CHAPTER - II
MICHAEL ONDAATJE: A VOICE OF SRI LANKA FROM CANADA

II.I: Introduction:

Michael Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka in 1943. At an early age he left Sri Lanka and migrated to England. Then at the age of nineteen he moved to Canada. He has settled down in Canada. In Canada he grows as a writer. In his novel *The English Patient* the Patient symbolically states about the belonging of the author to the International community “Kip and I are international bastards.” (Ondaatje 1993, 176) Ondaatje in an interview with Wachtel agrees:

> There are a lot of international bastards roaming around the world today. That’s one of the book’s main stories. Those migrants don’t belong here but want to belong here and find a new home.

(Ondaatje with Wachtel, 260)

Ondaatje is an ‘International bastard’ who chooses to live in Canada. In the same interview with Wachtel, Ondaatje writes about his attempt to overcome trauma of dislocation. He states, “They were all traumatic moves for me but I don’t think showed it very much.” (Ondaatje with Wachtel, 259)

Ondaatje’s literary journey begins with the publication of *The Dainty Monsters* in 1967 which established him as a poet. He tries at every literary genre and grows as a successful novelist, poet, film maker, editor, screen-play writer and so on. He bags a number of awards for his writing. Ondaatje has set his literary productions in Sri Lanka, Canada, Australia, Mexico, New Orleans and other parts of the world. He has handled the themes which are culturally very different than the world of Ondaatje. As an artist he negotiates with the worlds which have no obvious connections with him. His writing has begun to fuel the new Canadian literary renaissance. Ondaatje’s fame especially depends upon his skill of writing. Douglas Barbour in his book, *Michael Ondaatje* observes aptly: “Start each new book with a new vocabulary, a new set of clothes.” (Barbour, 9)

Ondaatje explains about his narrative style in the epigraph of *In the Skin of a Lion* which is taken from John Burgher, “Never again will a single story be told as though
it were the only one.” (Ondaatje 1997, epigraph unnumbered) It truly explains the fact of Ondaatje’s writing strategy. He consistently searches for the new textual territories and new modes of writing. Ondaatje’s position in Canada is described as: “Ondaatje along with Margaret Atwood, one of Canada’s most important country’s biggest cultural exports.” (http://literature.britishcouncil.org)

Canadian cultural renaissance took place in the 1960 when Ondaatje arrived in Canada, “when everyone changes, when everyone wants to remake themselves.” (Hutcheon and Richmond, 197) Ondaatje started his writing career in this scenario at the same decade when there was immense increase of readers of poetry. This situation is concisely explained by Margaret Atwood in *The New Oxford Book of Verse in English*:

> Michael Ondaatje evades categorization but this exotic imagery and violent mini-plots have gained him a reputation as one of the most vital and imaginative of the younger poets.

(Atwood, 38)

Michael Ondaatje was the co-winner of the 1992s Booker Prize for his novel *The English Patient*. Ondaatje’s name has surfaced as a likely candidate for the Noble Prize. John Porter in his article “A Canadian Nobel prize winner” expresses his views about Ondaatje’s writing as:

> As a creator of new art form an inventor of a style, a man who has found his own literary country and keeps putting flags there lest anyone be mistaken.

(Porter, 2)

It is necessary to put forth the biographical sketches of Michael Ondaatje as the Canada’s biggest cultural expert, the voice of Sri Lanka from Canada.

**II.II: The Biographical Sketches of Michael Ondaatje:**

Michael Ondaatje was born on 12 September, 1943 in Kegalle, fifty miles West of Colombo, Ceylon, the capital of Sri Lanka. His parents, Doris (nee Gratian) and Philip Mervyn Ondaatje, are from well established Burgher families which are also the part of the Eurasian Community. They formed an important element of the Ceylonese elite. Michael is the fourth child to his parents. He has three elder siblings: Christopher, Gillian and Janet. Ondaatje skillfully presents the Ceylon, his homeland in the family memoir *Running in the Family*. He also explains how his motherland’s
names have been changing from Serendip to Sri Lanka. He explains about the history of his country as:

*The Island seduced all Europe, the Portuguese. The Dutch.
The English. And So its name changed, as well as its shape – Serendip, Ratnadip (“island of gems”) Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon and Ceylon – the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of sword or bible or language.

