CHAPTER – III
CULTURAL CONFLICT IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S FICTION

III. I: Introduction:

In today’s world the problem of being displaced from one’s own culture and finding oneself in totally new environment has been growing very fastly. In this situation individual is seen geographically, culturally, linguistically sometimes psychologically alienated or isolated.

Michael Ondaatje is a writer who is shaped by the different cultures. He is Sri Lankan-Dutch immigrant to Canada, and his writing reflects the issue of identity, history, hybridity and cultural clashes. Glen Lowry in his “The Representation on of Race in Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion” comments on the issue of Ondaatje’s cultural writing especially about ‘race’ he points out:

*With a few notable exceptions, Ondaatje’s depiction of racialized subject has received only limited attention (see, e.g. Turcotte; Mukherjee; Rundle; Lowry). While his identity as a Sinhalese emigrant or Canadian immigrant is often noted (see e.g., Kamboureli; Richler; Watchel; Young), critics tend to ignore the political implications of Ondaatje’s work in relation to that of other writers of colour, effectively eliding “race” as an element of his writing.*

(Lowry Glen, 62)

The discussion of Ondaatje’s work aims to highlight his writing and “lack of cultural baggage” (Mukherjee, 114), he has brought with him from Sri Lanka. As well as his writing lacks to present ‘otherness.’ Ondaatje’s criticism has so far been unable to justice. Ondaatje’s critics have discussed Ondaatje’s oeuvre and his portrayal of Sri Lanka and highly praised for his writing. In his writing he often mentions his plentiful description of its landscape and detailed accounts of the country’s rich culture. Ondaatje’s complex cultural background provokes him to write literature of displacement.

Ondaatje has proved that his novels portray the cultural issues which are the central point of his fictions. In an academic paper read at the Western Social Science Association 49th conference held at Calgary Canada (2007) Sunil Govinnage
comments on Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost* “Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* as a representation of a clash of good and evil or more specifically, eastern and western cultural values as represented by two main protagonist-Sarath and Anil.” (http://www.Sundayobserver.lk)

The fact of birth is inevitable that one can never escape the culture in which one is born. Michael Ondaatje’s work brings mutual advantage and continued existence of the immigrant and sufferer in the alien land. Susan Spearey comments on Ondaatje’s status as a migrant writer as: “Ondaatje stakes his claim to a cross-cultural inheritance, and pieces together an alternative literary tradition that answers to his most pressing concerns as a migrant writer.” (Jodha Avinash, 65)

However, Ondaatje’s writing in many ways reflects the cultural issues. Ondaatje’s writing is shaped in Canadian multicultural society. Ethnic writing becomes the part of Canadian literary scene. Ondaatje has started his fictional work experimenting with genre which is biographical in treatment. Ondaatje in his very first novel *Coming through Slaughter* actually deals with the themes of the outsider and the other.

### III. II. Cultural Conflict in Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming through Slaughter*:

Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming through Slaughter* (1976) is the first novel to win the first Book in Canada’s first best novel award. Ondaatje desires to write on the real experiences of the people who have been neglected by the history. Ondaatje was diverted by a “Cryptic newspaper reference: Buddy Bolden, who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade.” (Barbour, 3) Ondaatje is obsessed with Buddy Bolden’s legend. Douglas Barbour rightly observes, “Ondaatje desires to speak the inner world of figure silenced by either too much documentation or far too little.” (Barbour, 7) Ondaatje gives voice to the figure to the New Orleans Jazz cornet player Buddy Bolden and tells about the novel. Ondaatje states:

> I wanted everything about this person. I read that reference in the newspaper. I became obsessed with him while I was working on another book. I realized that I was going to have to face this character. He took over and I started writing about him instead and left the other thing.

(qtd. in Barbour, 3)
In this debut novel Ondaatje has successfully presented the striking portrait of urban America of the early 1900s. The novel is mostly set into the New Orleans Black community. It is centered on Buddy Bolden, an Afro-American musician, the key figure in the development of the New Orleans music style mostly known as jazz. The culture of New Orleans plays an important role in Bolden’s life. Ondaatje focuses on the forgotten story of the Buddy Bolden where there is no recorded history. According to John Bolland, “The conflict between creative and destructive energy is returned to in Ondaatje’s first novel, *Coming through Slaughter* (1976) in the figure of the New Orleans jazz cornet player, Buddy Bolden.” (Bolland, 21)

The surrounding depicted in the novel are the lewd, murky or sexy. Ondaatje describes the protagonist Buddy Bolden’s Storyville district: “But here there is a little recorded history, though tales of ‘The Swamp’ and ‘Smoky Row’, both notorious communities were about hundred black prostitutes from prepuberty to their seventies.” (Ondaatje 1993, 4) The black whores and musician shipped in from the residential district located in the outskirt of a city and the black customers are refused. The New Orleans at night is described as the industry of sex, where the price of the teenage virgin is fixed. Ondaatje also describes:

> By the end of the nineteenth century, 2000 prostitutes were working regularly. There were at least 70 professional gamblers. 30 piano players took in several thousand each in weekly tips. Prostitutions and its offshoot received a quarter of a million dollars of the public’s money a week.

(Ondaatje, 5)

Tom Anderson ‘the district king’ has published a ‘Blue Book,’ in which he lists every whore in New Orleans Sporting district alphabetically, the ‘white’ and then the ‘black’ girls. Buddy Bolden is a barber, a cornet player. He edits a scandalous newspaper ‘The Cricket.’ “His life at this time had a fine and precise balance to it with a careful allotment of hours.” (Ondaatje, 11) He plays with his kids, sleeps with his wife Nora Bass, who is also a former prostitute. He is a good husband and a good father. Buddy after dinner in the Masonic Hall plays with his cornet. Douglas Barbour aptly comments on Bolden’s world as:

> Bolden immersed in the generous and full world of his culture. There is a kind of logic to the story of how he works,
drinks, plays with his children, edits ‘The Cricket’, gets along with Nora, and plays music at night.

(Barbour, 106)

Bolden is happy with his community and in his culture. In his life there is a kind of logic in his work. Barbour rightly remarks:

*Bolden immersed in the generous and full world of his culture. There is a kind of logic to the story of how he works, drinks, plays with his children, edits The Cricket, gets along with Nora, and plays music at night.*

(Barbour, 106)

Michael Ondaatje portrays Bolden as a tragic artist, whose music takes him away from friends and family and leads him to his insanity. At the height of his musical career he becomes insane. Bolden is obsessed with sex and infidelity. There is relatively lack of interest in the issue of race in Ondaatje’s portrait of Buddy Bolden, and in 1983 Ondaatje was criticized by Arun Mukherjee for “the absence of any cultural baggage he might have brought with him [from Sri Lanka]; and for “siding with the colonizer.” (qtd. in Bolland, 22) Douglas Barbour aptly criticizes the novel for its failure to foreground Bolden’s blackness and his black community:

*Faulting the text for its failure to foreground Bolden’s blackness and its socio-political effects at the time, he misses the point of the cover (or in some editions, the front piece); with the famous photograph of Bolden’s band a group of black men. This photographic sign says all that needs to be said. Having shown that these men are black, the text simply assumes that fact and all the cultural baggage that comes with it, and goes on from there.*

(Barbour, 102)

But the culture and the society of the black people is different from the white culture. In the same text Barbour explains Bolden’s culture as:

*The whole story takes place inside the essentially separate community of black New Orleans where everyone is black even Bellocq in this revision of history. In a sense, no matter how impoverished and cut off from power that community was, black at that time had perhaps less reason to question...*
their color because their culture and society were still separate from the larger white culture surrounding it. In that sense, the people would not be self-conscious about their color; they would not, in fact, tend to think about it.

(Barbour, 102)

Interview with Lionel Gremillion at East Louisiana State Hospital reveals the truth about black community as:

Wasn’t much communication between whites and blacks and so much information is difficult to find out. No black employees here.

(Ondaatje, 161)

There are no such evidences regarding the communication between black and white community members. Douglas Barbour points out truth of ignoring black community by white policy as:

This laconic comment points to a larger paucity of information, and, in a sense to a deliberate, if possibly unconscious, white policy of ignoring such information and thus effectively denying such knowledge any outlet at the time. It is in its own way a political gesture to refuse to try to fill in a never written history of political oppression.

(Barbour, 103)

In this novel Ondaatje has portrayed the culture of urban America of 1900s. He incorporates with the nineteenth century American marginal figure, Afro-American musician, Buddy Bolden, the key figure in music style known as jazz. Ondaatje has portrayed the New Orleans black community only. The notion of the ‘other’ is central to his work. However the novel fails to depict the issue of cultural conflict. Ondaatje in his second novel In the Skin of a Lion portrays the themes of dislocation, cultural hybridity sense of alienation and outsiderhood.

III. III: Cultural Conflict in Michael Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion:

Michael Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion (1987) articulates his concerns with the lives of the immigrants and the construction workers of Bloor Street Viaduct Bridge and a water filtration plant. The immigrant workers remain unrecorded in the Canadian official history of building of Toronto. The workers crosses the boundaries
of the another culture and rendered as cultural outsider in the host country. Linda Hutcheon explains that “the outsiders, the “ex-Centrics” are made the paradoxical (and very postmodern) centre of the novel.” (Hutcheon, 133)

Ondaatje has explored the present day reality, way of living the life that is the culture of the Canadian society. Immigrants attempt to assimilate into the host culture but the cultural differences among the groups do not allow them to become one with host culture. Pamela Maria Smorkaloff in her article “Shifting Borders, Free Trade and Frontier Narrative: Us, Canada and Mexico” points out as:

*The Canadian author Michael Ondaatje forges inter-American linkage and Trans geographical consciousness in his novel ‘In the Skin of a Lion.’ In it he explores unofficial passages of North American history, interweaving journalistic accounts and even period photographs into the work to evoke the underside of an era.*

(Smorkaloff, 94)

Winfried Siemerling notes how these immigrants enter into another world and their encounter with different cultural groups. He also explains the immigrant’s crossing of boundaries into the reality of another world and in the periphery of new language. He writes:

*The novel defamiliarizes habitual perceptions of Toronto by superimposing a reconstructed and imagined new world. With the non-English-speaking immigrants of Toronto, Ondaatje follows a whole community that crosses boundaries and borders to another reality and a new language.*

(Siemerling, 92)

Ondaatje sets his novel in the first quarter of the twentieth century, during the period very close to the first World-War while Europe has experienced crisis. Avinash Jodha, in his book, *Poetics of Exile* points out:

*Europe during this period was experiencing crisis; in the year 1913, just a year before the First World War, almost 4,00,000 immigrants primarily from European countries came to Canada, the event coincided with the creation of new provinces in Canada the westward expansion of the country.*

(Jodha Avinash, 80)
Canada is a multicultural country. Donald E. Waterfall, in his paper, “Multiculturalism Policy in Canada” writes about the multiculturalism as a social fact in Canada and the multicultural history of Canada:

*Multiculturalism was a social fact in Canada long before it features as an issue of public policy. Even at confederation in 1867, Canada consisted of myriad groups of people comprising various aboriginal groups, the French, the British and other important groups...He feels that Canada has a chequered history of multiculturalism.*

(Waterfall Donald, 197)

The immigrant workers reach Canada from different geographical divide to overcome economic depravity or the political harassment at their own homeland. But the immigration is a very complex act either voluntary or forced. Cultural difference among the community is one of the measure causes of the cultural conflict. The immigrant group’s culture is different from the native.

The immigrants in the novel are Macedonians, Finns, Greeks and Italian workers. Ondaatje’s protagonists are labours, doing filthy jobs in slaughter houses, tanneries, prisoners, and a thief and revolutionary who are cultural outsiders in the Canada. As well as the insiders like Patrick Lewis and Commissioner Harris, Clara and Alice are also immigrants in their own country.

Not only the outsiders but the insiders like the protagonist Patrick Lewis also finds difficult to survive in the multicultural country like Canada. Patrick Lewis knows very little about his culture. He is like an outsider who receives information about many things, including his own culture only after his interaction with immigrants’ community.

At the beginning of the novel, Patrick meets with the “collection of strangers” (Ondaatje 1997, 7), the silent companions. He observes them during the winter and “for the boy the end of winter means a blue river, means the disappearance of these men.” (Ondaatje, 8) Patrick observes their presence as declared by their axes that bangs into the cold wood and the procession early in the morning with lanterns. He observes the world and situates himself in the ‘pale green and nameless’ place which was not appeared on a map till 1910.

Patrick’s father Hazen Lewis is the man who is uninterested in the habits of civilization. He works for two or three farms, cuts woods, haying and herding cattle.
Later he works as a dynamiter in the feldspar mines. “He was a man who with his few props had become self-sufficient, as invisible as possible.” (Ondaatje, 18) He has not taught his son any legend or theory about how to live a life. Patrick is afraid of the stranger of another language, being the “boy growing into his twelfth year, having lived all his life on that farm where day was work and night was rest, nothing would be the same.” (Ondaatje, 22) Patrick comes to know his childhood companions, the Finnish logger’s presence, after reading Cato’s letter, to which he has shared his childhood. Ondaatje describes Patrick Lewis’s loneliness, his lack of knowledge about the culture of his country as:

Patrick has clung like moss to strangers ... He is the one born
in this country who knows nothing of the place.

(Ondaatje, 156)

Patrick has left behind his rural provincial background and arrived in the city of Toronto. Ondaatje has represented Patrick’s entry into the new quicksand, in the world of Toronto leaving behind his solitude as:

Patrick Lewis arrived in the city of Toronto as if it were land
after years at sea. Growing up in the country had governed
his childhood: the small village of Bellrock, the highway of
river down which the log drivers came, drinking working
raucous, and in the spring leaving the inhabitants shocked
within the silence... He was an immigrant to the city.

