distance- his thinness, his acrobatic walk. Watching them I’d see his and move up her arm and disappear into her sleeve, holding her in a controlling way, all the speaking about the intricacies of a world she must have desired._

(Ondaatje, 235)

Sunil controls Emily, elaborates the world. The Hyderabad Mind and his ‘Jankla Troupe entertainers’ are on their way to Europe to perform their brand of street theatre and acrobatics, but they occasionally perform for the passengers. They are marginal figures and storytellers, entertain the people. Szakolczai in his book, _Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events_ rightly describes these marginal characters, trickster figures as:

_Tricksters are always marginal characters: outsiders, as they cannot trust or be trusted, cannot give or share, they are incapable of living in a community; they are repulsive, as – being insatiable- they are characterized by excessive eating._
drinking and sexual behavior, having no sense of shame; they are not taken seriously, given their affinity with jokes, storytelling and fantasizing. However, tricksters can suddenly become dangers; in a situation where the attention of the community is on the wane. In an instant the trickster can capture the occasion and institute a lasting reversal of roles and values, making himself the central figure in place of the marginal outcast.

(Szakolczai, 154-55)

Sunil, the Hyderabad Mind and the Jankla Troupe, perform for the passengers. One of them is Emily who volunteers to be a part of performance, to become the top layer of a human pyramid. Mynah observes:

…the acrobats forming the lower part of the pyramid swaying back and forth, terrifying the volunteers on the top, who began screaming either in fear or with some strange joy they had discovered in themselves … Among the volunteers, only Emily was calm, only she appeared proud of her performance.

(Ondaatje, 322-23)

And a small award is given to Emily. Emily is hoisted back up onto the shoulders of one of the men in the troupe. Sunil also approaches her and put on a silver bracelet on her wrist which cuts her wrist:

Sunil, standing causally on the shoulders of another man, approached her and closed a silver bracelet onto her wrist. She winced as the clasp cut into her skin… Sunil rubbed some unguent over the cut on her wrist, and Emily bravely held her arm up for us all to see bracelet, or whatever it was, there on her forearm.

(Ondaatje, 323)

Michael Ondaatje presents characters from different backgrounds that have faced the problem of identity. Emily’s relation with an unidentified man from Ceylon, probably a policeman gives us an opportunity to see how CID policeman meets his death without revealing his identity. Mynah and his friends see Emily on lifeboat, going to meet a man; later on the boys confirm that the man is Lucius Perera, the CID Perera. Emily does not want to continue her relationship with Perera. But Perera
forces her to continue. Emil kills him pushing him into the sea from boat. “A body is lying there. It must have been Mr. Perera.” (Ondaatje, 325)

Identity of Perera is confusing one. No one knows about the mysterious CID man. It is assumed that, “Perera was intricately involved with high level crime; the gang members have revealed his own criminal connections.” (Ondaatje, 267) He is murdered by Emily. And Emily later suffers from food poisoning and cannot remember who the Perera is?

Another character is Mr. Giggs, an English high level army official who is sent to Colombo. And he is travelling under cover on the board. Mynah states:

Mr. Giggs was a high level army officer who’d been sent out to Colombo and -so rumors had it –was twinned with a person from the Criminal Investigation Department in Colombo, now traveling under cover. Both were in charge of escorting the prisoner Niemeyer to face trial in England.

(Ondaatje, 261)

Sunil, the Hyderabad Mind plans and asks Emily, “There’s something I want you to do,” (Ondaatje, 259) Sunil, wants Emily to murder the CID man Perera. Sunil knows Emily can do anything for him. She is under his thralldom. She doesn’t know who the undercover man is. And Emily thinks it is ‘Gunesekera’ a tailor, a worthless man on the Cat’s Table, a silent man having red scarf around his neck to hide the scar. But the man who is undercover is Perera. It’s Emily alone who always carries the memories on the ship with her life and agreed later to meet Michael that, she has killed the man on the ship. Emily says, “We all became adults before we were adults.” (Ondaatje, 352) The Personal identity of Emily is always in crisis. Her unsuccessful marriage, her behavior on the ship is the result of her identity crisis:

You trusted her but she didn’t trust herself. She was ‘good’, but she was not that way in her own eyes. Those qualities still had not balanced, out somehow, or agreed with each other.