(Ondaatje, 64)

Ondaatje’s paternal grandfather, Philip Bampa Ondaatje, was a wealthy tea planter in Kegalle. His parents divorced in 1945 and Michael moved to Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. He remained there with his mother until 1952, with his maternal uncle Noel Gratian. In Colombo he attended St. Thomas’s College Boy’s school. Jewinski compares Ondaatje’s school in Sri Lanka with Oxford and Cambridge school. He writes: “The school is the carbon copy of the English boarding school of the oxford/Cambridge model.” (Jewinski, 20) He is also fascinated by the American pop cultural and the Western culture at the school. Jewinski writes: “The emphasis was on the arts and British notions of culture.” (Jewinski, 21)

In 1949, Doris his mother moved to England, leaving Gillian and Michael behind in Ceylon. In 1952 Michael also moved to England towards his mother. There he attended Dulwich College where he developed his passion for reading the literature. Michael has never seen his father again in his after separation from him. Jewinski writes Michael’s separation from his father affects him causing his tremendous loss. He states: “Michael’s separation from his father affected him with a tremendous sense of loss.” (Jewinski, 19)

In spite of separation they wrote to each other. His father was in his mind imaginatively. According to Ondaatje’s Biographer Jewinski:

*A father was in his mind, a figure that he could imaginatively piece together from different points of view… In all, it was a view based on a series of fragmented insights, often devoid of a full context or background.

(Jewinski, 13)
In this context, his works such as *Billy the Kid*, *Coming through Slaughter* and *The English Patient* reflects how the facts and truths are pieced together to form a literary work. The truth of the protagonist’s life has to be pieced together from whatever is available.

In 1962, Ondaatje migrated to Canada. The Canadian environment influences his writings greatly. His reading practice and his meetings with Canadian poets inspires him to write. It is expressed by him in an interview published in Manna with Ondaatje. He tells:

_Around 1962, after I came to Canada. [I started to write poetry]. I was never read much poetry to that point, although I used to read to a great many novels and biographies, and still do. Then meeting poets and having enthusiastic teachers brought things into focus for me and I began to write. My first teacher at Bishop’s was Arthur Motyer and I owe him a great deal for he introduced me to poetry in the best possible way._

(Ondaatje with Manna, 19)

In Canada he joined his elder brother Christopher, to Montreal where he was allowed to enter for B.A. program at Bishop’s University in Lennoxville, in the Eastern Township of Quebec, and the University of Toronto. Ondaatje began his literary career as a poet, but today he is best known for his innovative prose. At Bishop’s University, Ondaatje met numerous people. His teachers at the university encouraged and introduced him with many scholars and poets. In an interview with Lind Hutcheon Ondaatje states:

_Although he grew up in Sri Lanka and lived in England for about eight years and then came [to Canada...I don’t feel much of ‘England’ in me] I do feel I have been allowed the migrant’s double perspective, in the way, say, someone like Gertrude stein was’re-focused’ by Pairs._

(Jewinski, 23)

Doug Jones, one of his mentors, recognized Ondaatje’s talent and encouraged him. He has invited him to stay with his family to live with them in order to save lodging expenses. His direct encouragement made Ondaatje to write poetry. Ondaatje at the age of nineteen encountered with well-known writers such as Ralph Gustafson, George Whalley, and Arthur Moyeter etc. who in later years, directly and

In 1964 Ondaatje married to Kim Jones, his mentor Doug Jones’s wife. Kim Jones was an artist. When their marriage took place, Kim was of thirty –four and Michael was of nineteen year old. It is the early stage of his career and Ondaatje married to a woman of his double age. They have two children, Quintin and Griffin.

In 1965 Ondaatje completed his B.A from University of Toronto. At the same time he came in contact with Raymond Souster- the editor who includes Ondaatje’s poems in his anthology entitled New Wave Canada. (1996) Ondaatje also met Wayne Clifford a poet and editor at Coach House press. In the year 1966 Ondaatje won with Wayne Clifford the E.J Pratt Gold Medal for poetry by the University of Toronto.

Michael, Kim and Quintin moved to Kingston from Toronto. Ondaatje completed his M.A. from Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario during the period between September 1965 to September 1967, and his thesis for master degree is entitled as “Mythology in the poetry of Edwin Muir: A study of the making and the using of the Mythology in Edwin Muir’s poetry.” (1967) The topic of myths fascinates Ondaatje “especially with how a few sparse facts can suddenly become an entire intricate history.” (Jewinski, 61) Ondaatje began to teach at the University of Western Ontario, in London.