(Ondaatje, 53)

Patrick’s entry from his small town of Ontario to the city of Toronto makes him an immigrant in his own culture. “Now, in the city, he was new even to himself, the past locked away.” (Ondaatje, 54) On the Union Station Patrick encounters with a man with three suitcases. The narrator states:

He saw a man with three suitcases, well dressed, shouting out
in another language... Two days later Patrick returned to
pick up his luggage from a locker. He saw the man again,
still unable to move from his safe zone, in a different suit, as
if one step away was the quicksand of the new world.

(Ondaatje, 54)

Patrick is a man who knows nothing about the civilized society and with the limited provincial cultural background and now he has entered into the highly
developed cultural setting of city. He is displaced from his limited childhood experiences to the vast setting of Toronto. “Twenty one years old Patrick dropped under the vast arches of Union station to begin his life once more.” (Ondaatje, 53) Glen Lorry in an article “The Representation of ‘Race’ in Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion” points out the trauma of immigration with the alienation of urbanization and remapping Toronto in terms of class struggle which is the cause of the cultural conflict as:

Overlapping the trauma of immigration with the alienation of urbanization, it refigures the expansion of Toronto, the modern industrial core of an emergent nation state, within an international flow of bodies and cultures. Imagining voices for marginalized individuals and /or their forgotten communities, In the Skin of Lion re-maps Toronto in terms of class struggle; in so doing, it depicts city under construction returning readers to key sites in the social developments of the nation.

(Lowry Glen, 64)

Patrick is entrusted with the job to search the disappeared millionaire Ambrose Small and has connected with the immigrant worker’s group through Alice. Patrick ‘a searcher’ meets Clara Dickens, the wife of Ambrose Small. During their visit Patrick is attracted only in her. He is in love with her and one day Clara has left Patrick for Ambrose Small and demands him not to follow her. They meet Clara’s friend Alice in her farmhouse who is ‘source less’ without any past. Patrick is again once rendered as isolated young man caring for Clara’s iguana. Alice consoles him and asks him to forget Clara. Patrick starts to work with immigrant workers in construction of tunnel under the lake. It’s very hard job of dynamiting. During the eight hours shift no one speaks with each other. ‘Patrick is as silent as the Italians and Greeks towards the ‘bronco’ foremen’ Patrick’s job is very dangerous. He is paid extra for this work. The narrator states:

Nobody else wants the claustrophobic uncertainty of this work but for Patrick this part is the only ease in this terrible place where he feels banished from the world.

(Ondaatje, 107)
Patrick lives among the immigrant community of Toronto. Most of the Southeastern section of the city where Patrick lives is made up of immigrants. He is anonymous here. Ondaatje describes this section of city as:

*The Southeastern section of the city where he now lived was made up of mostly of immigrants and he walked everywhere not hearing any language he knew deliriously anonymous. The people on the street Macedonians and Bulgarians, where his only mirror. He worked in the tunnels with them.*

(Ondaatje, 112)

Patrick is happy with these immigrants and shares his little ethnic affinity with them. He has discovered the Macedonian world for ‘goosther’ for ‘iguana’ and he has explained it to fruit stall owner for ‘clover and vetch.’ They cannot understand what Patrick means to say. The narrator explains this confusion due to the code of language between Patrick and immigrants as:

*Four women and a couple of men then circled him trying desperately to leap over the code of languages between them. His obsession with vetch had puzzled them. He had gone at one point into the centre of the city, brought some, and returned to the Macedonian to show them what he needed. The following week, a store owner had waved it to him as he came down Eastern Avenue. Vetch was fee-ee.*

(Ondaatje, 112-13)

Macedonians approves Patrick’s friendship and feels the tears on his faces falling on his stern Macedonian-style moustache. After all Patrick finds he is accepted by the Macedonians and invited by them for the waterworks gathering. Ondaatje describes this illegal gathering as:

*It was an illegal gathering of various nationalities and the noise of machines camouflaged their activity from whoever might have been passing along Queen Street a hundred yards away. Many languages were being spoken, and Patrick followed the crowd to the seats that were set up around a temporary stage. Patrick felt utterly alone in this laughing crowed that traded information back and forth held children on their laps.*

(Ondaatje, 115)
In this secret political gathering, in the puppet show, Ondaatje portrays the frustration of the immigrants. This show mimics the helplessness of the immigrant. It reveals their identity crisis, as they are not able to communicate with this new world. The show highlights the plight of immigrant in the host land. Through this show helplessness of the immigrants and the language barrier which is put forth by Ondaatje as:

> All of the puppets looked stunned. Feet tested air before each exaggerated step was taken on this dangerous new country of the stage. Their customs were a blend of several nations...The human puppet, alien and naïve and gregarious, upset everything. The face in spite of moustache was dark and Serbian pants.

(Ondaatje, 116-17)

The human puppet has brought before the authorities. The puppet is unable to speak the language of authority. So he is ‘assaulted and insulted' by the authority. Further the puppet show is described as:

> A plot grew. Laughing like a fool he was brought before the authorities, unable to speak their language. He stood there assaulted by insults. His face was frozen. The others began to pummel him but not a word emerged-just a damaged gaze in the context of those flailing arms. He falls to the floor pleading with gestures. The scene was endless. Patrick wanted to rip the painted face off. The caricature of culture.

(Ondaatje, 117)

In the puppet show Ondaatje portrays the frustration of the immigrants. The show mimics the helplessness of the immigrants. The situation showed in the show is the results of the cultural conflicts. It also portrays immigration as the cause of cultural conflict within the immigrant community. The role of the human puppet performed by Alice Gull, the friend of the Clara in the Political gathering brings Patrick to immigrant community. He lives with Alice and her daughter Hana among other immigrants. He becomes Hana’s surrogate father. Now Patrick lives with immigrants and he is in his thirties. He comes to know the group of men, the Finnish loggers, with whom Patrick longed to hold their hands and skate with them.
After the completion of tunnel at the waterworks, Patrick works at Wicket and Craig’s tannery. In the Cypress Street leather factory Patrick always thinks about Alice while cutting the skins. He is one of the three pilot men. The workers leap waist-deep into the circular pools within the reds and archer and greens, embracing the skins of recently slaughtered animals. The workers have leapt into the different colours and looks as if they are from different countries. Ondaatje depicts the suffering of the dyers who are the immigrant workers. He states:

*And the men stepped out in colours up to their necks, pulling wet hides out after them so it appeared they had removed the skin from their own bodies. They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries.*

(Ondaatje, 130)

Patrick remembers the dyers and their bodies standing there tired, only their heads are white. The dyers are mostly immigrants. Patrick portrays them as:

*That they were twenty to thirty-five years old, were Macedonians mostly, though there were a few Poles and Lithuanians. That on average they had three or four sentences of English that they had never read the Mail and Empire or Saturday Night (they had leapt into different colours as if into different countries).*

(Ondaatje, 130)

The immigrant dyers work in tanneries without enough ventilation. All these workers arrive in the morning darkness and works till six in the evening. But the most painful thing for these immigrant dyers is that the labour agents give them English names and it is very difficult to remember these strange foreign names. So they remember these foreign syllables like a numbers. In the tanneries the dyers address each other by their false names or true countries or nationalities, “Hey Italy! Hey Canada!”

(Ondaatje, 135)

A Canadian born Patrick aligns himself due to the lack of language within the immigrant community. His thinks his life is empty without the existence of immigrants. He is cultural outsider. Ondaatje describes Patrick’s posture in the immigrant community as:

*He lived-in his job and during these evening walks- in a silence, with noise and conversation all around him. To be*
understood his reactions had to exaggerate themselves. The family idiot. A stroke victim “Patrick,” the shopkeepers would call him as he handed them money and a list of foods Hana had written out in Macedonian, accepting whatever they gave him. He felt himself expand into an innocent.

(Ondaatje, 138)

Patrick and all the immigrants face problems in the host land. The Police Chief Draper has imposed laws against the outsiders, public meetings. And if they speak in any language other than English, they are jailed. Numbers of immigrants are arrested in the various rallies in High Park or in the Shapiro Drug Store clash. The condition of the immigrants is described as:

*He in fact pleasures in his descant interpretations of what is being said. He catches only the names of streets, the name of Police Chief Draper, who has imposed laws against the public meeting by foreigners. So if they speak this way in public, in any language other than English, they will be jailed. A rule of the city.*

(Ondaatje, 133)

Patrick feels relaxed or he is more comfortable in the immigrant’s community especially in Kostas’s house, the owner of the Ohrida Restaurant and a Macedonian immigrant where Alice speaks with her friends slipping out of English and into Finnish or Macedonian. In Kostas’s room Patrick attentively looks at the small memory painting of Europe on the walls. When he comes to live among the strangers, among the immigrants, he becomes aware and learns about his country and about his childhood companions, the Finnish loggers. During his childhood Patrick and his father is unknown about the Finnish loggers, they don’t know from where they are but now in this complex situation he remembers his father.

Patrick comes to live in Macedonian immigrant community in Toronto. He is isolated by language in his own country. He lives with immigrant community. Immigrants cannot speak the language of host country but the silent action films bring nothing but entertain only. Michael Ondaatje puts in front of us the real plights of immigrant community faced in alien culture as:

*The event that will light the way for immigration in North America is the talking picture the silent film brings nothing*
but entertainment….The comedies are nightmares. The audiences emits horrified laughter as Chaplin, blindfolded roller-skates near the edge of the unbalconide mezzanine…North America is still without language, gestures and work and bloodlines are the only currency.

(Ondaatje, 43)

Like Patrick, other immigrants also have faced the various problems after crossing the borders. The immigrants arrive with full of dreams and the stories of successful immigrants who returned to their own homeland. Daniel Stoyanoff, one of the immigrants tempts his countrymen by telling the stories about North America and stories about himself, how he becomes wealthy after migration. Ondaatje reveals sojourner’s stories as:

Daniel Stoyanoff had tempted them all. In North America everything was rich and dangerous. You went in as sojourner and came back wealthy-Daniel buying a farm with the compensation he had received for losing an arm during an accident in a meat factory…He had returned to the village of Oschima, his sleeve flapping like a scarf and with cash for the land. He had looked for a wife with two arms and settled down.

(Ondaatje, 44)

However, first travelers become the ‘Judas goats to the west’ for Macedonian villagers. Such stories of sojourners inspire them to migrate from their homeland.

One of the Macedonian immigrant characters Nicholas Temelcoff has inspired by the sojourner’s fairy tales of Upper America: “But it was the spell of the language that brought Nicholas here, arriving in Canada without a passport in 1914, a great journey made in silence.” (Ondaatje, 43) Ondaatje reveals the story of his dangerous and difficult journey to Canada. Nicholas is a twenty-five-years old when has left Balkan when the war began. “After his village was burned he has left with three friends on horseback.” (Ondaatje, 45) They were suffering from fever while travelling through Switzerland to France and at last he lands in Saint John by a French boat. Two of his friends have died during the travelling. Their boat is filthy and covered with lice. ‘Nicholas has no passport; he cannot speak a word of English.’ In Toronto he joins his villagers. Now “he would not be among strangers.” (Ondaatje, 46)
have formed a community in new country. He works in a Macedonian bakery. For
Nicholas language is much more difficult than to work in space. He loves his new
language, the terrible barriers of it. He decides to overcome the barrier. He still hardly
speaks English. So he has 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 has translation dreams. He becomes very obsessive over learning
English. The narrator observes:

*During this time in the Sault he had translation dreams-
because of his fast and obsessive studying of English. In the
dreams trees changed not just their names but their looks and
character. Men started answering in falsettos. Dogs spoke
out fast to him as they passed him on the street.*

(Ondaatje, 46-47)

Immigrants face problem of a language in the host land. In Canada most of the
immigrants learn English through mimicking a single actor throughout his career.
Ondaatje has described the problem of immigrant’s learning language as:

*Most immigrants learned their English from recorded songs
or until the talkies came through mimicking actors on stage.
It was a common habit to select one actor and follow him
through his career, annoyed when he was given a small part
and seeing each of his places as often as possible-sometimes
as often as ten times during a run.*

(Ondaatje, 47)

Among the immigrants community certain actors are popular because they speak
slowly. In ballads and blues the line of verse is repeated three times, so they are in
great demand. Ondaatje reveals the process of learning the language in foreign
countries as:

*Usually by the end of an east-end production at the Fox or
Parrot Theatres the actors’ speeches would be followed by
growing echoes as Macedonians, Finns, and Greeks repeated
the phrases after a half second pause, trying to get the
pronunciation right…Certain actors were popular because
they spoke slowly. Lethargic ballads, and a kind of blues
where the first line of the verse is repeated three times, were
in great demand. Sojourners walked out of their accents into regional American voices.

(Ondaatje, 47)

In order to learn English language Patrick’s immigrant friend Nicholas has joined the school. “The teachers were all young ladies and were very good people.” (Ondaatje, 46) He wakes early at two and bake till 8.30 and at nine he attends the school. He studies English. And in his dreams he sees tree has changed their names, looks and characters. However, his obsession to learn English is nothing but to struggle to survive in the foreign culture.

Patrick learns to adjust to his surroundings. Once he was in the Teck Cinema watching a silent film, he found himself silent among laughing audience and joins others in their laughter. He looks and catches some one’s eye and they both have the same realization- that this mutual laughter suggests nothing but conversation. He assimilates in the multicultural community of his own country from which formerly he was alienated. John Bolland rightly compares Ondaatje with Patrick Lewis as:

> Despite being part of the dominant race and tradition, Patrick feels himself to be an alien like Ondaatje he sees himself as both foreigner and son of the land. When he finds work as a construction worker on the viaduct, Patrick becomes aware of the immigrant workers’ communities which he had previously regarded as mysterious other. He finds new form of solidarity, based not on genealogical descent but collaboration in labour and in form of social and cultural expression.