(Ondaatje, 353)

Emily is not happy with her husband. She breaks her relationship with her husband start to live alone on one of the Gulf Islands carrying the trauma of those bad memories on the ship. Mynah comments:

Had she become the adult she was because of what had happened on that journey? I didn’t know. I would know how
much it had altered her. I simply thought it over to myself at that moment in Emily’s spare cottage on one of the Gulf Islands, where she appeared to be living alone, seeming to hide herself away.

(Ondaatje, 342)

Another character Mr. Hastie is one of the less important members on the Cat’s Table. He turns out to be in charge of the kennel on the Oronsay. Mr. Invernio is his assistance at the kennels. Hastie and his few friends play cards late at night. They rarely speak with each other:

They rarely had conversations. I remember they use to call each other by their surnames- ‘Mr. Tolroy’, ‘Mr. Invernio’, ‘Mr. Hastie’, ‘Mr. Babstock?’ as if they were midshipmen in a nineteenth–century naval academy.

(Ondaatje, 28)

However, Hastie is very different man. He is constant talkative man and has experienced so many ups and downs in the Merchant Navy: “He has strong affection for hounds over any other breed of dog.” (Ondaatje, 28) After the death of a millionaire Sir Hector de Silva, he is no more in charge of the kennels. Michael informs:

...he had been relieved of his duties. He was no longer in charge of the kennels. The Captain had been looking for someone to blame and now believed it was one of the hounds from Mr. Hastie’s kennels ...and bitten Hector de Silva to death.

(Ondaatje, 163)

Mr. Hastie is falsely accused for the mistake which he has never done. Mr. Hastie’s demotion indicates his identity crisis. Now Mr. Invernio is the in charge of the kennel.

On the board, Emily whispers to Michael that prisoner’s name is Niemeyer. In fact Niemeyer is Asian, but his name sounds too European:

...the prisoner’s name was Niemeyer, something like that. It sounded too European, for he was clearly Asian. He looked a mixture of Sinhalese and something else.

(Ondaatje, 167-68)
Michael Ondaatje presents mixed identity of Niemeyer as hybridization within Sri Lankans culture. Prisoner’s identity is complex one as the identity of the island. Niemeyer has continued to wear the foreign name like badge, or an insult to the establishment. Mynah states:

*He was part Asian, part something else. He was never sure what. The name Niemeyer could have been inherited or stolen or invented.*

(Ondaatje, 245)

Prisoner’s voice is calm and “Ramadhin thought it was a voice that hypnotize you if you were alone in a room with him.” (Ondaatje, 168) Emily knows the secret of prisoner. The prisoner looks powerful, self-contained and barefoot. Mynah learns from the Falvia Prins that, “The prisoner had killed the judge to stop him from helping the prosecution, perhaps.” (Ondaatje, 22)

Sunil, the Hyderabad Mind from the Jankla Troupe, takes care of the deaf daughter of the prisoner. He sits beside her at meals at the table where Emily also sits. Gradually the conversation between Emily and Asuntha is increasing day by day. “It was Emily as a different soul, when she was with the deaf girl.” (Ondaatje, 106) Asuntha’s journey towards her father’s sister Pacipa is very hard. “She was never married, has no children but now there was this girl she was responsible for until her brother returned.” (Ondaatje, 25) Pacipa trains Asuntha in acrobatic performances “She [Asuntha] was now a member of the seven-person circus that traversed the provinces of the south coast.” (Ondaatje, 253) Niemeyer makes friendship with the acrobat Sunil, “One who wore the painted face of a bird.” (Ondaatje, 254) She has erased her former identity as an acrobat and becomes deaf girl, speaks with difficulty, slurring words. The narrator observes:

