Chapter 3

History and Identity in Ondaatje’s Fiction

History is replete with the incidents that modulate our lives and channelize our deeds and actions accordingly. Through history, we learn about cultures, civilizations that enriches us and teaches us morality and ethics and helps us in forming specific principles of society. Traditionally, history and fiction have been posited as opposites, to quote Aristotle’s famous words, “The poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen.” (qtd. in Sifakis, 19). History on the other hand always relates things as they were. History thus came to be viewed as depicting incidents which actually happened without caring for the consequences; while an artist on the other hand had the artistic license to depict what a man could do when caught in different situations. As recent commentators have pointed out, history actually may be just as fictional. The present chapter discusses the complex issues of identity and individual histories in the transnational/transcultural setting, especially as depicted in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), *The English Patient* (1992) and *Coming Though Slaughter* (1976).

Ondaatje frames his stories around actual historical events, yet at the same time his aim is to uncover the unwritten, hidden, ignored histories of the marginal characters. The historical and the fictional thus get juxtaposed in his works as Ondaatje attempts to create a narrative space where many stories/histories may enact/recreate/reinvent themselves. Ondaatje’s work is an apt example of what Linda Hutcheon defines in another context as “Historiographic Metafiction,” fictional works that situate “… themselves within historical
discourse, while refusing to surrender their autonomy as fiction.”(Hutcheon, 124). Having a fascination with history in the modern postcolonial world of ever shifting social spaces, Ondaatje in his works repeatedly returns to the themes of identity and individual histories. The juxtaposition of the fictional and the actual worlds allows him to, in his words, “...both reveal and discover myself...I could be more honest about the things I wanted to talk or witness.”(Spinks, 6). Hence, again and again he creates what Lee Spinks succinctly terms as “panoramic historical fictions that explore the historical determination of our experience while insisting that what we understand as ‘history’ is always also the effect of a particular perspective or ground.”(Spinks, 19). History for Ondaatje thus becomes a ground but he refuses to be contained within its boundaries. Ondaatje instead attempts to counterbalance the omissions and partiality of the historical master narrative through a projection and celebration of plurality of personal and local narratives that give voice to the forgotten of history.

In the postmodern world however, the paradox of the historical and the fictional representation has acquired larger dimensions. The writers in particular blur the boundaries between history and fiction with the idea of Historiographic metafiction which according to Ansgar Nunning “deals not so much with historical events, personages, and facts as with the reconstruction of the past from the point of view of the present, often reflecting the insights of modern theories of history-- theories focusing on the epistemological and narratological problems that beset historiography.”(Nunning, 216). Ondaatje easily can be taken as belonging to the category of postcolonial writers who again and again blend the genres to provide a wholesome view of reality. In the three works selected for discussion, Ondaatje focuses on people who otherwise are not considered worthy to find mention in
the historical records. In an interview with Catherine Bush in 1990, Ondaatje stated “I think reclaiming untold stories is an essential role for the writer. Especially in this country, where one can no longer trust the media. The newspapers have such power over the story and portrait of Canada. You can see the newspapers moving in a certain politically right-wing or economically right-wing direction, and this-- before you know it--becomes the official voice of the country.”(147). Writing for Ondaatje thus becomes an act of resistance, an attempt to fill the empty spaces existing in history.

*In the Skin of a Lion*(1987), highlights the role played by workers and immigrants in the history of Toronto, aiming to give voice to the marginalized members of society who formed an active force in making Toronto what it is today, but who were ignored in historical accounts. The author portrays the “unofficial” stories of the immigrants normally associated with anonymity and passivity in Canada’s “official” history. His stories attempt to uncover the lives of those who have been denied a role in Canada's past: women, immigrants, and the working class. The debate around Canadian history understandably has made a strong impact on Ondaatje. Gordon Gamlin rightly remarks, “Ondaatje’s retelling of hitherto unwritten history emphasizes especially the problem of immigration and the continual struggle for an acceptable division of power within changing social constructs. Ultimately the novel allows an egalitarian voicing of previously marginalized perspectives.”(Gamlin, 68). In *The English Patient* (1992), a group of ordinary persons caught in the crossfire during the second world war become the focus of Ondaatje’s interest. As a migrant himself, Ondaatje’s work reflects the desire to revise the existing history from the perspective of the subordinate groups.