Awards and Honours:

Ondaatje is the greatest living poet, novelist, passive observer of the social reality, a screen play writer, film maker and editor. Ondaatje has been conferred with a number of prizes and awards for his contribution to the literary world. Ondaatje is awarded with the ‘Ralph Gustafson Award’ for the year 1964-65. He is a recipient of ‘E.J Pratt Gold Medal’ for poetry by the University of Toronto in 1966. In the same year he won the ‘Norma Epstein Award’ for poetry. In 1967 he received ‘The President Medal’ for his poem “Pairs” by the University of Western Ontario in London. Ondaatje has also been honoured with “Governor Generals Award” for Billy the Kid for 1970-71. Ondaatje is also awarded with “Chalmers Award” for his work Billy the kid: Left Handed Poem in 1973.
His first novel *Coming through Slaughter* received “Books in Canada First Novel Award” in 1967. He won the “Governors Generals Award” and the Canadian Authors Association Award for *There’s a Trick with a Knife I ’m Learning to Do* in 1980. The Play *Coming through Slaughter* received Canada-Australia Literary Prize in 1980. In the 1987 Ondaatje is the winner of the city of Toronto Book Award for his novel *In the Skin of Lion*. He is also a recipient of “Trillium Book Award” and a finalist for the “Ritz Paris Hemingway Award” (no award given) in the same year.

In 1988 he received “Order of Canada” and awarded with the Booker prize in 1992 for his novel *The English Patient*. He also won “Governor Generals Award” and the “Trillium Award” for the same novel. In 2000 he is recipient of the “Giller Prize” (Canada) for his fiction *Anil’s Ghost*. He also bags “Governor General’s Literary Award” for fiction (Canada) for Anil’s *Ghost*. Ondaatje won the “Governor General’s Literary Award” for English fiction in 2007. In the same year he is shortlisted for Giller Prize. In 2011 he was the finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for fiction. In 2011 he was also the finalist for “Scotia bank Giller Prize”

Ondaatje started his career as an instructor in English at the University of Western Ontario in London in 1967. In the same year his first collection of poems *The Dainty Monster* appeared. His Literary journey began with the publication of these poems by Coach House, which established himself as a poet. His collection of poems *The Dainty Monster* is an attempt to find his identity in the Canadian Context. Especially at the beginning of his career, he wished to be considered and accepted as a Canadian poet of the importance. In Interview with Manna Ondaatje says:

*It is there I suppose, but not in any conscious way. There are couples of poems which refer to image of Ceylon, but mostly I was concerned with coming to terms with the present landscape of the time.*

(Jewinski, 50)

Ondaatje doesn’t want to be seen as a foreigner. He wishes to be recognized as a Canadian poet. And the poems in this collection are offspring of the British Canadian tradition. According to Jewinski “The poems of *Dainty Monster* is offspring of the British Canadian tradition, tradition; preside over by the modernist Auden and Yeats.” (Jewinski, 34) These poems established perennial themes of Ondaatje’s writing and revealed important influence on him.
The Man with Seven Toes is published in 1969. Its dramatic reading is performed in Vancouver and Stratford. The poem is about colonial writing. The poem is based on the semi legendary white woman named Mrs. Fraser, the mythical figure. The poem narrates the renewing and loss of the civilization and her return to civilization. The poem explains her encounter with native Australians and her loss of self and her sexual exploitation. The suffering of white woman and her mental breakdown and her wilderness, is represented in the poem. Ondaatje admits to an interview with Catharine Bush “without feeling the self conscious there was a jump from the self to mask of kind.” (Jewinski, 54)

Ondaatje’s next collection of poems The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poem published in 1970. In this collection Ondaatje has used a collage of photographs, genetic fragments, interview, newspaper articles, extracts, passages of lyric poetry, prose narratives, comic strip and etc to represent the legend of famous nineteen century American ‘Outlaw’- Billy the Kid, William Bonney a legendary figure. The issue of nationality and national identity are problematical in his work.

Billy is represented as the borderline figure crossing both geographical and moral boundaries. Ondaatje tells Bush in an interview about Billy as:

Billy is personal book, very much about my world then ,even though its set in a different country and its about an absolute strange to me I found I could both reveal and discover myself more through being given a costume I could be more honest about the things, I want to talk about or witness.