(Bolland, 25)

However, the novel depicts the plights and problems faced by the immigrant community as well as the insider like Patrick Lewis in alien land. Though he is the part of dominant race and tradition a Canadian born insider is an immigrant in his own country and faces the problem of language. He is unknown with his country’s culture. It also portrays the striking picture of cultural clash. The theme of isolation, alienation, dislocation and rootlessness is reflected. The novel depicts the excluded history of immigrants, who are the part of Canada’s infrastructure. Ondaatje brings together the characters from different cultural identity in his next award winning novel *The English Patient*. 87
III. IV. Cultural Conflict in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*:

Ondaatje’s Booker Prize winning novel *The English Patient* (1992) deals with the problem of displacement. The novel is focused on the impact of World War II and on the lives of the characters who are all displaced individuals and inhabitants of the deserted Tuscan Villa San Girolamo in Central Italy. All these displaced individuals are of different nationalities and of different cultural identities. They are wounded badly in war either psychologically or physically. They have formed a community within the villa away from the outside world. During the war, the villa is used as an army hospital by the Allies. The novelist depicts the pathetic condition of these people:

…born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from or homelands all our live.

(Ondaatje 1993, 176)

Hana is a Canadian nurse who takes care of English patient who is burnt beyond the recognition. David Caravaggio, a Canadian Italian thief joins them in the villa and the fourth character is a young Indian Sikh soldier who defuses bombs in the British Army. The villa is a deserted place, “Just fifty yards away, there had been no representation of them in the world.” (Ondaatje, 112)

John Bolland rightly comments on the newly formed community and the inhabitants of the villa as “a new community which crosses barriers of age, culture and gender and which is cut off from the violence of the outside world controlled by money and power.” (Bolland, 35) In fact, all the habitants of the newly formed community are exiles, away from their homelands. Amynovak in an article points out the characters traumatic experiences during the war and examines the cultural trauma of the World War II:

*The English patient, while a novel about each characters traumatic experience during the war, is also a text about the trauma of history. Examining the cultural trauma of the World War II not so much the “truth” of what happened, but instead its place in the cultural imaginations –the novel probes how the present confronts the unimaginable and the silences of the past.*

(Novak Amy, 211)
Every character in the villa represents his/her own cultural identity and nationality. Hana and Caravaggio are from Canada, Kirpal Singh or Kip from India and the patient is Hungarian but due to his English accent and mannerism he is called the English patient. Not a single character in the villa is English. According to Linda Hutcheon they are all “patients of the English colonials, each in his or her own way trying to find an identity beyond the protection of and the abandonment by the empire.” (Hutcheon, 22) John Bolland is agreed with other reviewer’s opinion about the novel’s theme as:

...its central preoccupation was with displacement and the figure of the outsider, particularly with those finding themselves in a declining British Empire. (Hutcheon; Slopen, and Sage)

(Bolland, 79)

From the outside the villa San Girolamo looks as a deserted place. It is unsafe to live. It is torn by bombing. “The villa seemed a ruin” (Ondaatje, 14), and represents failure of that culture to take care of its historical places. And in such ruined place or culture all the characters are interlinked themselves with their ruined histories and memories and connected socially with each other through culture Even, they are surrounded by the death and the ruins. In this context the villa has its own history: “The villa San Girolamo, built to protect inhabitants from the flesh of the devil.” (Ondaatje, 43) Now it is a temporary field hospital. It is an old nunnery. It is taken over by the Germans and then converted into a hospital during the war. The English patient reveals the possibilities regarding the past of the villa as:

I think this was the Villa Bruscoli. Poliziano - the great protégé of Lorenzo. I am talking about 1483. In Florence, in Santa Trinita Church, you can see the painting of the Medicis with Poliziano in the foreground, wearing a red cloak...Yes; I think a lot happened here. This fountain in the wall. Pico and Lorenzo and Poliziano and the young Michelangelo. They held in each hand the new world and the old world...They sat in this room with bust of Plato and argued all night.

(Ondaatje, 56-57)

The Allies have dismantled water pipes, burned earth; everything is damaged “There are unexploded bombs all over the place.” (Ondaatje, 32) In such unfavorable
situation Hana prefers to care for her English patient who is a ‘despairing saint’ for her and lives with, such a man who has consumed his all identification in a fire.

Hana is broken psychologically due to the war. Death of her father Patrick in the war, death of her lover and the father of her unborn baby, her abortion and the death of her dear ones and victims of the war make her mentally weak. Hana is affected with madness due to the number of deaths around her. Her face ‘without the mystery of long hair’ shows her personal loss due to the World War II:

I worked very hard in the hospitals and treated from everybody around me. Except the child, who I shared everything with. In my head. I was talking to him while I bathed and nursed patients. I was a little crazy.

(Ondaatje, 82)

She decides to get off from nurses uniform, wears a brown print frock she has with her, wears her tennis shoes and “she stepped away from the war.” (Ondaatje, 52) In this ruined culture and in the newly formed community, Hana misses her homeland, Canada. She feels alienated and recalls her childhood memories of Toronto:

What she misses here is slow twilight, the sound of familiar trees. All through her youth in Toronto she learned to read the summer night. It was where she could be herself, lying in a bed, stepping onto a fire escape half asleep with a cat in her arms.

(Ondaatje, 49)

In the villa, Hana prefers to be wandering in the house with her pallet or hammock. Sometimes she sleeps in the English patient’s room, sometimes in the hall. Unrecognizable burned man accompanies her in the villa without any expression. The doctors from the Military hospital in a Rome discusses about the villa, Hana and her patient as:

San Girolamo. Well, she’s got her own ghost, a burned patient. There is a face but it is unrecognizable. The nerves all gone. You can pass a match across his face and there is no expression. The face is asleep.

(Ondaatje, 28)

A man with bandaged hands named Caravaggio has been in the military hospital in Rome for more than four months and has not said a word during the time.
“He had revealed nothing, not even his name, just wrote out his serial number, which showed he was with Allies.” (Ondaatje, 27) He has heard about the nurse Hana and her patient. He is the friend of Hana’s father. He is more caring and having deep affection towards Hana. He is in the villa San Girolamo to see her. Caravaggio knows Hana and her father in Toronto before the war. The narrator observes him as:

Then he had been a thief, a married man, slipped through his chosen world with a lazy confidence, brilliant in deceit against the rich, or charm towards his wife Giannetta or with this young daughter of his friend.

(Ondaatje, 40)

Caravaggio is a brilliant thief, so Allies makes his skills official and recruit him as a spy working for British intelligence in Cairo. He says, “At time we were sent in to steal. Here I was an Italian and a Canadian thief.” (Ondaatje, 35) And he is captured while stealing some papers and is arrested. He is threatened and amputated of his thumbs in order to reveal secret information. He is a man with absurd name and his attachment towards Hana is uncertain and Ondaatje reveals him as:

War has unbalanced him and he can return to no other world as he is, wearing these false limbs that morphine promises.

He is a man in middle age who has never become accustomed to families. All his life he has avoided permanent intimacy.

(Ondaatje, 116)

Caravaggio needs to reveal the identity of the English patient for Hana’s sake. He also warns Hana to protect herself from sadness.

One day Hana is playing with a piano, the two men enter in the villa with the guns and Hana finds herself among the foreign men. Ondaatje describes the situation: Hana sees a lightning flash across the valley; the storm has been coming all night, a quick glimpses of a Sikh man with his turban and the bright wet guns. She is surrounded by foreign men. No one is pure Italian. When Caravaggio returns he finds Hana with two soldiers from a sapper unit in the kitchen making up sandwiches. Caravaggio always prefers to eat alone. Hana sees Caravaggio, eating like someone from East. But his graying-stubble beard, his dark jacket makes Hana think of him as Italian. She observes:

She has seen him from a window eating with his hands as he sits on one of the thirty-six steps by the chapel, not a fork or a
knife in sight, as if he were learning to eat like someone from the East. In his graying stubble-beard, in his dark jacket, she sees the Italian finally in him.

(Ondaatje, 39-40)

The Sikh man, the sapper sets up a tent near the villa. “She sees his shirtless brown body as he tosses water over himself like a bird using its wing.” (Ondaatje, 72) Hana also notices the “darker brown skin” of his wrist. The skin colour is the racial marker of the identity and ‘a little nod of his head.’ Caravaggio thinks the Sikh man is too fussy. He laughs over the Sikh sapper for always washing his own hands. The sapper explains to Caravaggio about the Indian habits as:

_I grew up in India, Uncle. You wash your hands all the times._

_Before all meals. A habit. I was born in the Punjab._

(Ondaatje, 76)

In the East especially in India, brushing of teeth is an outdoor activity. “The brushing of teeth, since he was child has always been for him an outdoor activity.” (Ondaatje, 86) After a week Hana and Caravaggio adapt Sikh sapper’s brushing and eating habit. He spreads onion and other herbs bundled within handkerchief during their meals. Caravaggio doesn’t like sapper’s way of eating with his right hand, his fingers carries food to his mouth:

_At lunch there is Caravaggio’s avuncular glance at the objects on the blue handkerchief. There is probably some rare animal, Caravaggio thinks, who eats the same foods that this young soldier eats with his right hand, his fingers carrying it to his mouth. He uses the knife only to peel the skin from the onion, to slice fruit._

(Ondaatje, 87)

The issue of cultural conflict is seen in the character’s day today’s routine and habits and the way of living the life. Eastern and Western cultural values are different and are reflected through interactions. Intermingling of any two cultures always lead to cultural conflict. The sapper, Kirpal Singh nicknamed as Kip, is the only eastern character that lives outside the villa in the tent and other three Hana, the English patient and Caravaggio are Westerner who live in the villa.

During the end of the war period Hana is sick of the Europe. She wishes to go her home in Canada but there is no one at the home. All the deaths around her make
her crazy. “A twenty-year-old throws her out of the world to love a ghost.” (Ondaatje, 45) She prefers to make the isolated, deserted villa as her new home and tries to find the meaning of her life in the Tuscan villa. But her upbringing in Canada forbids her to become one with villa. She longs for her homeland, Canada. Hana

expresses her grief, her craziness towards her homeland as:

I wanted to go home and there was no one at home. And I was sick of Europe. Sick of being treated like gold because I was female. I courted one man and he died and the child died. I mean the child didn’t just die; I was the one who destroyed it. After that I steeped so far back no one could get near me. Not with the talk of snobs. Not with anyone’s death. Then I met him, the man burned black. Who turned out to be, up close, an Englishman. 

(Ondaatje, 85)

However, Hana finds meaning of her life in caring of this burned Englishman because Hana’s father Patrick has died of burning in France when Hana was in Italy, nursing her patients who are the victims of the war. She is the victim of the “sadness of the geography.” (Ondaatje, 296) She couldn’t nurse her father who was burned in the dove cote. So she has decided not to leave the English patient and the villa San Girolamo. All inhabitants in the villa continue to live through hardship or adversity and with their physical and psychological wound. Madhumalati Adhikari has commented on the lives of these four characters:

The blurring of boundaries and causes underlines the futility of worse. The four shell-shocked humans begin to gather the broken pieces of their lives. The process of reconstruction begins after devastation. The bridge between countries that had collapsed due to political or national reasons is rebuilt…Kip and Hana’s love life is shattered by the dropping of the bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and yet hid return to India and bringing up a family reveals a remarkable ability to mend and to reconnects with others. (Adhikari Madhumati, Ondaatje and Michener James A., 50)
All these displaced individuals celebrate the party in the English patient’s room. Thus healing begins within this newly formed community. And suddenly they hear the faint sound of explosion in the distance. Kip observes:

*West wind coming into the room. And he turned suddenly, angry. A frail scent of cordite reaching him, a percentage of it in the air, and then he slipped out of the room, gesturing weariness, leaving Hana in the arms of Caravaggio.*

(Ondaatje, 110)

Kip finds his second-in command Hardy amongst dead in the explosion. After his mentor Lord Suffolk, Hardy is the only last connection to England for Kip. Both of them have died while dismantling the bomb.