*Coming through Slaughter*(1976), is based on historically documented and
legendary characters, the Jazz musician Buddy Bolden and the photographer E.J. Bellocq. Both artists lived and worked in Storyville, New Orleans, a notorious red-light district, but there are significant gaps in the information available to us about Bolden and Bellocq. It has been rightly observed, “Ondaatje’s sources for these legendary figures range from historical research and archival documents to popular culture such as films, comics and records.” (Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada, 846). Ondaatje however adapts and modifies the material to suit the truth of his fiction. Unlike historical novels in which there is fiction mixed with implicit historical facts; Wolfgang Hochbruck aptly points out, Ondaatje’s novels use “historical characters but surrounds them with inventions of his own and with facts ...expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction.” (Hochbruck, 450). Ondaatje thus creates parallel stories moving to and fro in multiple directions.

Ondaatje’s technique of putting epigraphs to his works enables his readers to unravel the hidden links to the multi-layered, multi-voiced tales. The English Patient opens with an epigraph taken from ‘the minutes of the Geographical Society meeting in London’ of the early nineteen-forties. It reads: “Most of you, I am sure, remember the tragic circumstances of the death of Geoffrey Clifton at Gilf Kebir, followed later by the disappearance of his wife, Katherine Clifton, which took place during the 1939 desert expedition in search of Zerzura.” Through this epigraph, Ondaatje situates his tale to the World War II. The characters in the novel spend the last days of the war in the Villa San Girolamo in Tuscany, Italy discovering the secrets of their past in an effort to move towards healing in the future. Each character attempts to remember the past in order to get a grip on his/her identity. As a result, the novel consists of flashbacks, which are often vague and provide the reader only with a fragmentary account of both history and each
character's story.

In the Skin of a Lion narrates a story that a young Hana ‘gathers’ during a car journey. What give structure to this complex narrative are the two epigraphs to the novel given at the beginning of the book, one drawn from the relatively lesser known Epic of Gilgamesh and the other, from John Berger’s novel G. The epigraph from Gilgamesh gives the novel its title: “The joyful will stoop with sorrow and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion.” Ondaatje uses the myth to equate the modern immigrant experience with that of the pre-cultural, epical one, like whom, the immigrants remain excluded from those very cultural spaces which they help make possible. Patrick, the protagonist, like Gilgamesh in the epic identifies himself with the fellow Macedonians and Bulgarians even as he is transformed by his relationship with them. Patrick is shown as a challenging character who participates politically culminating the collective expression of a new social vision.

This aspect gets emphasized when we look at the second epigraph taken from John Berger’s novel, “Never again a single story be told as though it were the only one.” As Ondaatje narrates, there emerge many stories with many characters in no defined order, for example, the last scene becomes the first scene while the story must be assimilated and made one’s own. It is a story that defines its characters in terms of social, political and linguistic issues while being continually redefined by the place they make for themselves within its own shifting borders.

In the Credits and Acknowledgements given at the end of Coming Through Slaughter, Ondaatje declares: “While I have used real names and characters and historical
situations, I have also used more personal pieces of friends and fathers. There have been some date changes, some characters brought together, and some facts have been expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction.” Authorial invention is there in Prescript and postscripts like Openings, Acknowledgements, Credits. Ondaatje acknowledges the sources he worked from. The main source of historical information in the case of Buddy Bolden is found in ‘New Orleans Music’ by William Russell and Stephen Smith, from Jazzmen, a book published in 1939 by Frederic Ramsey jnr. and Charles Smith; historical information is also found in Martin Williams’ Jazz Masters of New Orleans, 1967. (referred in Credits and Acknowledgements). In Search of Buddy Bolden, a book by Donald Marquis traces the life of Cornetist Buddy Bolden, researched through many interviews, articles, oral histories, books, monographs etc.