*She spoke with difficulty with her already slurring words. She appeared to be in the state of worthlessness, her talent no longer in her....her life was no longer for herself, but for her father.*

(Ondaatje, 256-57)

Mynah also feels alienated on the ship. While he is on ship, he misses his childhood companion, his cooks Narayan and Gunepal and the smell of burning hemp. Here, on the ship, the smell of the burning hemp comes from the corridor of D
level, from the man named Fonseka’s cabin. Fonseka is also traveling to the England to become a teacher. Michael states:

“He had lived in Colombo all his life, and his manner and accent were a product of the island, but at the same time he had this wide-ranging knowledge of books. He’d sing a song from the Azores or recite lines from an Irish play.”

(Ondaatje, 79)

He is the man ‘who can gaze from an unimaginable distance (one could almost see the dates flying off the calendar) and quote lines written in stone or Papyrus.’ Mr. Fonseka is not a very rich man. But he lives the life with his choice and without any stress. Mynah states:

“And it would be a spare life he would be certain to lead as a schoolteacher in same urban location. But he had a serenity that came with the choice of the life he wanted to live. And this serenity and certainty I have seen only among those who have the armour of books close by.”

(Ondaatje, 80)

Fonseka enters in the foreign culture with his Sri Lankan cultural identity. In Sri Lanka he works as a school teacher in an urban location. And his life is mixture of serenity and certainty, which is the product of his study in world literature. Michael agrees, “It was the anonymity of the stories and the poems that went deepest into me.” (Ondaatje, 79) And Michael worries and thinks about Fonseka as:

“I think about Mr. Fonseka at those English schools wearing his buttoned sweater to protect himself from English weather, and wonder how long he stayed there, and if he did really stay ‘forever.’ Or whether in the end he could no longer survive it.”

(Ondaatje, 81)

Is Fonseka surviving in this foreign culture? Will he maintain his cultural identity or stay there forever? Or he returns to his homeland as a ‘foreign-returned’ by feeling his own identity crushed.

Mynah’s journey to England is recorded in the newspapers because of the presence of the philanthropist, Sir Hector de Silva on Oronsay. Mynah observes him “Sir Hector a Moratuwa entrepreneur who had ground out his fortune in gems, rubber and plots of land, was now suffering from a possibly fatal illness and was on his way
to Europe to find a doctor who would save him.” (Ondaatje, 86) Sir Hector de Silva is one of the wealthy millionaires of the Sri Lanka. He is traveling with retinues that include two doctors’ one ayurvedic, a lawyer, and his wife and daughter. And now Hector de Silva suffers from hydrophobia and for leaves to England protection in a grand double suite on the ‘Oronsay.’

During the journey of twenty-one day, Sir Hector has a complete faith in the advancements of Europe more than the herbal medicines of his own country. Datura is the most successful poisonous beverage; the millionaire takes Datura during the journey. Under its influence a person responds to with no hesitation and with utter truthfulness. What is the identity of Sir Hector de Silva? The medicine reveals his original identity. He is an untruthful man. “He exposed the terror from his father’s whippings that compartmentalized him and eventually made him a brutal financier.” (Ondaatje, 135) The narrator says that’ “A small fire had broken out in the engine room when he began telling the truth for the first time in his adult life.” (Ondaatje, 136) Whatever the information is revealed by him is around the time of cyclone, this voyage from the East to the West through vessel is now traveling like a coffin in the cyclone.

During the first landfall in Aden, Michael and his two friends, Cassius and Ramadhin are excited “The dog jumped up onto an oversized bed, where Sir Hector de Silva lay, and bit down into his throat.” (Ondaatje, 148) Ramadhin reasoned it’s the fate of the man that has killed Sir Hector and not us because we have brought the dog on the board. And the little creature has never seen on the ship again. It is believed that smuggled dog was a phantom. The identity of the legend, Sir Vector de Silva is crushed forever, proving the Buddhist priest’s spell truthful, which is put on him.