Kip in his flashback recalls the memories of Westbury, England in 1940s. He remembers his arrival in England. As a twenty-year-old boy “knowing no one, distanced from his family,” (Ondaatje, 187) in the Punjab, the only Indian among the applicants, Kirpal the second son of the family breaks the tradition of his family and joins a Sikh regiment to fight the war for England. Ondaatje writes about Kip:

*He was the second son. The oldest son would go into the army; the next brother would be a doctor, a brother after that would become a businessman. An old tradition in his family. But all that had changed with the war. He joined a Sikh regiment and was shipped to England. After the first month in England he had volunteered himself into a unit of engineers that had been set up to deal with delayed-action and unexploded bombs.*

(Ondaatje, 182)

Kirpal has broken the tradition of his family and shipped to England, for war. There in England Kirpal is welcomed by Lord Suffolk, as Kirpal has willingly accepted his changed nickname Kip, “but the young Sikh had been there by translated into a salty English Fish.” (Ondaatje, 87) His acceptance of his nickname as a Kip indicates his assimilation into the Western culture. “He stepped into a family after a year abroad as if he were the prodigal returned, offered a chair at the table, embraced with conversations.” (Ondaatje, 189) Lord Suffolk introduces English customs to the young Sikh, as if it’s a recently discovered culture.
Kip has volunteered himself in bomb defusing squad in British army. It is a very dangerous task for Kip and he is following their codes like a dutiful son. His mentor Lord Suffolk is the real gentleman he has met in England. Miss Morden is the first English woman who speaks with Kip since he has arrived in England. The Britishers don’t want to speak with Indians but they want Indians to fight their wars:

*The English! They expect you to fight for them but won’t talk to you. Singh. And the ambiguities.*

(Ondaatje, 188)

After few months he came to Italy and joins others in Villa San Girolamo. However, Kip is not happy in Villa and remains as an outsider. He prefers to live in the tent near the villa. While in England he is neglected by the various barracks being the anonymous member of other the race:

*He was accustomed to his invisibility. In England he was ignored in the various barracks, and he came to prefer that. The self-sufficiency and privacy Hana saw in him later were caused not just by his being a sapper in the Italian campaign. It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world.*

(Ondaatje, 196)

In England Kip experiences racial discrimination. He is ignored by the various barracks; even then “he had built up defenses of character against all that, trusting only those who befriended him.” (Ondaatje, 196-97) He knows that he cannot become an Englishman, cannot perfectly assimilate into the alien culture. In spite of this he has molded himself to adjust to the culture of the host land and trusts only those who befriended with him. Kip remembers how Lord Suffolk watches him while riding on a white horse as a black figure. Ondaatje writes:

*Then he descended, down into the giant white chalk horse of Westbury, into the whiteness of the horse, carved into the hill. Now he was a black figure, the background radicalizing the darkness of his skin and his khaki uniform...To them it would look like he was striding down a paper map cutout in the shape of an animal.*

(Ondaatje, 181)
Kip is a colonized Indian while working as Lieutenant Kirpal Singh. With Westerners Kip always experiences humiliation because soldiers refuse to call him “sir.” Ondaatje observes and writes about colonizer’s reaction to call colonized as sir. He writes:

*Kip smiled. He was ten years younger than Hardy, and no Englishman, but Hardy was happiest in the cocoon of regimental discipline. There was always hesitation by the soldiers to call him “sir”, but Hardy barked it out loud and enthusiastically.*

(Ondaatje, 213)

Kip recalls the incident in Lahore courtyard when he was enlisted for the job as a sapper in Lord Suffolk’s team. The recruitment officers write the result of their selection carelessly with chalk on their bodies which are very insulting for Kip’s brother. He states:

*The coded results written onto our skin with yellow chalk…I did not feel insulted by this. I am sure my brother would have been, would have walked in fury over to the well, hauled up the bucket, and washed the chalk markings away. I was not like him. Though I loved him. Admired him. I had this side to my nature which saw reason in all things.*

(Ondaatje, 200)

His brother, the anti-colonial character refuses to accept the power of other culture. So the colonizers have dragged him to the jail. Kip thinks:

*But to me my brother was always the hero in the family. I was in the slipstream of his status as firebrand. I witnessed his exhaustion that came after each protest, his body gearing up to respond to this insult or that law. He broke the tradition of our family and refused, in spite of being the oldest brother, to join the army. He refused to agree to any situation where the English had power. So they dragged him to their jails.*

(Ondaatje, 200)

Caravaggio questions Hana, why she is risking Kip’s life, a twenty-six-years-old guy for the sake of the burnt man whose identity is unknown. They don’t know he is Englishman or not, a talker who seduces with words. Caravaggio knows, Hana is
obsessed with the English patient and he is obsessed with the sanity of Hana. Caravaggio wants to realize Hana and Kip that why they are wasting their life in this deserted villa and with this burned man or fighting English wars:

The trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn’t be.
What are we doing in Africa, in Italy? What is Kip doing dismantling bombs in orchards, for God’s sake? What is he doing fighting English wars? ...We should all move out together.

(Ondaatje, 122)

But Kip becomes one with English culture, he becomes more English than Indian. He has willingly adopted these new cultural values.

Hana and Kip becomes lover after dismantling a dangerous bomb. One night Hana is with Kip in canvas tent. But she feels displaced. She misses ‘sleeping trees and sleeping roofs’ in the Canada. She wants Kip to show the Skootamatta River and Georgian Bay. She also wants Kip to meet Clara, ‘the last one in her family’. Physically she is with Kip as his lover but she feels isolated in this tent. Ondaatje describes her sense of displacement as:

She feels displaced out of Canada during these nights...She wants a tin roof for the rain, two poplar trees to shiver outside her window, a noise she can sleep against, sleeping trees and sleeping roofs that she grew up with in the east end of Toronto and then for couple of years with Patrick and Clara along the Skootamatta River and later Georgian Bay. She has not found a sleeping tree, even in the density of this garden.

(Ondaatje, 128)

Kip is a “warrior saint” for Hana and ‘the Englishman calls him “fato profugus”-fate’s fugitive.’ “Hana imagines all of Asia through the gesture of this one man.” (Ondaatje, 217) The period of one month they sleep beside each other. Hana feels, she holds an Indian goddess in her arms. Ondaatje reveals their relationship as:

There is the one month in their lives when Hana and Kip sleep beside each other. A formal celibacy between them. Discovering that in love making there can be a whole civilization, a whole country ahead of them... The boy’s
desire completed itself only in his deepest sleep while in the arms of Hana.

(Ondaatje, 225)

Kip’s brother thinks Kip as a fool for trusting the English. Though “Japan is the part of Asia, I say, and the Sikhs have been brutalized by the Japanese in Malaya.” (Ondaatje, 217) English are now punishing Sikhs those are fighting for independence.

The protagonist of the novel is the English patient who is a burned pilot. Bedouins have saved him in the Libyan Desert. “The burned pilot was one more enigma, with no identification, unrecognizable.” (Ondaatje, 95) He has felt burning into the desert, at the time of war in heaven. The patient states:

I was perhaps the first one to stand up alive out of a burning machine. A man whose head was on fire. They didn’t know my name. I didn’t know their tribe.

(Ondaatje, 5)

The Bedouins brings the patient into the ‘British base at Siwa, then moves to Tunis, and then shipped to Italy.’ “Everything about him was very English except for the fact that his skin was tarred black, a bogman from history among the interrogating the officers.” (Ondaatje, 96) In the villa San Girolamo the patient ‘reposes like the sculpture of the dead knight in Ravenna.’ The English patient is Count Ladislaus de Almasy European desert explorer, who has begun mapping the greater part of the Gilf Kebir Plateau, and the information about the desert exploration by Almasy and his companion:

By the mid 1930s the lost Oasis of Zerzura was found by Ladislaus de Almasy and his companions. In 1939 the great decade of Libyan Desert expeditions came to end, and this vast and silent pocket of the earth became one of the theatres of the war.

(Ondaatje, 134)

During his expedition of desert Almasy experiences collision of cultures. Almasy meets number of people from different nations. However, Bedouins are the most beautiful men he has met in his life. For them nationality is insignificant. Almasy wants to erase his name and the place from where he comes from.

Almasy knows Madox, the member of the desert exploration team who died because of nations. He hates a kind of nationalism which respects war rather than the
civilization. Almasy “hate nations.” John Bolland rightly comments on Almasy’s character:

_Aspects of Almasy are based on historical records-the discovery of the lost oasis of Zerzura in the Libyan Desert and of the cave paintings in the Uweinat Mountains, the mapping of the Libyan Desert, he is espionage work for Rommel, his book on desert exploration._

(Bolland, 52)

Mapping the desert is spying work in the Libyan Desert. Colonial powers constitute the organization such as ‘Geographical society’ to explore new lands for colonial domination. Colonial domination is one of the causes of the cultural conflict. During the exploration in Cairo, Almasy develops an incestuous relationship, a love affair with Katherine Clifton, the wife of one of the members of exploration team named Geoffrey Clifton. He works for British Intelligence as a spy and British aristocrat. After revelation of the affair Geoffrey tries to kill all of them but he himself died. Almasy takes the wounded Katherine but fails to save Katherine. The English patient says, “And three years later, in 1942, I walked with her towards the buried plane, carrying her body as if it was the armour of a knight.” (Ondaatje, 174) Due to the oil leakage the plane catches fire and Bedouins finds his burning body and the Hungarian Almasy becomes one of the men without identity. Almasy is the victim of the Cultural conflict.

Kip hears the news of dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the cities of Japan. He emerges from the tent with rifle. He puts the rifle stock pointing against the English patient’s chest. Kip is also aware of the fact that the Western Countries impose their customs on other nations. They want to dominate the people of other nations. He further states:

_You stood for precise behavior. I knew if I lifted a tea cup with the wrong figure I’d be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot, in a tie, I was out. Was it just ships that gave you such powers? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and Printing Presses?_

(Ondaatje, 283)
The news of bombing makes Kip condemned. He addresses angrily to the English man about how the Indian soldiers have wasted their lives for Western countries. He says:

You and then Americans converted us. With your missionary rules. And Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be pukkah. You had war like cricket. How did you fool us into this?

(Ondaatje, 283)

After all Kip learns from the Caravaggio that the English patient isn’t an Englishman. He thinks English patient as a representative of British.

Kip has left the villa and three of them to their world. He repents for his failure to follow his brother’s path. Kip has willingly accepted the Western culture in spite of opposition from his brother. He breaks his family ties and tradition and adjusted himself to Western cultural values and codes that he is following like a dutiful son. He has fought wars for them. He has faced racial discrimination in the bomb defusing squad. Ondaatje portrays this painful outburst of Kip as, “When he closes his eyes he sees fire, people leaping into rivers, into reservoirs to avoid flame or heat within seconds burns everything.” (Ondaatje, 286)

Caravaggio knows that young Sikh soldier is right, “they never dropped such bombs on a white nation.” (Ondaatje, 286) Watching towards his family photograph he repents over his decision of accepting the hybrid cultural identity as Kirpal Singh to Kip and now he questions himself ‘what is he doing here in the West?’ And why has he fought for the white nations? Kip has left the villa. Hana outbursts her emotion, and writes how the end of the war and dropping of atomic bomb on Eastern country has broken the bonding of her newly formed community in the villa. She writes to Clara as:

I have spent the last few months living with three others,…
One day after we heard the bombs were dropped in Japan, so it feels like the end of the world. From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public.

(Ondaatje, 292)

They all except the English patient have assessed their original identity. Hana and Caravaggio return to Canada. Kip becomes Doctor Kirpal Singh ‘he is a doctor, has two children and a laughing wife.’ At the end of the novel the globalised
community formed in the villa San Girolamo is shattered by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is the result of the cultural conflict. Kip is at his home in India and at last he acquires his original cultural identity leaving behind his acquired hybrid identity.

Rachel D. Friedman in an article, “Deserts and Gardens: Herodotus and The English Patient”, rightly comments on the end of the novel:

By the novel’s ending, fourteen years into the future, he has shed his English moniker with all of its colonial associations and is permanently Kirpal now, and we see him back at home in India sitting around a table with his family where “all of their hands are brown” and “they move with ease in their customs and habits.

(Friedman, 48)

However, the novel represents the newly formed imagined community of all the displaced and wounded members in the villa San Girolamo during the war which is the symbol of Global unity. In spite of the different cultural and ethnic identities all the displaced individuals who represents East and West transcends their belonging and hope of reconciliation after the war. But the image of this global unity is destroyed by the bombing on the brown race by white nations. The devastating effects of war cause Cultural clash and identity crisis. Ondaatje’s next novel Anil’s Ghost takes us to his country of birth and portrays the ethnic conflict and violence during the Civil War.

III. V: Cultural Conflict in Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost:


Sri Lanka has been a colony controlled by Portugal, Holland and Britain, respectively. The island has a complicated history of Inter-ethnic tension and violence that both predates colonialism and was exacerbated by colonialism but which for
reasons of space cannot be evoked here. However, in reading Anil’s Ghost it is important to know that Sinhalese-Tamil violence in post-colonial Sri Lanka had gained momentum in 1956 when Sri Lanka’s first prime minister passé a government act that made Sinhalese the official language of the country.

(Burrows Victoria, 167)

In the same article Burrows explains the nature of the ethnic conflict which results in killing of the Sinhalese soldiers. The Civil unrest between majority Singhalese and Tamil’s, especially Tamil Tigers is explained as:

Civil unrest and ethnic frictions then erupted into greater carnage in 1983 when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (known more colloquially as the Tamil Tigers) Retaliated against what they saw as their oppression by the majority Sinhalese with a suicide bomb attack in northern Jaffna, which killed thirteen Singhalese soldiers.

(Burrows Victoria, 167)

Goonewardena criticize the novel on the ground that Ondaatje “only deals with the symptoms of the Sri Lankan crisis, as he paints pictures of the everyday life there in a time of a terror.” (qtd. by Marline Goldman 28) Victoria Burrows rightly expresses the horror of Civil War, killings and number of disappearances in Sri Lanka as:

After Iraq Sri Lanka has the second highest number of disappeared people in the world. A UN study published in 2006 stated that more than 55,000 people have disappeared, presumed killed in the past twenty five years.

(Burrows Victoria, 170)

Ondaatje in an “Authors Note” of Anil’s Ghost highlights the ongoing trauma of the civil war within the government, antigovernment insurgents and the separatist guerilla and number of disappearances of the loved ones as:

From the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the anti government insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north. Both insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government. Eventually in response,
legal and illegal government squad where know to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents.

(Ondaatje, unnumbered)

The novel sketches how the three sides involved are responsible for the conflict in this deeply disturbing portrays of a country at war, Ondaatje profoundly points out the terror and conflict on the island as:

There had been continual emergency from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatists guerrilla groups, who were fighting for home land in the north. The insurrection of the insurgent in the south, against the government. The counter terrorism of the special forces against both of them. The disposal of the bodies by fire. The disposal of the bodies in the rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses.

(Ondaatje, 38-39)

In such a moving situation Sri Lankan common man is forced to live at the very edge of human capacity and feelings. This is a war with modern weaponry. The cave 24 becomes the place of complete crime.

The panorama of Bodhisattvas-their 24 rebirths were cut out of Buddhist caves and bought up by the museums in the West. This was the place of complete crime. Heads separated from bodies, hands broken off. None of the bodies remained - all the statutory had been removed in the few years following its discovery by Japanese archeologist in 1918.