Ondaatje uses historical characters but surrounds them with inventions of his own and with facts to suit the truth of fiction. For example, Bolden is a musician whose work we cannot hear because no recording of his music exists today, and Bellocq is a photographer we cannot see because we have no pictures of him, and very few of those he took. These gaps have inspired many writers to try to fill them in. Ondaatje sees the gaps in the historical record as a chance to make his own unique artistic mark. For this he chooses historical/legendary especially ex-centric characters such as Buddy Bolden (in Coming Through Slaughter), Ambrose Small (in In the Skin of a Lion), Laszlo Almasy and Harris (in The English Patient) etc., a fact that shows Ondaatje’s fascination with the historical and the mythical even as he attempts to reveal the hidden, mysterious and silent truths of history. He ensures that these marginalized and ex-centric people no longer remain mere objects or outsiders of others’ history as he interrogates and confronts the
dominant culture whose discourse and language do not allow the migrants to fully articulate their experience. The novel’s oral narrative enables a retelling of the story from multiple viewpoints, yet leaving gaps here and there for the listeners/readers to fill and comprehend.

For Ondaatje, the immigrants’ stories are important because they were the ones who built the city. The background of the novel *In The Skin of Lion* is the moment in Canada’s history when the foundations of modern industrialized nation was laid by the immigrant European laborers in the 1920s. Ondaatje chooses the historic events of building the Bloor Street Viaduct in 1917 and the Toronto Waterworks in the 1930s and the construction of Union Street Station. By doing so, Ondaatje gives voice to the blood, the sweat and tears of these workers who have never been recognized by the 'official' history. For seeking jobs and exploring greener, newer pastures, people of various nationalities immigrated to Canada.

As such, the most important theme of discussion is the portrayal of the immigrant experience. The immigrants are presented as the ultimate ‘outsiders’; they are separated from their old world and excluded from their new one. The official historical records however are silent about the existence and the contribution of the migrants in the development of the new lands as also of their identity. Jonathan Friedman rightly opines, “The people without history in this view are the people who have been prevented from identifying themselves for others.”(Friedman, 117). They only mention town’s city planners and corporations. As marginalized and ex-centric people, they remain mere outsides of others’ history.

*In The Skin of a Lion*(1987) opens with Patrick the main character declaring that he
will tell his whole story; even the portions he cannot have possibly known to his sixteen-year-old adopted daughter Hana during a four hour drive from Toronto to Marmora. As he remembers, when he arrived in Toronto, he paused at the station. Surrounded by a flood of humanity, he called out his name but no one turned, he after all was a mere nameless worker and they did not recognize those involved in the construction of the nation. Son of a paid farmer in Depot Creek, Ontario, Patrick learned the trade of setting dynamite from his father. On reaching Toronto around 1923 from Canada’s backwoods he begins to support himself as a construction labourer among many immigrants from Europe or elsewhere. The plot consists of fragmented stories of Patrick Lewis, his two mistresses Clara and Alice, Ambrose Small, a millionaire who vanishes without a trace, Harris, the Commissioner of Public Works, Carvaggio, a thief, Nicholas Temelcoff, a doer of all kinds of difficult jobs. They all live with immigrants from Macedonia, Greece and Finland. While writing about Toronto’s history, many characters become aware of the fact that they are left out when retelling the history of the city. A continual influx of immigrants of various nationalities seeking jobs and a better life. As such, the portrayal of the immigrant experience and his identity is one of the most central, pervasive, and thematically suggestive aspects of the novel.

The immigrants are presented as the ultimate outsiders; they are separated from their old world and excluded from their new one. They leave familiar places and cultures and are transplanted into the alien environment of Canada. It is a wrenching, disorienting experience, and the immigrant characters continue to feel a profound sense of otherness, of not belonging. This condition is reinforced by the Canadian society which refuses to accept them. Patrick reads about the history of the Bloor Street Viaduct, which was constructed
at the cost of suffering and lives of loggers. He finds out that all details like the soil, the wood, the concrete used for the bridge are mentioned: “Everything but information on those who actually built the ridge.” (In the Skin..., 145). The business tycoons and politicians of that time are mentioned but those who suffered and built this bridge are driven out from the historical records. This message is reinforced when the reader learns that Mr. Lewis, Patrick’s father, has been killed in a mine by a fallen piece of feldspar. The author uses this event to emphasize that people suffer and die accidentally in the process of building a community or a society. They are never be recalled by history.