One of the members on the Cat’s Table is Miss Lasqueti, a likely bachelor and whimsical character. Mynah observes her as:

> Miss Lasqueti was regarded by most of those at the Cat’s Table as a likely spinster, and by us three as having a possible libido (that elbow against Cassius’s scrotum). She was not fond of sun….She could be whimsical.

(Ondaatje, 100)

Miss Lasqueti’s most distinguishing characteristic is that she is a sleeper. It is also revealed about her that ‘she is a sleep walker, which is very dangerous habit on a ship.
At the Cat’s Table Miss Lasqueti draws sketches in a ‘yellow notebook.’ Later on it is discovered that:

Miss Lasqueti had twenty or thirty pigeons caged somewhere on the ship. She was ‘accompanying them’ to England.

(Ondaatje, 102)

She is described on the ship as ‘white as pigeon.’ Once she has showed her pigeon jacket to all of us and she has talked around on deck carrying several live birds on its padded pockets. She is more affectionate towards Mr. Mazappa. ‘Her first name is Perinita, for Mynah it appears a type of apple found in the Netherlands. Mynah comments:

The name Lasqueti suggested European background, but she existed comfortable alongside that specific breed of garden aristocracy among the English. She certainly had knowledge of the variety of the Englishness.

(Ondaatje, 292)

It’s Miss Lasqueti who wants to protect Mynah from the Baron. She warns Mynah about his involvement with Baron. In her later life she suggests Mynah and Emily to be away from the dangerous relationship with Jankla Troupe. She writes in a letter to Mynah:

It has been a wish of mine for quite some time to get in touch with Emily. I think of her often. For there was something I had wished to say to her during that journey but did not. I had thought that afternoon of simply removing you from the clutch of the Baron. But it was Emily I should have wanted to save. For I had run into her with the Jankla Troupe chap a few times and her relationship with him seemed fraught and dangerous. There was also something I had promised myself to give her that might be useful to her, to help her out but again I never did.

(Ondaatje, 296)

She has enclosed another letter, with the package and sends it to Mynah. She wishes Mynah to forward it to Emily. In this letter Lasqueti has enclosed her own life story and her relationship with an older married man named Horace Johnson. In her teens Miss Lasqueti migrated to Italy to learn Italian. But there she is controlled by
Horace’s power. In the letter, she narrates her life story to Mynah and Emily. She tells how Horace for first time speaks with Lasqueti and how he exercises his power over her:

> When he talked like that I could have slid with ease into his assured pocket. I was very young the first time he spoke to me. The thing is that men, with the kind of power that comes with money and knowledge assume the universe.

(Ondaatje, 304)

During the Christmas, in the fancy dress party she recognizes his intention. ‘He kisses and embraces her with the moustache between them.’ She also shares her childhood stories with him. She informs:

> I shared stories of my youth with him. I handed all of that information sleepily over to his curiosity... He was older, and older skills are different seemingly more gracious perhaps

(Ondaatje, 307)

Lasqueti realizes that Horace can only seduce her, engages and toasts her with his smartness. Her words do not hurt him. She is under Horace’s control like Emily is under control of Sunil the Hyderabad Mind. And now with Horace Miss Lasqueti is no more a girl who is there in Italy to learn a language. Her identity is crushed by Horace. So Miss Lasqueti warns Emily to be away from such danger and someone’s spell. Like Emily, Miss Lasqueti also faces the problem of identity crisis. She states:

> I had become aware that like me in my youth, you were under someone’s spell. And I thought I could save you. I’d seen you with Sunil from the Jankla Troupe, and it seemed you were caught up in something dangerous.