(Ondaatje, 8)

The novel Anil's Ghost opens in the Guatemala. Like the Sri Lanka, Guatemala was also colonized country and a place of ‘fear double edged.’ Anil Tissera is a forensic anthropologist inspecting the situation with her forensic team. She is a young woman born in Sri Lanka and educated in the West having westernized outlook. She is the protagonist of the novel and the hybridized character. She can speak little Sinhala and understands only a few words in Tamil. “Anil had read documents and news reports, full of tragedy and she had now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long distance gaze.” (Ondaatje, 7) She is sent by
international human rights group to identify the victims of the civil war. The Sunday Times review rightly expresses:

Anil’s Ghost transports us to Sri Lanka, a country steeped in thousands of years of tradition, now forced in to the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century by the ravages of a bloody civil war. Enter Anil Tissera a young women and forensic anthropologist born in Sri Lanka but educated in the West, sent by an international human rights group to identify the victims of the murder campaigns sweeping the island. When Anil discovers that the bones found in an ancient burial site are in fact those of much more recent victims, her search for the terrible truth hidden in her homeland begins. What follows is a story about love, about family, about identity a story driven by a riveting mystery.

(Review by Sunday Times)

Victoria Burrows points out that Anil’s home coming are not a diasporic subject but she is an outsider with westernized look and as a representative of United Nation:

Anil fled her home island fifteen years ago when she was eighteen and returns now, at the behest of the United Nation, not as diasporic subject returning to a familial community or even to a community of friends, but as a Westernized outsider who can no longer fluently speak her mother tongue.

(Burrows Victoria, 167)

Anil is paired with local government archeologist Sarath Diyasena. Sarath tells Anil about the conflicting situation of the Sri Lanka during the Civil War. During the investigation she interacts with number of Sri Lankans but faces many problems like a migrant. Sri Lankan common man doesn’t want any interfere by foreign powers and Anil is investigating the situation in Sri Lanka on behalf of International Human Rights Group in Geneva:

The bodies turn up weekly now. The height of the terror was eighty-eight and eighty-nine, but of course, it was going on long before that. Every side was killing and hiding the evidences. Every side. This is an unofficial war; no one wants to alienate the foreign powers. So it’s secret gangs and
squads. Not like Central America. The government was not the only one doing the killing. You had, and still have, three camps of enemies—one in the north, two in the South—using weapons, propaganda, fear, sophisticated posters, censorship. Importing State-of-the-art weapons from the West, or manufacturing homemade weapons. A couple of years ago people just started disappearing. Or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition. There is no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are.

(Ondaatje, 13)

Many complaints from Amnesty International and other civil rights groups are received but Sri Lankan government has claimed that it does not have only knowledge of organized campaigns of murder on the island. But under the pressure the Sri Lankan government has offered a local government official to assist Anil Tissera who is chosen as the Geneva Organization’s forensic specialist. Anil is not sure about her selection by international human rights group. Anil is selected on the cultural basis that it is easy for her to make a report. For this seven week project, she is in her homeland Sri Lanka travelling with a British passport as:

*She did not expect to be chosen, because she had been born on the island, even though she now travelled with a British Passport...Over the years complaints from Amnesty International and other civil rights groups had been sent to Switzerland and resided there, glacier like. President Katugala claimed no knowledge of organized campaigns of murder on the island. But under pressure, and to placate trading partners in the West, the government eventually made the gesture of an offer to pair local officials with outside consultants, and Anil Tissera was chosen as the Geneva Organization’s forensic specialist, to be teamed with an archeologist in Colombo.*

(Ondaatje, 12)

As per her own desire Anil has changed her name and possesses a masculine name Anil which is her brother’s unused second name. Anil’s parents have brought her to an astrologer. Ondaatje beautifully portrays the belief of Sri Lankan towards
the astrologer in their everyday life. Ondaatje put forth the Sri Lankan Culture with respect to the Sri Lankan born westernized woman Anil who later on believes on scientific truth only. According to astrologer to add ‘e’ after her name will make her name more feminine. She wishes to accept masculine name but it is not accepted in Sri Lankan society. Ondaatje presents Anil more masculine. But astrologer is unknown with the deal between Anil and her brother:

*Her Tempestuousness could be harnessed with a name change.*

*Unknown to him was the deal that had involved Gold Leaf cigarettes and rupees… The astrologer soothsayer had eventually compromised his solution down to a simple appendage - the addition of an e, so she would be Anile. It would her and her name more feminine, the e would allow the fury to curve away. But she refused even this.*

(Ondaatje, 132)

Anil left Sri Lanka at eighteen for Higher education. While studying as a trainee forensic doctor at Guy’s Hospital in London she feels alienated. In this new country Anil finds herself comfortable with the company of medical student who is also from Sri Lanka. She loves him because of loneliness. She speaks with him about jaggery jackfruit or specific barber in Bampalapitiya. As a result of her alienation Anil marries with this Sri Lankan medical student. About Anil’s married life Ondaatje in an interview with Catherine Bush states “they take their country with them to [the] the new place.” (qtd. in Sanghera Sandeep, 83) But soon Anil’s marriage comes to an end. Anil divorces him and starts to live with no partner. Anil loses her only connection with Sri Lanka with whom she can speak about Sri Lanka. Ondaatje has presented Anil’s feelings of rootlessness:

*She could cook a curry with him. She could refer to a specific barber in Bampalapitiya, could whisper her desire for jiggery or jackfruit and be understood. That made a difference in the new, too brittle country. Perhaps she herself was too tense with uncertainty and shyness. She had expected to feel alien in England only for few weeks.*

(Ondaatje, 137)
The things related to Sri Lanka makes her feel comfortable in the migrated country. In her first month in London Anil has constantly confused by the geography around her. She has missed two classes in her first week, because she is not able to find the lecture room:

_She missed two classes in her first week, unable to find lecture room. So for a while she began arriving early each morning and waited on the front steps for doctor Endicott, following him through the swing doors, stair ways, grey- and- pink corridors, to the unmarked class room._ (She once followed him, startled him and other in the men’s bathroom)

(Ondaatje, 137-138)

But for Anil’s it is very hard to adopt in a new culture. She is very fearful and lacks of confidence. She is confused, lost in herself and becomes emotional. Sometimes she saves money to phone Colombo. Ondaatje delineates how it is difficult to accept and assimilate into the foreign culture. He portrays how the memory of her homeland Sri Lanka makes Anil emotional and timid. Her last conversation in Sinhalese is with her ayah:

_She seemed timid even to herself. She felt lost and emotional. She murmured to herself the way one of her spinster aunts did. She didn’t eat much for a week and saved enough money to phone Colombo. Her father was out and her mother was unable to phone to the phone. It was about one in the morning and she had woken her Ayah, Lalita. They talked for a few minutes, until they were both weeping; it felt, at the far ends of the world._

(Ondaatje, 138)

After a month she feels careful about her future and starts to assimilate into new culture and becomes completely Westerner. And now she returns to Sri Lanka to gaze her homeland as an outsider.

Anil returns after nearly half a life time away from the island. She no longer speaks Sinhala or Tamil. She does not have any contact with her Colombo relatives or her native friends. “Anil was glad to be alone.” (Ondaatje, 6) In Sri Lanka her only connection was her new sarong that her parent had sent her at every Christmas and her ayah Lalita. Anil visits her old Ayah Lalita but she can’t communicate properly
with Lalita. Anil can understand a little conversation in Tamil between Lalita and her Granddaughter. Ondaatje has profoundly presented the issue of cultural conflict through the protagonist Anil’s character and the lost connection with her motherland:

... and for the next while the granddaughter talked to Tamil to Lalita. Anil could understand only a few words when it was spoken relying mostly on the manner of speech to understand what they were saying.

(Ondaatje, 19)

Though Anil is Sri Lankan, she is influenced by the western culture. She has studied in London as well as United States. Her education, her costume is westernized. While in Sri Lanka on her seven week project she misses west very much. She feels better by re-reading her girl friend Leaf Niedecker messages. Leaf has met and worked with her in the Arizona labs. Leaf is Anil’s closet friend and a constant companion.

Anil and Sarath have found three skeleton in the government protected archaeological preserves in the Bandarawela region. One of the skeletons which Anil has found in ancient burial site is in fact more recent, its bones are still held together by dried ligament, partially burned. It is not prehistoric- a new proof of a murder by the government. Anil tells Sarath, the skeleton has been moved from somewhere else and reburied in this government protected area to make sure the skeleton is not discovered. According to Anil it’s not an ordinary murder or burial. They named it ‘Sailor’ and other three as ‘Tinker,’ Tailor,’ and ‘Soldier.’ Anil explains to Sarath about sailor as:

It was found within a sacral historical site. A site constantly under government or police supervision.

(Ondaatje, 48)

The murderer believes that by hiding bodies in reserved areas, they can hide the truths from the public. No one is hopeful about Anil’s investigation. But she strongly believes that she can change the condition of the people in the country by finding the truth behind this violence. Sarath alerts Anil:

I want you to understand the archeological surround of a fact. Or you'll be like one of those journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel. That false empathy and blame.  

(Ondaatje, 40)
Anil wants to identify murderers. By identifying the victims she can give voice to the innocent Sri Lankans. But both Anil and Sarath face difficulty in investigation due to the government and it violets human rights freedom. Anil reveals the island reality:

*In a fearful nation, public sorrow was stamped down by the climate of uncertainty. If a father protested a son’s death, it was feared another family member would be killed. If people you knew disappeared, there was a chance they might stay alive if you did not cause trouble. This was the scarring psychosis in the country. Death, loss, was ‘unfinished’, so you could not walk through it. There had been years of night visitations, kidnappings or murders in broad daylight. The only chance was that the creatures who fought would consume themselves. All that was left of law was a belief in an eventual revenge towards was those who had power.*

(Ondaatje, 52)

From working in the high-tech desert towns of the American Southwest Anil is in the country of her birth. While investing the truth about the sailor Sarath knows Anil’s difficult journey towards getting the truth. Sarath knows the intensity of danger:

*It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter. There were dangers in handing truth to an unsafe city around you.*

(Ondaatje, 152-153)

Anil and Sarath have met Palipana in the Grove of Ascetics. Anil is Westernized forensic scientist and Palipana is a historian of ancient Sri Lanka. Anil seeks the help of an archeologist, the father figure Palipana. Antoinette Burton in the article “Achieves of Bones: Anil’s Ghost and the Ends of History,” presents Palipana as an anti colonialist as:
Palipana is an anti colonist who doesn’t reject history but seeks to reimagine it on new procedural grounds: a kind of fictional subaltern studies hero, an albeit a fallen one.

(Burton Antoinette, 45)

Palipana was “in wrestled archeological authority in Sri Lanka away from Europeans.” (Ondaatje, 75) Ondaatje presents Palipana as the icon of the ancient Eastern culture:

The main force of a pragmatic Sinhala movement, Palipana wrote lucidly, basing his work of exhaustive research, deeply knowledgeable about the context of the ancient cultures. While the West Asian history as a faint horizon where Europe joined the East, Palipana saw his country in fathoms and color, and Europe simply as a land mass on the end of the Peninsula of Asian.

(Ondaatje, 75)

In the international conferences during the 1970s held in Delhi, Colombo and Hong Kong had told their best anecdotes and presents Palipana as the most respected of the Sri Lankan groups as:

It was finally realized that while European culture was old, Asian culture was older. Palipana, by now the most respected of the Sri Lankan group, went to on such gathering and never went to another. He was a spare man; unable to abide formality and ceremonial toasts.

(Ondaatje, 75)

Palipana had published the series of interpretations of rock graffiti that stunned archeologist and historian. He has discovered and translated a linguistic sub text but there are no real evidences for the existence of these texts. In the same way Anil’s findings about the island, her forensic report is confiscated by the Sri Lankan government and she is forced to leave. Palipana and Anil have used the same methodology, but Palipana’s study is based on his country’s traditional occupation-from stone masons and dhobi women whereas Anil interprets bodies from Western perspectives. At one point Anil wants to be identified herself as the “woman from Geneva” (Ondaatje, 67) and at the same time she confirms her Sri Lankan origin in the auditorium. Sri Lankan government officials want to discredit her whole
investigation. But Anil finally declares herself as a Sri Lankan citizen. Ondaatje lets Anil speaks:

... she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, ‘I think you murdered hundreds of us. Hundreds of us. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally us.

(Ondaatje, 269)

For Chelva Kanaganyakam, Palipana and Anil represent the East and the West. According to Kanaganyakam:

Anil Palipana and Ananda... work together and their varied approaches complement each other, but each espouses different perspectives. Anil occupies one end with her faith in scientific rationality and Palipana occupies the other with his belief in intuition. If in the end, no position is privileged, it can also be interpreted as Ondaatje’s reticence to endorse any single ideological position.

(Kanaganyakam, 17)

Palipana refers Ananda’s name to reconstruct the sailor’s head. Sarath and Anil wish to reconstruct sailor’s head but they don’t have the sufficient equipments to do the work in Sri Lanka. Sarath makes Anil to know the fact:

This isn’t Brussels or America. Only the weapons in this country are state-of – the art.

(Ondaatje, 157)

Ananda Udugama a ritual painter has started to reconstruct the sailor’s head. While Sarath is in Colombo, Anil wishes to communicate with Ananda. Ondaatje describes the language problem faced by both Anil and Ananda:

Anil wished she could trade information with him, but she had long forgotten the subtleties of the language they once shared...For the next few days they went back to their mutual silences.

(Ondaatje, 167)

Anil and Ananda can’t communicate properly with each other as Ananda doesn’t speak English and Anil no longer speaks Sinhala fluently. But finally they communicate through touch:
Now Ananda has touched her in a way she could recollect no one ever having touched her, except, perhaps, Lalita. Or perhaps her mother, somewhere further back in her lost childhood.