The author in the novel depicts the history of Canada from 1920s and early 1930s—in its pristine virginity, its snow covered peaks, frozen rivers, its national sport of skating, its valour, hard life and undaunting courage before odds and vagaries of nature, its woodcutters and cow-boys and its slow transformation from a country of loggers and dynamites to big bridges, roads, railway network, viaducts, water works, bakeries and tanneries; from being a country of pastures to an industrial giant. Hoards of men come to this place to start their new lives, going through their own ordeals and tribulations to keep tryst with destiny.

The immigrants from various places at first are displaced people, who live apart, at the periphery; they work in the woods, in mines or tunnels, and live at the outskirts of small towns, i.e. at the margins or under the surface of the world. Their origins are often unknown. To an immigrant, everything is strange. The new physical environment, even the climate, is foreign, probably quite different from the land left behind. The immigrants experience an alien culture of whose subtleties and nuances they know nothing. They come and go like the seasons, “melt away with the ice”. The physical, cultural and language differences make them strangers. As a boy Patrick Lewis watches
foreign loggers go to work, earn their living. These men walk “twenty miles into land they
did not know.”( In The Skin...,16). Later an older Patrick remembers his father musing on
the displacement and disorientation of loggers in their new land, “they don’t know where
they are.” These people bear inhuman conditions, work in tanneries and tunnels causing
nauseating smells, living in makeshift places amidst freezing snow-covered peaks yet
vibrate with best of life, dare to dream and toil to achieve. Patrick feels himself to be “an
immigrant to the city,”( In The Skin...,53), solitary and withdrawn, a loner by nature, he
does not make friends easily. Patrick's natural reticence results in a self-imposed exclusion
from society that parallels the linguistic isolation of the immigrants. Further, he works with
and lives among the immigrants with whom linguistic barriers prevent communication.
Even to buy food, Patrick must “leap over the code of languages between himself and the
Macedonian clerks.”( In The Skin...,113). Thus he is doubly isolated and excluded, an
outsider among outsiders, and feels himself to be an alien.

Lack of language is a significant barrier faced by the immigrants. Their inability to
speak English cuts them off from the larger world, confirming their outsider status. Closely
related to the language barrier, and in a sense, a consequence of it is the idea of
inarticulateness, the inability to express oneself. Instances of linguistic difficulties are
numerous. As Maria Jesus Llarena Ascanio aptly points out, “the isolation and silence of
Patrick’s early years serves a very specific function in the novel. Patrick remains silent.
The lack of language separates him from his community.” (Ascanio, 562). Again, Alice’s
silent puppet show demonstrates how the language barrier prevents the access of so-called
ethnic minorities to society’s institutions. “The human puppet, alien and naive and
gregarious, upset everything…A plot grew. Laughing like a fool he was brought before
authorities, unable to speak their language. He stood there assaulted by insults.” (In The
Skin ..., 117).

Similarly, when Nicholas Temelcoff reaches Canada, he realizes that the
immigrant’s first step towards social consolidation is language acquisition, for “if he did
not learn the language he would be lost,” (In The Skin ..., 46). So he decides to go to
school, working nights in another Macedonian bakery. Perhaps the most poignant example
of the frustration and isolation caused by the language barrier occurs when Patrick sees an
immigrant at the train station: “He saw a man with three suitcases, well-dressed, shouting
out in another language. The man's eyes burned through everyone who at first received his
scream personally… Two days later Patrick returned..., 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.” (In The Skin ..., 54). As Homi Bhabha observes in another context, “The
‘language’ metaphor raises the question of cultural difference...Increasingly, the issue of
cultural difference emerges at points of social crises, and the questions of identity that it
raises are agonistic; identity is claimed either from a position of marginality or in an
attempt at gaining the centre: in both senses ex-centric.” (Bhabha, 177). In the same vein
Ondaatje portrays the continuous and constant overlapping of interactions among different
cultural groups within Canadian multi-cultural society. As long as the cultural baggage is
retained in totality, the road towards community and the new transcultural identity cannot
be taken. Ondaatje along with other renowned diasporic writers questions the concept of an
essentialist, unitary and fixed identity. Rather his point of interest is the different positions
resulting from the notion of cultural differences in relation to one another.