(Jewinski, 65)

In 1971 Ondaatje’s studied for Leonard Cohen for McClelland and Stewart’s Canadian writer series and his film on pbNichol Sons of caption Poetry is released and he worked as an editor for Coach House Press. In the same year Ondaatje in collaboration with Tony Urquhart Published an anthology of poems entitled The Broken Ark: A Book of Beasts. He worked as a teacher at ‘Gledon College’ at York University Toronto from 1971 to 1990. In 1972 Ondaatje worked on his two films, his comic short carry based on Crime and Punishment and he shoot the documentary film The Clinton Special And this documentary released in 1974.

The Rat Jelly his next collection of poetry published in 1973. The poems in this collection reflect his father’s letter and other world. The play Collected Works of Billy the Kid is produced at the Stratford festival in the same year. Ondaatje’s
*Coming through Slaughter* the fictionalized biography of New Orleans jazz cornet player, a black man of Afro-American ancestry, Buddy Bolden (1876 -1931) is published in 1976. The novel portrays the life of the legendary jazz musician Buddy Bolden whose life is barely recorded in the history. This is the story of identity crisis which focuses on the protagonist Bolden’s madness and self destruction. Bolden lacks the control and the limitation of his own powers. No recording are available or he is never be a part of electronic history. Infidelity remains as a curse and obfuscates the man causing his identity crisis. This is the murky world of sex and alcohol where Bolden lived his life.

Bolden’s disappearance keeps him away from the music and the world of audiences. Buddy Bolden becomes a legend in the final parade performance. He become totally insane and remains in the asylum 24 years of his life. The issue of cultural conflict is not focused by Ondaatje as concern to this novel. The issue of race also is not discussed by him. So Ondaatje is criticized for it by various critics.

His famous chapbook *Elimination Dances* published in 1978. This year proves for Ondaatje as a year of personal discovery. Along with Kim and their children he travelled to Sri Lanka for five months visit with his sister, Gillian and other various relatives. *There’s a Trick with Knife I’m Learning to do* published in 1979. It includes poems written up to 1978 and some finest poems which explores the connection between past and present.

In 1979 his marriage with Kim comes under stress. He travels to China alone. On his return to Canada he has attended a writer’s conference in Hawaii and there he is introduced with Linda Spalding a television journalist and producer. Ondaatje has accepted a post as a creative writer at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. In 1982 he separated from his wife Kim. According to Jewinski, his poem *Tin Roof* (1982) is written when Michael alone is on visit to Island (Hawaii), and prepares to shape his family memoire *Running in the Family*. His *Secular Love* published in 1984 the poems in the *secular Love* are full of with expressions of pain and guilt. Ken Adachi writes in review of *Secular Love*: “Dwelling on absence, following obsessive private rituals, working out dramas of loss and disaffection.” (Jewinski, 111) Adachi also continues her reading as:

“Like a commentary on [Ondaatje’s] more recent adult experiences, the pain and turbulence of a marriage break-up and a new relationship in the midst of 'love for you /my wife’s suffering /anger in every direction.”
In 1985 Ondaatje begins co-editing *Brick: A Literary Journal* with his wife and novelist Linda Spalding.

In 1982 Ondaatje published his family memoir *Running in the Family*. Ondaatje left Sri Lanka at the early age and returns to visit his homeland at the age of thirty six in order to write his family memoir. With the help of very limited childhood experience Sri Lanka the country of his origin. The title *Running in the Family* speaks and inspires him to run in and to feel united with the family. In this autobiographical novel Ondaatje tries to explores the source of identity. The book reflects the strong element of memory, emotional ties, pain of separation, cultural inheritance etc. Running in the family renders to record the narrator’s quest of belonging and finding the roots in the country of his inheritance. It also portrays the image of his father contrast to his memory.