(Ondaatje, 184)

Though they can’t communicate verbally, Victoria Burrows points out the language of touch between them as:

They have no spoken language in common but the physical language of touch both communicates and eases physical and Psychic pain. Yet in spite of Anil’s deep immersion in this grounded visible pain of fellow Sri Lankan’s, she can’t divest herself of her need to classify and prove.

(Burrows Victoria, 175)

Sandeep Sanghera in an article, “Touching the Language of Citizenship in Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost” comments on Ananda’s touch takes her back into her past memories of her ayah Lalita or her mother:

The touch takes her back before the language of subtleties was lost and Sri Lankan citizenship and belonging was given up...back before her settling on English as her only tongue… It is not just touch that taken Anil in to the past; it also roots simultaneously her in the present. It citizens Anil clearly to Sri Lanka she stands now.

(Sanghera, 90)

Anil and Sarath discover sailor’s identity and conclude that sailor is a victim of government murder, a minor Ruwan kumara, a toddy tapper who belongs to the third Plumbago village. His name is enlisted in a list of government undesirables. Anil wants to return west and present her report to UN government. But Anil succeeds only to identify the victim. Her forensic report was confiscated by Sri Lankan government and she is forced to leave the island.

But it’s only Sarath who disobedys the government and has helped Anil in finding the truth. Finally Sarath is killed by the Sri Lankan government officials for his involvement with Anil’s investigation. He sacrifices his life for the sake of the truth and to give the voice and justice to the victims of the Sri Lankan Civil War. Anil doesn’t wish to stay in Sri Lanka any longer; Ondaatje explains her state of mind:
She knew she wouldn’t be staying here much longer; there was no wish in her to be here anymore. There was blood everywhere. A casual sense of massacre.

(Ondaatje, 280)

Frustrated Anil returns to the adapted country of her choice. Does she remember Sarath and Gamini, the two Colombo brothers who love their homeland very much in spite of everything?

John Boland rightly observes and writes about Anil’s condition. She is caught between her Sri Lankan childhood nostalgia and the freedom of exile in migration. Bolland aptly comments on the situation as:

The novel presents her in broken personal relationship and torn between a desire for freedom of the exile and a nostalgia for her Sri Lankan childhood, whose rich texture are evoked with Ondaatje’s characteristic vividness.

(Bolland, 86)

Anil remembers Gamini’s words about the West. Gamini criticizes westerners for their ability to speak the violent situation in Sri Lankan Civil war:

American movies, English books- remember how they all end? Gamini asked that night. The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That’s it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, some place now he can look at through the clouds.

The tired hero. A couple of words the girl beside him. He’s going home. So the war, to all purposes is over. That’s enough reality for the West. It’s probability of the history of the last two hundred years of western political writing. Go home. Write book. Hit the circuit.

(Ondaatje, 282-83)

However, the novel Anil’s Ghost paints the picture of everyday life during the Civil War or ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka. The protagonist Anil Tissera, who is Sri Lankan by birth gazes her homeland as the representative of the Human Rights organization. She is torn between nostalgia for her Sri Lankan childhood and desire for the freedom of the exile. She feels rootless and alienated. At first, during her education period in England she feels isolated. She feels rootless and alienated. Her
unsuccessful marriage with a Sri Lankan medical student is the result of her alienation.

But her assimilation into foreign culture makes her complete foreigner with westernized outlook; even she no longer can speak Tamil or Sinhalese. While in Sri Lanka for her project she misses her life in West very much. Her character represents her fractured and fragmented identity. Sri Lankan government confiscates her report and forced to live the country is the indication of her double marginalization and crisis of her gender identity. Anil no longer continues the tradition of West as to fix the problem, go home and write a book about it. This is the story of the protagonist Anil who is a global traveler and faces the problem of cultural crash and identity crisis in the West as well as in her homeland. Ondaatje’s latest work Divisadero steps into the landscapes of California and France.

III. VI: Cultural Conflict in Michael Ondaatje’s Divisadero:

Michael Ondaatje’s latest novel Divisadero (2007) steps in the landscapes of Northern California’s small settlement, then Paris and the Demu in the southern France. The novel focuses on cross cultural conflicts, problems faced by the protagonist Anna due to migration and cross cultural encounter. Anna is the narrator as well as the biographer of the 20th century French minor poet Lucian Segura. This is the story of the separation of siblings, Anna Claire and Cooper from a small settlement in the California’s Petaluma farm. Brian Short in his review on the Divisadero rightly observes the novel as:

At the center of Michael Ondaatje’s novel Divisadero is a triangle of characters. Anna whose mother does not survive child birth. Claire who is born the same week as Anna, and whose mother dies the same way, and Coop whose family is murdered when he is only 4 year old, and is raised by Ann’s father as a sibling to Claire and Anna. The novel follows these 3 characters through childhood to adolescence on a far, in Northern California’s bold country, a world where the boom is long born but danger and desperation linger. Here the family lives until tragedy strikes again and the siblings scatter.

(Review by Brian Short)
Incestuous relationship is developed between Anna and Coop. Anna reads for Coop till he completes his work on a cabin. The narrator observes Anna and Coop’s lovely days on the Petaluma farm as:

> Sometimes she brought a library book and sat reading in the shadow of the corrugated roof’s overhang until the sound of his sawing and hammering disappeared and she was in another country, in Italy with Leopard, or in France with musketeer. There were days they barely touched.

(Ondaatje 2007, 28)

In the cabin Anna has found the gramophone of the 1978s. Anna and Coop have danced in the cabin and whispers the word ‘Begin the Beguine’ while dancing. The music makes both of them belongs to another time and place. Anna buys a set of Buddhist flag in order to form a perfect harmony between them. Ondaatje’s stages the union of natural and cultural elements:

> There are five flags, she explained. The yellow one is earth, the green is water, the red is fire-the one we must escape-and white is cloud, and blue is sky, limitless space or mind.

(Ondaatje, 29)

When Anna’s father discovers their affair father “damages” Coop. A terrible violent incident shatters the life of the siblings. From these flags white flag is unseen. “Blue, red, green, the hint of yellow, and now unseen white” (Ondaatje, 33), means the loss of innocence.

After the violent incident, Coop has started his new life in Tahoe as a gambler. Anna’s father has put Anna in the truck and drives off with her. Anna has escaped from her father’s truck near San Jose. She has climbed into the passenger seat of a vehicle going to South. Anna describes her journey into another culture:

> …this person formerly known as Anna climbed into the passenger seat of a vehicle going south. We drove all night, a shy black man in his commercial refrigeration truck giving a lift to someone he thought was a French girl. (I did not wish to talk or explain anything.) We stopped now and then for food, though I barely ate my stomach hearting from fear.

(Ondaatje, 144)
The shy black man in a commercial refrigeration truck considers Anna as a French girl and gives lift. Anna says, “We sat in roadside diners and I watched him eat guacamole and chiles rellenos.” (Ondaatje, 144) Anna thinks this violent incident had thrown her away from her culture and now she is with a polite and generous stranger. She doesn’t speak any word to the stranger. And without any communication the person formerly known as Anna “was now a runaway.” (Ondaatje, 140) Now she is with stranger and remembers the violent incidence on Coop’s deck:

> It had been a sunny afternoon on Coop’s Deck, before the windlessness and those moments of thunder, and here I was, a day later, across the table from a polite and generous stranger. I did not speak. English never escaped my lips and the only words that existed between us as we travelled into the Great Central Plain came from the truck’s radio.

(Ondaatje, 144)

Anna travels on a route which separates her from her father at the age of sixteen. She has travelled to South, running away from her father with Coop’s heart in her beside strangers. Anna narrates:

> And I kept travelling it seemed for another ten years among strangers, alone, never intimate, slowly building a confidence in my solitude. But during that first journey, I sat in the spacious cab of that commercial refrigeration truck and stared and stared, swallowing everything I saw, so that whatever existed in me would be worst away.

(Ondaatje, 146)

Anna with the black shy man in the refrigeration truck continues to travel to Dinuba, and enters in the deserted town of Allensworth. Anna describes:

> It was a route separate from my father’s. We continued to Dinuba, where he ate Mexican food, then cutler and Visalia. It began to darken and my mysterious new friend headed south and west to a place he said we could stay. We drove alongside orange groves and a state prison in the moonlight, and finally entered the deserted town of Allensworth.

(Ondaatje, 146)
The stranger helps Anna in crossing the border of culture, till Bakersfield. He has dropped some money in her pocket. She cannot communicate with him due to language problem:

*He kept talking to me in English, but I still returned mostly silence. If I spoke, I spoke my mother’s Spanish, or my tentative French. He knew I was raw with something, that I had some poison within me.*

(Ondaatje, 147)

He brings books and recites the most beautiful lines for Anna. “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.” (Ondaatje, 147) The strange man is nothing but Mister Allensworth guiding Anna in South. Anna enters in new life and culture.

Anna came to France to study the life and work of Lucien Segura in the thirty-fourth year of her life. Anna’s architect friend Branka has drove her to Paris and helped her to arrange the rent of writer Segura’s house in Gers in the France. While travelling to Segura’s home they came across to the ancient belfry constructed in 13th century like a coil or screw, which represents the culture of the France. “It had one of those unexpected, helicoidally shapes-the surface like a helix-so that as it curved up it reflected every compass point of the landscape.” (Ondaatje, 135-36) The belfry is the best example of visionary craft. The architect Branka informs about belfry. “The belfry was for her an example of visionary craftsmanship, its fifty-meter elevation like a fire in the sky.” (Ondaatje, 136) In Demu Anna experiences, the strange form of that belfry, turning on to itself again and again and feels familiar to her. Anna also knows the refrain, “We live permanently in the recurrence of our own stories, whatever story we tell.” (Ondaatje, 136)

Anna migrates to France (Demu) far from her American roots and now fully adult Anna moves to French writer Segura’s house in Gers. Anna no longer remembers that she comes from the fictional street named *Divisadero*. In Segura’s house, “Most days Anna worked indoors at a kitchen table, reading the manuscripts and the handwritten journals of Lucien Segura.” (Ondaatje, 63) What she does in Segura’s home is “sweeping the translator’s house.” (Ondaatje, 64)

Once Madame Q’s husband has prepared a map of this region for Anna but Anna wants to hang it in her living room on *Divisadero* Street San Francisco. She
feels worse will come in her life. She came here with the help of this map to escape from the worst. Map is the cultural artifact for her:

*In Anna’s terms the map was a ‘keeper’ and she might one day frame it and hang it in her living room on Divisadero Street in San Francisco, a private core of memory. In some part of her mind, she felt that if worse came to worst, she could always escape back here.*

(Ondaatje, 65)

The only thing that has truly squeezed her in spending time in the Gers of France is the group of men at the cross roads with their dogs. No one reminds Anna of North America. Besides research she enjoys the processes of filling the notebook with fragments and truly enjoys her new life:

*France had meant a quiet and anonymous time for Anna. Apart from the visits of Monsieur and Madame Q, she saw no one. And there was nothing in the house of the writer to remind her of North America. She was escaping the various aspects of her professional life—acquaintances, deadlines, requests for prefaces—all of which, if she were in her real world would be essential duties.*

(Ondaatje, 66)

Near the Segura’s house Anna meets Rafael, the son of the Roma musical family of the France. Rafael feels comfortable in Anna’s company. Anna wants to hide her American past. She is afraid of intimacy with anyone. Anna’s research is an excuse for her to escape from her own past. However, one cannot escape from own past.

*This smallest possible space is where Anna wishes to be now. The truth of her life comes out only in places like this. There are times when she needs to hide in stranger’s landscape, so that she can look back at the tumult of her youth, to the still-undiminished violence of her bloodied naked self between her father and Coop, the moment of violence that deformed her, all of them…She can imagine her sister riding her horse in the Sierras, wearing small bells on her wrists to warn wildlife of her approach, concise of all the possibilities of danger. Just as*
she herself works in archives and discovers every past but her own, again and again, because it will always be there.

(Ondaatje, 75-76)

Anna has started her new life, her authorial career. Perhaps Anna’s mother’s portrait, her unknown life may make Anna an archivist. She is the successor of her historian mother Lydia Mendez. “Those who have an orphan’s sense of history love history.” (Ondaatje, 141) Anna’s voice becomes orphan:

My career exhumes mostly unknown corners of European culture. My best known study is of Auguste Meguet, one of Alexandre Dumas’ collaborators and plot researchers...I work where art meets life in secrete.

(Ondaatje, 141)

In this nameless and unseen country Anna is alone, “I am a person who discovers archival subtexts in history and art, where the spiraling among a handful strangers tangles into a story.” (Ondaatje, 137)

Anna learns important thing that “under the mask she could rewrite herself into any place, in any form.” (Ondaatje, 142) She feels “This is where I learned that sometimes we enter art to hide within it. It is where we can go to save ourselves, where a third person voice protects us.” (Ondaatje, 142) Anna changes her name and writes using pseudo name. In the very first page of the prologue-Anna writes:

So I have taken myself away from who I was with them and what I used to be when my name was Anna.

(Ondaatje, prologue)

Anna writes living in host culture looks into the distance for those she has lost, so that she can always experience and feel them. Anna lives in Segura’s old house and writes on him remembering her own life on Divisadero Street.

Anna is uncertain why she studies and writes about Segura’s life. Though Anna is uncertain she realizes a sweet shadow and hesitance in Segura, a ruined love which is familiar to her:

I am uncertain, even now, what made me fall upon the life of Lucian Segura and wish to write about him. Or what made me explore in the Berkeley archives the almost worn out paths of his life in the Gers...There was a sweet shadows and hesitance in Segura. It was like ruined love, and it was familiar to me...
His voice with the wound in it kept hunting me. I traveled to French, to the last house he had lived in, during the final stage of his life. I pieced together the landscapes he had written about. I took long walks. I swam in the nearby stream. I walked his avenue of trees. I met Rafael.