The immigrants thus are conscious of otherness, of not belonging, standing apart
and it is reinforced by the host society which refuses to accept them. Silence and marginalization becomes metaphorically associated with historical inarticulateness or exclusion. Ondaatje draws parallels between the realistic silences or inarticulate nature of immigrants or other disenfranchised characters, and their exclusion from the historical record. When Patrick reads about the history of the Bloor Street Viaduct, which was constructed at the cost of much suffering and many lives, he discovers that all sorts of details are mentioned: the wood, the soil, the concrete used for the bridge, “everything but the information on those who actually built the bridge.”(In The Skin...,145). All these are forgotten based on an unjust system of exploitation. Patrick realizes the social reality he inhabits.

In this novel Ondaatje focuses on the fragmented narrative space inhabited by marginalized characters involved in the struggle to transform themselves into a community, coming to terms with the past, dealing with a difficult present and looking hopefully towards a future. Patrick and immigrants are exiles who want stable centre as an anchor. Patrick watches these immigrants minutely. His discovery of and communication with immigrant community of Toronto is a part of a larger quest, a quest for identity, for the meaning of things, for contact with others illustrated by the metaphor of his job as a searcher. The narrative has some gaps which are not filled and it is left to the reader to wonder and guess. For example, Alice and her friend, Clara Dickens, the other important female character, do not reveal anything about their past, leaving Patrick Lewis and the reader to guess, for the most part. These gaps also highlight the plight of worker immigrants who live life in anonymity and die unknown, unrecognized, never registered in the official history of their country.
Ondaatje specifically exposes the cost, in human lives, of building the city, and according to Catherine Delmas, ‘the relationships between people like Ambrose Small, the millionaire, (In The Skin...,55) “the hawk,” “the jackal,” (In The Skin..., 57) or Harris the construction engineer, and workers caught in the choreography of power and “money river” are predatory.” (In The Skin...,30). Predators however do not create histories. It is the burning desire to live and love, look and contribute that creates culture and translates individual efforts into an epoch. In the course of his adventures, Patrick falls in love with the two artists, Clara Dickens and Alice Gull. He first meets Clara and begins a short but passionate affair. When Clara breaks off the affair to return to her millionaire boyfriend, Patrick is again alone and returns to Toronto to seek solace in isolation and physical labor. There he meets Clara's friend, Alice, a woman with no history but with strong political leanings. A single mother, Alice has raised Hana, the child she had by Cato, a murdered revolutionary activist. It is Alice who sets up one of the major images in the novel, by “the way Alice came to him it seemed in a series of masks or painted faces ... like the sea through a foreground of men.” (In the Skin...,128).Alice reads a Joseph Conrad letter that provokes Patrick to tell her that the trouble with Ideology “is that it hates the private. You must make it human.” (In the Skin..., 135).

Patrick comes to understand his own self and the country only after he meets Alice who teaches him about the lives of the workers: “And all of his life Patrick had been oblivious to it, a searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country...” (In the Skin...,157). With his will power and inspiration drawn from Alice’s political activism, he fights for the recognition of the marginalized people and participates in a leftist political movement event Alice thus is the catalyst that brings Patrick out of his isolation. He
becomes a part of the immigrant community in which they live and forms a close bond with Alice's daughter, Hana. Alice and Hana become the force in his life that brings about a new awakening, a new consciousness. With Alice he proclaims: compassion is not enough. “Compassion forgives too much. You could forgive the worst man. You forgive him and nothing changes. - You can teach him, make him aware... Why leave the power in his hands?” (In the Skin..., 123). Again, Alice tells Patrick: “You believe in solitude, Patrick, in retreat. You can afford to be romantic because you are self-sufficient... I’m not talking about money. Working in the tunnels is terrible, I know that. But you have a choice, what of others who don’t? Such as three quarters of the population of Upper America. They can’t afford your choices, your languor.” (In the Skin..., 123). Alice’s concern with the world around becomes the moving spirit of the novel; a re-forging of identity. Alice is like the Joan of Arc of immigrant labour who yearns and pines for the small slice of joy and love, bonding and protection. The author puts his hands quivering with love and understanding around this flame with a wistful wish to turn it into burning torch of knowledge, wisdom and true development. When Alice is killed in an accident, Patrick, again lost to alienation, blames wealthy predators of society. Alice’s death, however, causes Patrick to feel truly human sorrow and to “wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion.”