With the publication of his fiction *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) Ondaatje contributed greatly to the Canadian literature. He is renowned as a national and international author. The Novel fictionalizes the lives of immigrants, and minorities who construct the Toronto. But their role is systemically eliminated from the nation’s history. They are forgotten and lost. The novel focuses on the first quarter of the twentieth century, when numbers of European people are migrating from Europe to Canada. The immigrants require jobs, but there is no requirement. This is the period of great depression among the immigrant. Ondaatje placed his work during this crisis. In the skin of lion depicts the unofficial histories of the making of Toronto Bridge by the immigrants. But they remain silent in the country’s official history. It also deals with the neocolonial social structure of the Canada. Ondaatje writes about immigrants who helped to build a bridge in Toronto in 1917 as:

*The writing was a learning process, as the writing of books often is for me. I don’t go into the book with a full set of ideas: this is going to be a book about this issue or that period of time...The moving out from the self into a wider sphere is what I enjoy.*

(Ondaatje with Hutcheon and Richmond, 199)

Immigrants are not outsiders only, but native Canadians like Ontario born Patrick Lewis who is the protagonist of the novel-comprehends himself as an immigrant. This act of immigration is not only geographical but psychological and emotional also. Immigrant faces the problems like language barriers. Immigrants as
well as insiders like Patrick alienated by the lack of language racism and the problem of identity crisis. *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems* is published in Great Britain in 1989 in United States in 1991 and Canada in 1992. In this poem Ondaatje wants to be the Cinnamon peeler, wants sureness of belonging. Ondaatje also wishes all the scars of his multicultural, multiethnic belonging to be open and be transformable through history, memory and myth. His desire of belonging to the island is depicted in the poem.

His Novel *The English Patient* appeared in 1992, a sequel of *In the Skin of a Lion*. The novel is set in Italy. The English Patient is a novel that seeks to explore the issue of displacement exile, identity crisis and cultural clashes, both by colonizer and colonized. The individuals that gather at the Villa San Girolamo at the end of the World War II are all displaced persons; all are exiles from their homeland. Hana is a Canadian nurse, who volunteered for war services. She stays to the villa to nurse a dying burn English accented, Hungarian man named English patient. The third member of the villa is Indian Kirpal Singh or Kip- the sapper and Caravaggio friend of Hana’s father Patrick who worked as a spy and captive of German. The central figure of the novel is English Patient who burnt beyond the recognition and his identity is already erased. Being Hungarian he is mistaken as an English man.

Ondaatje brings all these characters together. The novel represents the cultural clash and the problem of identity as the central issue. United States has dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. Kip who already caught between two culture decides to leave the villa and his love Hana. He has returned to his native country India.

*Handwriting* (1998) his latest collection of poems takes Ondaatje back to Sri Lanka. Some poems are autobiographical in nature. *Anil’s Ghost* is published in 2000. It is story of cultural conflict and clashes of two cultural the east and west. This is represented by the protagonist Anil Tissera and the native Sri Lankan –Sarath Diyasena. The novel transports us to Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is the country with thousand years of tradition and culture. Ondaatje situates his novel in the period of violence of the ethnic war in Sri Lanka. Anil Tissera a young woman and forensic anthropologist born in Sri Lanka educated in the West. She is sent by an International Human Rights group. Sri Lankan government is systematically killing its own people in the campaign of murder. She handles ethic violence in Sri Lanka Civil War is central to *Anil’s Ghost*. She is completely alienated. She no longer can speak Sinhala
and speak primarily English to her ayah Lalita. This novel is perceptive representation of culture and history and marginalized people in Sri Lanka.

His Conversations: *Walter Murdoch and the Art of Editing film* his nonfictional work published in 2002. In 2006 his collection of poetry *The story* published. Ondaatje’s lyrical painful family story his recent novel *Divisadero* published in 2007. The novel is partly set in Northern California of 1970. *Divisadero* is about identity and mysteries of which exactly we are. This is a painful story of Anna the Biological daughter, Coop the hired hand. The novel also traces the life of French writer Lucien Segura in Europe.


II.III: Conclusion:

Ondaatje is the first Canadian national tradition to win the Booker Prize award. His name is surfaced to be a likely candidate for Noble Prize. Ondaatje wanders from genre to genre to present his art. His exploration and experiment in generic form makes him different than the other Sri Lankan writers. His sense of cosmopolitan in his work makes him the cosmopolitan Canadian writer. Ondaatje knows that people are no longer remains tied to biology and geography. This view leads him to be a global writer. Ondaatje is considered as the writer of Canadian tradition. Solescki authorizes Ondaatje as “something different from a major Canadian writer.” (Solescki 1985, 9) He is the voice of Sri Lanka from Canada.
II.IV: References:
14) -------------. *The Man with Seven Toes*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1969