(Onaatje, 143-44)

Anna lives with the strangers in France missing and remembering past. But Anna loves such strangers to history. She lives stranger’s life in unknown culture. She is not Anna giving a seminar at Berkeley, or the Anna in San Francisco eating at Tadich Grill on California Street. The narrator observes her:

There are layers of compulsive secrecy in her. She knows there is a flock of Annas and that the Anna beside this unnamed river of Rafael’s is not the Anna giving the seminar at Berkeley on one of Alexandre Dumas’ collaborators and plot researchers, is not the Anna in San Francisco walking in to Tosca’s or eating at the Tadich Grill in California Street.

(Onaatje, 88)

Rafael’s father is also a stranger in France. World War left only violence and frustration in the mind of the people. To avoid all these effects of the World War II Rafael’s father “had been journeying up from Italy after the World War ended, and found himself in Belgium, where it was easier to obtain money the way he usually did.” (Onaatje, 82) There in the prison Rafael’s father met to Gypsy woman named Aria and prefers to live with her and with her caravan in the Demu, the small village of France without doing marriage. Rafael is their son. And they were neighbour of Segura in the Demu, the small village of France. Rafael becomes complete French and forgets his past, and now he is Anna’s lover and knows everything about Segura’s life story.

Anna saves money for her university studies in French but dean suggests her best way to learn French “by the time she has earned and saved enough money to pay for university studies in French, she was told by a dean that the best way to learn French was to take a French lover.” (Onaatje, 89) In Demu Anna has not revealed her past to anyone. Anna changes her name and desires French Rafael as close as Coop. Perhaps Anna needs a man to tell her past:
She was lying again to a lover. He had a sister. Had a past. She would not tell him. Later if she were brave enough. About their father turning like an axe on Coop, and her praying for his breath beside him, even for a small rise of his chest, the rest of her life splintered at that movement, with her becoming a creature of hundred natures and voices, and with a new name. She envied this man beside her, as close as Coop had been to her on that cabin floor...Perhaps she needed a man as content as this to tell her past to.

(Ondaatje, 90)

However, Anna has completed her research on Segura’s life that has changed her name in the host land and away from her family, country finds herself alienated and till waits for any telephone call from her father or Coop or from Claire. In the prologue Anna writes:

The raw truth of an incident never ends, and the story of Coop and the terrain of my sister’s life are endless to me. They are the sudden possibility of every time I pick up the telephone when it rings some late hour after midnight, and, I wait for his voice or deep breath before Claire will announce herself. So I have taken myself away from who I was with them, and a hat I used to be. When my name was Anna.

(Ondaatje, prologue, unnumbered)

However, the novel Divisadero brings together some Ondaatjean concerns like memory, history, cross-cultural interactions and journeys of the self, and the voyage towards self which blend together the stories of others. Violence on Coop’s deck scatters the life of siblings, and set fire to the rest of their lives. Anna changes her name and has started her new life, her authorial career as an archivist in the rural France in this nameless and unknown country. Anna feels isolated and alienated. She lives with strangers and misses and remembers them with whom she has lived. She lives stranger’s life in unknown culture crushing her own identity.

Anna thinks her voyage in France to discover the life of Lucien Segura is her escape from her own past but it brings her back to her past. This is the story of the raw truth of her life that circles around her life. Ondaatje turns towards his native land
Sri Lanka, for his next award winner novel, his factitious autobiography *The Cat’s Table*.

**III.VII: Cultural Conflict in Michael Ondaatje’s *The Cat’s Table***

Ondaatje’s latest work *The Cat’s Table* (2011) portrays the protagonist Michael or Mynah’s voyage to the West. Michael embarks on a sea voyage by the War ship ‘Oronsay’ from Colombo to England, via Suez Canal. The novel tells the story of Michael’s migration from East to West to join his mother in England. But in England Michael never feels being at home. This fictional autobiography, a classical immigrant story is set on the board of vessel in the early 1950s. In an interview with Linda Hutcheon, Ondaatje tells, “I don’t feel much of ‘England’ in me.” (qtd. in Jewinski, 23)

However, this novel is the portrayal of Mynah’s voyage on the ship and his encounter with the fascinating series of the adult characters and the two boys of his age named Ramadhin and Cassius. All these characters reveal their life stories and expose the trauma of cultural clashes they have encountered in their life.

Michael an eleven-year-old boy nicknamed, Mynah is the narrator of story of his migration and his ship voyage. He embarks for the first time on a voyage, same as the age of Ondaatje does. The narrator says, “He was eleven-years old that night when, green as he could be about the world, he climbed abroad the first and only ship of his life.” (Ondaatje 2012, 4) At the beginning of the journey he feels there is a wall between him and what takes place there. Before he embarks on a voyage, he is a Ceylonese boy who never has slept under a blanket or he say, “The longest journeys I had made were car rides to Nuwara Eliya and Horton Plains, or the train to Jaffna.” (Ondaatje, 7) What is the way of living life before such a ship in his life? He thinks, “What had there been before such a ship in my life?” (Ondaatje, 7) But now he is migrating to England alone. He says, “I would be traveling to England by ship, and that I would be making the journey alone.” (Ondaatje, 7)

Before leaving to England Michael bids farewell to Narayan and Gunepal, his cooks, but the little boy has no sense of him and is unknown about his future. It is the voyage which connects Michael’s past to his present and his future. He thinks:

*How mother could know when exactly I would arrive in that other country. And if she would be there.*

(Ondaatje, 9)
The world of the ‘Oronsay’ is too big for the Michael to understand himself and culture around him. Michael grows in such a cultural background is now trying to understand, the adult world and the culture of the ‘Oronsay.’

On the ship Michael is placed at the ‘least privileged’ place, the ordinary place, ‘the Table-76’ known as the ‘Cat’s Table.’ The narrator says, “It was clear we were located far from the Captain’s Table, which was at the opposite end of the dining room.” (Ondaatje, 10) There are total nine members on the cat’s table who accompany during his voyage. There are some very interesting adults like a botanist named Mr. Larry Daniel, a tailor named Gunesekera, having a shop in a Kandy. The most exciting one is Mr. Mazappa- the pianist. One of the members of cat’s table is a ship dismantler Mr. Nevil. Mr. Hastie is the in charge of the kennel and the roommate of the Michael. And the most distinguishing character is Miss Lasqueti, who is as white as pigeon. On the deck there is a prisoner, his daughter Asuntha and some marginal trickster figures like Hyderabad Mind Sunil and Baron.

Michael and his friends have decided to keep their background secret and to do at least one forbidden thing, every day:

And Ramadhin, Cassius and I had already established one rule. Each day we had to do at least one thing that was forbidden.

(Ondaatje, 33)

Quill and quire review of The Cat’s Table rightly comments on cultural world on the ‘Oronsay’:

The boy is nicknamed Mynah by his shipmates, he has absent parents and thus “no secure map”, and is free to invent himself. For Mynah the sea voyage marks a kind of second birth, a passage that influences everything significant in his later life. Interwoven with the drama of Mynah’s journey are his experiences and reflections and adult, where many of childhood mysteries experienced abroad are unraveled with the benefit of hindsight.

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

On the ship Michael’s encounter with number of adult characters have a significant influence on his life. Sea voyage proves as a second birth for him. The childhood mysteries which are experienced abroad become beneficial perception for him. He
says, “And I reinvented myself in this seemingly imaginary world.” (Ondaatje, 17)

It is Ramadhin who calls Michael as ‘Mynah.’ When Michael is in England ‘he is known only by his surname’, but when he receives phone call and someone says ‘Mynah’, it may be only one of them, either Ramadhin or Cassius. Mynah narrates:

My shipboard nickname was ‘Mynah.’ Almost my name but with a step into the air and a glimpse of some extra thing, like the slight swivel in their walk all birds have when they travel by land. Also it is an unofficial bird, and unreliable, its voice not fully trustworthy in spite of the range. At that time, I suppose, I was the Mynah of the group, repeating whatever I overheard to the other two. Ramadhin gave it to me accidently, and Cassius, recognizing its easy outgrowth from my name, started calling me that.

(Ondaatje, 202)

Like the bird ‘Mynah’ Michael is also the ‘Mynah of the group’, repeats whatever he has heard on the ship with rest of his two friends.

Naming is a cultural phenomenon. Names illustrate the ethnic identity of the man. In an interview with Mr. Steve Roberts, Michael Ondaatje argues:

Well it looks like a Dutch name, but I think my family originally came from India to Sri Lanka or Ceylon as it was called then. And when the Dutch invaded, the very good smart businessman made their names look like they were Dutch names so that the double A and the TJ and so forth. So it probably, you know, phonetically a very easy to spell name, but now it is more complicated and classy as they would say.

(http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2011-12-08)

In the same interview he is described as a kind of cultural mongrel by himself, not just of race but of place and language also. His migration from Sri Lanka to England and then to Canada makes him a kind of cultural mongrel. He states:

Well I think, you know, my family, you know, originally a time where they would marry the Dutch or the English or the
Sinhalese, and so there was a kind of great mixture, you know. I can’t really kind of decodes the source of it all, And I am a mongrel not just of, you know race, but place and languages and, you know, I left Ceylon when I was 11 and went to England. Then I came to Canada, so I have a kind of-I’m cultural mongrel I think.

(http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2011-12-08)

Mynah’s one of the friends on the cat’s table, is Cassius. Most of the parents from the Sri Lanka have changed their direction from giving a (firstborn) such a name’, “Though Sri Lanka has always enjoined the merging of classical first names with Sinhalese last names-Solomon and Senaka are not common, but they exist.” (Ondaatje, 51) Cassius is a very gentle and whispering name. Cassius’s reputation in St. Thomas College in Sri Lanka is not good. But now he is going to represent his school’s name abroad. And the narrator observes Cassius as, “A few years after he had become well known, his school in England, which he had hated and which had probably disliked him, asked him to donate a painting. (Ondaatje, 200)

Mynah wishes to meet Cassius in his late twenties while in England, when a show of Cassius’s paintings has been arranged. Michael visits the gallery but he can’t meet Cassius. Michael observes paintings by Cassius which reminds him their voyage on the ‘Oronsay’:

For what I saw in the paintings was Cassius himself. They were large canvasses that felt the three rooms of the Waddington Gallery. About fifteen of them. They were all about that night in El Suweis. The very same sulphur lights above the night activity that I still remember…I even found Ramadhin’s small dog gazing at the boat. All this enlarged me, and I did not know why.

(Ondaatje, 180-81)

These paintings take Michael into the past memories. These paintings shows, photographic angle if a small boy with a camera looking towards the adults to whom he is photographing. These paintings indicate ‘Oronsay’s entry in another culture:

What I was seeing now in the gallery was the exact angle of vision Cassius and I had that night, from the railing, looking
down at the men working in those pods of light. An angle of forty-five degrees, something like that, I was back on the railing, watching, which was where Cassius was emotionally, when he was doing these paintings. Goodbye, we were saying to all of them. Goodbye.

(Ondaatje, 182)

Cassius paints his emotion through these paintings indicating goodbye to all the Asian culture and the Asian continent.

Ramadhin is also an immigrant in England. He is generous. He has asthma and a fibrillating heart. His migration from Sri Lanka to England results in identity crisis and cultural clash. Ramadhin was happy in his previous life in Sri Lanka. Ondaatje explores the issue of cultural conflict in Ramadhin’s life, and his relationship with his student Heather Cave. Ramadhin struggles to live in the host culture but he finds difficult to root in the new society. The narrator observes:

*Every immigrant family, it seems, has someone who does not belong in the new country, they have come to... I’ve met many who remain haunted by the persistent ghost of an earlier place. And it is true that Ramadhin’s life would have been happier in the more casual and less public world of Colombo.*

(Ondaatje, 192)

The memories of past and the ghost of present culture haunt Ramadhin and he is not happy in the host land. His struggle to belong in the alien culture with his weak heart creates the emotion of guilt within him. Ondaatje describes his death as:

*He had been found with his heart stopped, a knife beside him. That was all. He had gone into the darkness of one of the communal garden in the city, near the girl’s flat. Massi told me he was supposedly obsessed with her, someone he had been tutoring. But when Massi looked into it, there was only one girl, fourteen-years-old Heather Cave, who he gave lessons to. If she was the one Ramadhin was enamored of, he would have had an overwhelming guilt that must have filled him like dark ink.*

(Ondaatje, 191-92)
Ramadhin’s obsession with the girl Heather Cave and heaviness of this guilt leads Ramadhin towards his death. Ramadhin has no knowledge about the world around him. Ondaatje represents Ramadhin in this immigrant’s community as:

And what was he? A too-innocence thirty- year- old, in the cocoon of that small immigrant community in London. He was not active or knowledgeable about the world around him.

(Ondaatje, 204)

‘The girl Heather Cave wants Ramadhin to go to the boy Rajiv, who is also an Asian and bring Raju back to her. But it is very dangerous yet formal gesture for Raju. And there is an inevitable trembling in Ramadhin’s heart, Ramadhin cannot speak, of the great weight he feels against his heart and this interaction leads him to his death. However, Ramadhin cannot survive in the host land and is the victim of cultural clash. All the members on the ‘Oronsay’ form the community on the ship. Some of these members are from the different cultural background, other than Sri Lankan culture. These cultural clashes are seen through the eyes of the eleven- year- old boy Michael.

Mr. Hastie, who is the roommate of Mynah on the shipboard, is in charge of the kennel on the ‘Oronsay’. He is more talkative outside his cabin. Ondaatje describes him as, “At some stage during his travels in the East, he had picked up the habit of wearing the sarong, and most of the time he wore just that around his waist, even when his friends came by.” (Ondaatje, 27) During his journey towards the East he wears sarong. The wearing of sarong indicates his love for culture of the Sri Lanka. He always reads ‘The Bhagwad Gita’ which is the holy book in India or Eastern culture. Mr. Hastie is blamed for the death of the knighthood Sir Hector de Silva and denied in charge of the kennels on the ‘Oronsay’.