(Ondaatje, 319)

During the voyage on the ship Mynah is accompanied by two youths of his age who are the members of the Cat’s Table. Their names are Ramadhin and Cassius. Ramadhin is quiet and Cassius is scornful. But both of them face the problem of identity. ‘Cassius’ is a gentle and whispering name. Identity of Cassius is nothing more than an insignificant boy on the Cat’s Table. In Sri Lanka, names like Cassius are given to their children. Mynah observes:

> In spite of its bad Roman press, Cassius is a gentle and whispering name, though youthful Cassius I got to know on the
voyage was very much an iconoclast. I never saw him side
with anyone in power...He relished, for instance, being one of
the insignificants at the Cat’s Table.

(Ondaatje, 51)

Mynah in his flashback wishes to meet Cassius. He says, “I had not seen Cassius since the day our ship docked in England.” (Ondaatje, 179) Now Cassius has become a well considered painter. Michael sees the paintings of Cassius in the ‘Cork Street’ gallery in London. Michael says, “I suppose it clarified how close Cassius and I had been, real brothers.” (Ondaatje, 181)

It’s the Ramadhin’s migration to England that displeases him, otherwise Massfeels; Ramadhin is more content with a career and a home in Colombo. Massi thinks Ramadhin rarely entered in the public world.

Three of the boys, have entered in the Aden, with an adult male Mr. Daniel. It is the first landfall the last footstep in the East in the city. They are surrounded by the new language. And they cannot communicate with the people. Mynah narrates:

> We were surrounded instantly by a new language... A carpet
> salesman gestured to us, offered us tea, and we sat with him
> for a while laughing whenever he laughed, nodding when he
> nodded.

(Ondaatje, 141)

The culture of their home back home is collided with new culture and hence unable to communicate. Emily and Miss Lasqueti disguised as boys and entered in the city. It is Captain’s rule that “women forbidden to go at all.” (Ondaatje, 140) Disguise is a kind of erasing one’s self.

Ramadhin calls Michael, Mynah that becomes his nickname on the ship. He says, “No one called me ‘Mynah’ but the two friends I made on the Oronsay.” (Ondaatje, 202) Mynah feels a sense of loneliness on the deck. He says, “They were all adults on the deck, no one I knew, and I felt without any connection.” (Ondaatje, 152) But it is only Emily who makes him comfort. “Mynah felt in that moment that I had been alone for years.” (Ondaatje, 156) And now, Michael is going to England and doesn’t remember anything about his mother. When the ship reaches at Tilbury, Michael states:

> As soon as I reached foot of the gangplank I lost sight of
> Cassius and Ramadhin...And after vast seas we were not able
to find one another again in that unpainted terminal building on the Thames. Instead, we were making our way through the large crowd nervously, uncertain as to wherever it was that we were going.

(Ondaatje, 364)

Finally Michael meets his mother in England. Michael’s voyage to England is the story of voyage of the Eastern culture to the Western culture which gives result to damaged psyches and identity crisis. For Michael “This journey was to be an innocent story within the small parameter of my youth, I once told someone.” (Ondaatje, 337)

IV.VIII: Conclusion:

Michael Ondaatje portrays the issues of identity in the novel Coming through Slaughter. His cross-cultural inheritance, his migrant status and complexities of identities are frequently reflected in the novel. He portrays displaced, marginalized figures with fractured identities; most of the Ondaatje’s characters encounter the identity crises which show their inability to cope with new culture and new language. One is agree with Rosalind Jennings’s description about Ondaatje, which she quotes from Susan Spearey in the context of migrant metamorphosis, “As post-colonial by birth and by naturalization as a male from privileged Sri Lankan Burgher background [a descendant of the Dutch /Portuguese colonist], as a migrant and as a Toronto writer working within the academy, Ondaatje is ideally placed, she believes, to examine the implications of the wearing of a succession of skins.”(Jennings Rosalind, 165)

Michael Ondaatje’s first novel Coming through Slaughter explores the theme of disappearance. The novel portrays the fictional autobiography of legendary, marginal figure, the protagonist Charles Buddy Bolden. His Schizophrenia makes him invisible to the outside world and keeps him away from the fame of the twentieth century game of fame and crushes his identity. Bolden’s performances makes him the brightest star of the New Orleans, only the music is his passion and his identity. He is never being a part of electronic history or no recordings are available of him. At the height of his musical career he loses himself, Bolden disappears without any trace for two years. His disappearance indicates wiping out his past and erasure of his existing identity as a brightest star of the New Orleans. The novel also focuses on the marginal, historical figure, a secret photographer Bellocq who diverts Bolden’s path.
Bolden has jailed himself in Jaelin Brewitt’s house, and becomes invisible to the outside world in his self exile.