The presence of the philanthropist Sir Hector de Silva on the ‘Oronsay’ makes Mynah’s journey memorable and is recorded in the newspapers in England. Sir Hector, the richest man from Sri Lanka, is the victim of the curse by a holy priest or ‘battaramulle’. And now ‘he is on his way to Europe to find a doctor who can cure him’:

Sir Hector had been knighthood in England for his donations to various charities. So now he was cocooned in a grand double suit on the ‘Oronsay’, suffering from hydrophobia.
Sir Hector de Silva is a donor. In spite of the recommendation from the British governor, English specialist denies coming to Colombo, to deal with Sir Hector’s medical problem.

It is said that while in Colombo, he is under the spell of ‘battaramulle.’ Once on seeing the priest or the monk, Sir Hector punned the title by saying, ‘Ah there goes a ‘muttaraballa’ ‘muttara’ means ‘urinating’ and ‘balla’ means dog.’ The insulted monk cursed him saying, ‘I’ll send you a ‘muttaraballa...’ and sealed the fate of Sir Hector d Silva by chanting mantras. Sometime after this episode Sir Hector’s pet terrier bits his hand, and ‘dog died, showing the symptoms of rabies.’ And ‘urinating dog’ has left his message for Sir Hector:

As the patient was being given supportive care, the duration of the illness might last as long as twenty-five days before it was fatal...And three staterooms were booked on the ‘Oronsay’, which was the next ship leaving for Europe, just in case. The liner would stop at Aden, Port Said and Gibraltar, and it was hoped a specialist would be able to meet with the vessel in at least one of these locations.

The ayurvedic practitioners from the Sri Lanka have claimed that they have successfully treated victims of rabies. They requests Sir Hector, if he remains on the island, he is to be close to the country’s most powerful herbal remedies. But Sir Hector prefers Europe for his treatment rather than his own homeland Sri Lanka. He believes more in the advancements of Europe than the powerful herbal remedies of the island. The narrator notices:

In the end, Sir Hector decided to take the ship to England. Acquiring wealth he had also acquired complete faith in the advancements of Europe. Perhaps this would prove to be his fatal flaw.

Sir Hector once read in one Russian novel “Where as a cure in Colombo seemed to rely on village magic, astrology, and botanical charts in a spidery handwriting.”

Sir Hector has also grown up in such a culture of Sri Lanka, “He had
grown up knowing some local cures, such as quickly urinating on a foot to alleviate the pain from sea pencils.” (Ondaatje, 92)

However, Sir Hector is travelling with a retinue, which includes two doctors, one ayurvedic, a lawyer and his wife and daughter. But during the first landfall in Aden, Ramadhin’s smuggled dog ‘bit down Sir Hector de Silva into his throat’ and the ‘phantom’ never appears on the ship and becomes the cause of Sir Hector’s death. The spell put on him by the Buddhist priest proves truthful. Ramadhin reasoned it as, “It was fate that had killed him.” (Ondaatje, 150) After his funeral ceremony, Mynah narrates:

*Then Hector de Silva slid from the ship and disappeared into the sea. There were no rifle shots or cannon fire, as Cassius had promised.*

(Ondaatje, 172)

Before the dawn, once Mynah and his two friends wander on ‘Oronsay.’ They are fascinated by the determination of the Australian girl who is skating on the perimeter of the upper deck:

*One morning we suddenly found ourselves hemmed in by a girl on roller skates racing round the wooden perimeter of the upper deck...She was Australian, and we were enthralled. We had never witnessed such determination. None of the female members of our families behaved this way.*

(Ondaatje, 49-50)

Mynah is charmed by the Australian girl’s determination. At the hour before dawn she is skating on the upper deck. Mynah wonders, in Sri Lanka he never has seen such type of behavior.

Michael has left Sri Lanka and embarks on a voyage, “A rite of passage”, but he misses so many Sri Lankan things and first deliberate smell of the day:

*I missed the chorus of insects, the howls of garden birds, gecko talk. And at dawn, the rain in the trees, the wet tar on Bullers Road, rope burning on the street that was always one of the first palpable smells of the day.*

(Ondaatje, 72)
Michael recalls, Narayan and he wakes early in the morning and walk through High Level Road barefoot. Michael recalls his childhood memories with Narayan, his cook and Narayan’s habit of lighting a beedi with a piece of hemp rope:

At Jinadasa’s we bought egg hoppers, and ate them in the middle of the almost deserted street, cups of tea at our feet. Bullock cart’s heaved by, creaking, their drivers and even the bullocks half asleep...But it was almost heroic to walk with Narayan in dissolving dark, greeting the waking merchants, watching him bend to light his beedi on a piece of hemp rope by the cigarette stall.

(Ondaatje, 73-74)

Narayan and Gunepal are Michael’s childhood companions. They are his essential and affectionate guides during that unformed stage of his life. When Michael has left for England, he has lamented over losing them. Michael sheds tear over losing the company of his friends:

They opened doors for me into another world. When I left the country at the age of eleven, I grieved most over losing them. A thousand years later, I came upon the novels of the Indian writer R. K. Narayan in London bookstores. I bought everyone and imagined they were by my never forgotten friend Narayan.

(Ondaatje, 75)

Immigrants carry with them the things dear to them. It is also true in case of Mynah also. Fonseka carries Sri Lankan thing like ‘kothamalli’ and ‘Balsam’ in his suitcase. Mr. Fonseka is a Colombo man, with Sri Lankan manner and accent and wide ranging knowledge of books. “He must have believed it would be a humble but good life for an Asian living in England, where something likes his Latin grammar could be distinguishing sword.” (Ondaatje, 80) Ramadhin is in touch with Fonseka during his early years in England. Michael has pointed out his attitude towards the West as, “the same slights and insults and embarrassments over the pronouncing of the latter ‘v’ and our rushed manner of speaking, and most of all the difficulty of ‘entrance’, and perhaps a modest acceptance and ease in some similar cabin like flat.” (Ondaatje, 81) Michael worries about his survival in the foreign culture. ‘London returned’, Michael thinks:
Were all those memorized paragraphs and stanzas of the European cannon he brought back the equivalent of a coil of hemp or a bottle of river water? Did he adapt them or translate them, insist on teaching them in a village school, on a blackboard in the sunlight, the rough call of forest birds screeching nearby? Some idea of order at Nugegoda.

(Ondaatje, 82)

During the voyage on the ‘Oronsay’ the ship comes across the Aden. After all Aden is the last footstep in the East. ‘Aden is the great harbor as early as seventh century B.C. and is mentioned in the Old Testament.’ Michael tells about the Aden as:

It was where Cain and Abel were buried, Mr. Fonseka said, preparing us for the city he himself had never seen. It had cisterns built out of volcanic rock, a falcon market, on oasis quarter, an aquarium, a section of town given over to sail makers, and stores that contained merchandise from every corner of the globe. It would be our last footstep in the East.

(Ondaatje, 139-40)

As soon as Mynah, Ramadhin and Cassius have entered in the city of Aden they feel alienated with that culture. They cannot understand alien language:

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)

In the new city at Aden, all of them feel that the language becomes the barrier. They perform only through gesture, laughing when the salesmen laugh and nodding when he nods. There is no verbal communication between them. Mynah compares the world of Colombo to the world of Aden:

I was used to the lush chaos of Colombo’s Pettah market, that smell of sarong cloth being unfolded and cut (a throat-catching odour), and mangosteens, and rain-soaked paperbacks in a bookstall. Here was a sterner world, with
fewer luxuries...It was a dusty landscape, as if water had not been invented.

(Onnitje, 142)

‘Mynah realized that they have just glanced through a keyhole into Arabia.’ But Mynah’s Cousin Emily and the likely spinster Miss Lasqueti disguise as a boy and entered in the city of Aden, in spite of “women were forbidden” to go at all.

Mynah’s ‘distant cousin’ Emily de Saram is also on the ship, but sadly, she is assigned to the Cat’s Table. She is Mynah’s only closet relative. In Sri Lanka Michael lives with his uncle who is a judge. Sometime Michael feels isolated without his mother and consoles himself as, “there was always Emily, my ‘machang’, who lived almost next door for a period of years.” (Onnitje, 14) Both Mynah and Emily have same childhood experiences. Emily’s family is always under the threat of her father’s temper. In order to keep her away from presence of her father, her grandmother keeps her in boarding school in Southern India. Now she is seventeen years old and “arrived in England to complete her last two years of schooling.” (Onnitje, 16) There in London, Michael says, ‘The last time we’d have met at her wedding to the man named Desmond’s, a good looking man. Emily’s marriage is a kind of escape, Michael narrates:

…and it was an escape perhaps from disorder, just as in an earlier time she had escaped tempestuous, uncertain father by being sent to school in another country…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.

(Onnitje, 342)

And now in the foreign culture she is alone, living on one of the Gulf Islands on the West coast of Canada as a kind of exile. Her marriage with Desmond is failure and she is stepped out of marriage:

And we began talking immediately about our lives, her years with her husband in Central America, then South America. His nomadic career as an electronics expert meant there friends changed every few years. Then she had left him.

(Onnitje, 340-41)
She ends her marriage and comes to Canada. Due to cultural differences both Emily and Desmond fail to adjust in the married life. Michael remembers Emily’s initial life in London. Emily is expelled from college in London because “she has slipped through the school gates, climbed onto the back of someone’s motorcycle.” (Ondaatje, 345) She is expelled from the college and she cannot continue to live with Asians. Hence she takes interest in a person belongs to other culture. But her cultural background forbids her to accept new culture in the form of husband.

*She had arrived in England to become a boarder at Cheltenham Ladies College. I’d see her during the holidays, still part of the Sri Lankan community in London, some boyfriend hovering beside her...In the accident she broke her arm, and as a result of the incident was expelled from the school. So she was then no longer a fully trusted part of that close-knit Asian Community.* (Ondaatje, 345)

This is not the life, she has chosen for herself. Michael and Emily have fancied their life when they were in Sri Lanka. Michael recalls, ‘how Emily talks about that school in India, and her brown arms waving Michael during one of their dances.’ But now in the Canada she is alone living an isolated life. Michael and Emily meet in Canada at her Gulf Island house in Canada. Emily sadly expresses her trauma of cultural clashes and its impact on entire life. She cannot attend her father’s funeral in Sri Lanka. She experiences rootless due to cultural clash:

*I was supposed to fly back for his funeral. But I don’t even belong there anymore. I’m like you. We don’t belong anywhere, I guess.* (Ondaatje, 347)

She wanders over her failure and sad life. At last she realizes, ‘we don’t belong anywhere.’ She always feels alienated in both the cultures. Here Ondaatje wishes to express the ‘in-between’ situation of an immigrants:

*She had believed, every foothold for years, had been lie. ‘I have thought all along I was the one who killed him,’ she said quietly. ‘May be I did.’* (Ondaatje, 351)
Miss Lasqueti’s first name ‘Perinita’ suggests her European background. Her love towards Italian language once has brought her in trouble. She was in Italy in her twenties for the language she loved. ‘She loved the Italian best’ and she has applied for the job to a wealthy American couple, Horace and Rose Johnson. She is selected “as a translator-of correspondences as well as for research and cataloguing.” (Ondaatje, 298) And slowly she is overpowered and seduced by Horace. In an anger and hatred she wounds herself that reminds her about her days in Italian culture under the spell of Horace. And now Miss Lasqueti is with her twenty or thirty pigeons on the ‘Oronsay’ and is “accompanying them to England.” (Ondaatje, 102) Like Emily Miss Lasqueti is also a victim of cultural clash.

Michael’s teenage marriage with Ramadhin’s sister Massi plays very important role in attaching himself with native culture. Massi is assimilated in the foreign culture quickly in comparison with Ramadhin. In a letter to Michael Ramadhin writes “Massi was ‘moving with a fast coterie’ and working for the BBC, on one of its music shows, and that she was ambitious and very smart.” (Ondaatje, 184) Michael after a long period watches Massi at Mill Hill house in London and observes her, “I noticed her moving from person to person in this expatriate community in the role of dutiful family bee.” (Ondaatje, 187) She has assimilated in the foreign culture quickly. As a result she works for BBC in London. Michael decides to marry with Massi in order to remain attached with his own childhood native community. He says, “I see now that I married Massi to stay close to a community from childhood I felt safe in and, I realized, still wished for.” (Ondaatje, 197) Michael is a young writer. When he marries with Massi:

We were lovers again now, engaged to be married with all of the formality that families who live abroad insist on. The weight of the tradition of exile had fallen over us.

(Ondaatje, 199)

In short the novel tells a story of eleven year old boy who migrates from his homeland Sri Lanka to England and all joins his mother at Tilbury dock after a long separation. During the voyage to England on the ‘Oronsay’ Michael’s encounter with number of adult characters and their life stories bring devastating changes in the life of Michael by retaining his cultural past in the form of Emily. Michael adopts foreign/ alien culture in the form of choice to continue to live in England. It seems that author is not critical of host culture but at the same time he does not want to
detach with his own past culture completely. Thus the novelist celebrates in-betweenness.

**III.VIII: Conclusion:**

Thus Sri Lankan Canadian fiction emerges as one of the major subaltern cultural discourses in Canada. It articulates a spilt or ambivalent subject writing on cultural conflicts for Sri Lankan-Canadian fiction, writing on cultural conflict is an event that results from a liminal existence of being caught between two cultures or two worlds—doomed to the agonizing condition of “neither/nor.” Most of Sri Lankan Canadian authors including Michael Ondaatje celebrate cultural hybridity through fragmented memories and images and repressed voices and forms of thought. Michael Ondaatje’s novels bear a testimony of cultural hybridity.
III.IX: References:


18) https://www.Sundayobserver/K/2010/10/03