Bolden lacks power to control him. The issue of physical attraction and the desire for sexual intimacy and infidelity are the causes of Bolden’s destruction, which Ondaatje focuses, in the final parade performances with the ‘right audience.’ Bolden’s self is immersed into music; he forget audience and the gorgeous dancer pushes him to further limit leading to his destruction. Bolden becomes totally insane in the parade.

_In the Skin of a Lion_ is Ondaatje’s only work that depicts Canada, his adopted home. The novel is set in Toronto in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In this novel Ondaatje deals with the issues of identity and sense of belonging in the context of Canada. Various views such as insider outsider, native and alien, absence or presence are shown. Linda Hutcheon points out rightly, “the outsiders, the “ex-Centrics”...are made the paradoxical (and very postmodern) centre of the novel.” (Hutcheon, 133) The novel depicts the plight of the immigrants. Immigrants are not outsiders but the insiders like the protagonist Patrick Lewis, who is outsider in his own country. The construction of the city of Toronto is done by a group of European immigrant labours but they are remained unrecorded in the official history of the Canada. The novel portrays how immigrants reached Canada and to overcome the language barrier proves very difficult for them. Thus the novel describes the plight of the poor immigrants.

Ondaatje in his Booker Prize winning novel _The English Patient_ seeks to explore the problem of identity and the displacement experienced both by the colonizer and the colonized due to the World War II. He also deals with how the boundaries affect the national and personal identities. The issue of nationality and nationalism, the concept of homogeneous cultural identity are explored. The protagonist, the international bastards such as English accented the Hungarian man ‘the English patient’ and the Indian Kirpal Singh nicknamed as Kip, are displaced members. The Canadian nurse Hana and the Italian thief Caravaggio and all the members who are inhabited in the villa ‘San-Girolamo’ are exiles and experienced identity crisis. They all form the community in the villa and find new identities which are temporary. Kip assimilates into English culture and forms the hybrid identity which is not permanent. The English patient is the central character who wishes to erase his identity and the borders of the nation. He is burnt beyond the recognition and
his loss of memory shows his crushed identity. In short, novel is about displacement and shows the fractured identity of the characters.

Ondaatje’s complex cultural background stimulates him to write frequently the literature about displacement and dislocation. Ondaatje’s recent novel *Anil’s Ghost* describes Ondaatje’s inherited home, Sri Lanka. This is the novel of mystery. Anil Tissera is a young woman born in Sri Lanka and educated in the West. Now she works for International Human Rights group as a forensic anthropologist. She returns to her homeland for the first time for her seven weeks project. She is coupled with the local archaeologist Sarath Diyasena, to identify the victims of the political violence.

Ondaatje’s more recent novel *Divisadero* explores the theme of identity and division. This is the story of the siblings. Anna is the protagonist of the novel. The outburst of the violence on farm pushes Anna to migrate to Paris and then to Demu in southern France. In the second part of the novel Anna becomes the Lucien Segura, a minor French writer, revealing his identity.

Michael Ondaatje’s latest work *The Cat’s Table* is the narrative of the displacement. This is the fictional autobiography narrated by the eleven-year-old boy Michael. Michael embarks on a voyage by the ship named the ‘Oronsay’ from his homeland Sri Lanka to England to meet his mother in the England. His voyage is from the East to the West. During the voyage Michael is accompanied by the number of adults. They share their experiences with their damaged psyches, fractured.
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