The inter-textual reference to the epic of Gilgamesh indicates that he must hide in a ‘different skin’ in order to be able to blend into their surroundings. To become a part of society, the immigrants need to adopt the skin of Toronto. Linda Hutcheon in “Intertextuality, Parody, and The Discourses of History” succinctly explains in another context, “The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction enacts, in a way, the
views of certain contemporary historiographies: it offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces--be they literary or historical.” (Hutcheon, 125). The intertextual references reveal a blending of the mythical, historical and fictional in the invention of identity. As in the epic, the novel has its various characters in a quest, different journeys, adventurous incidents, fights, etc., for example, Temelcoff’s harrowing passage from Macedonia to Canadian shores, Patrick’s voyage from hinterland to metropolis followed by his repeated journeys between various peripheries and centres, Ambrose Small’s mysterious disappearance underground, the equally strategic maneuvers of Cato in his efforts to fortify union organization while avoiding the threats of company authorities, and Caravaggio’s numerous and clandestine odysseys and escapes. Through these migrations, as Llarena Ascanio aptly points out, “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. Similarly he shapes connections with old worlds and new, situating himself in relation to their various geographies and histories.” (Ascanio, 573).

Patrick is shown as Ondaatje’s other and parallels the character of Gilgamesh. Patrick, like Gilgamesh, is on a quest. In the epic, Gilgamesh roams with the wilderness “in the skin of a lion,” mourning the death of his friend Enkidu. On his quest to find out why his friend Enkidu has died, Gilgamesh visits the garden of the gods and tells a woman, Siduri, of his grief and his quest. Similarly, Patrick hides on an island during his quest to avenge the death of Alice who fought for the rights of labour and immigrants, and thinks of telling a blind woman he meets in a garden there of his love and grief. Both use artificial weights to dive deep into the water towards the seat of power. Patrick prepares to swim
through the intake tunnel of the Waterworks (which he has earlier helped to build) in order to confront Commissioner Harris and to dynamite the plant, he changes his skin colour. Moreover the title of the novel indicates that it is a call for action, for taking responsibility for one's own story and for its narration in order to compensate for historical silences, as Alice states: “...Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story…” (In The Skin..., 157).

Patrick seeks revenge by blowing up a dock at a regatta and is sent to prison, where he meets another immigrant from his neighborhood, Caravaggio the thief. Patrick reconnects with humanity through his contact with Caravaggio. He warns Caravaggio before he is attacked in his cell one night, and after Caravaggio's escape and Patrick's release, the two men meet again in their immigrant neighborhood. Upon his release, Patrick first goes to Nicholas Temelcoff's bakery, where Hana waits for him. Then, still bent on avenging the death of Alice, he enlists Caravaggio's help in a plan to blow up the waterworks facility. The plan goes well.

In the final scene of confrontation between Patrick and Commissioner Harris, Harris thinks that there is a common ground to be negotiated between the worlds of Harris and that of the nameless workers. Patrick asks, “think about those who built the intake tunnels. Do you know how many of us died in there?” This leads to Harris’ reply, “there was no record kept. The workers are never accepted or acknowledged.” (In The Skin..., 155). When Patrick wants to stop the conversation and says: “I don’t want to talk of this anymore,” Harris replies: “Then it will always be a nightmare.” Patrick then confirms that “It will always be a nightmare, Harris.” (In The Skin..., 239). Patrick thus proclaims that cultural clashes should be inevitable. Commissioner Harris recognizing that the centre has
shifted away from him, calls for a nurse with medical supplies rather than the police.

As Harris accepts his role in the death of Alice, Patrick too acknowledges his complicity in the accident that killed Alice. He thus lays down the mantle of a victim and recognizes that he has been an aggressor too. With this realization he turns away from his rage and finally finds release from the burden of the past. He finds anchor in Clara who, he knows, shall free him from the solitude, enable him to reconcile with the human urge to forge bonds, family ties and embrace the world. Ondaatje thus presents the character’s stories to his readers in a fragmented, non-linear way which the reader must unfold. Barbara Leckie rightly states, “Ondaatje’s use of history, his stress on multi-voiced narratives spoken from unusual locations, and his self consciousness about different art forms are indicative of the time during which he has written.” (Leckie, 28). Ondaatje thus emerges as a transcultural writer reflecting his multiple origins and influences.

Ondaatje ends and begins the novel in the twilight mood as a father and a daughter travel together in a car. The car ride is indicative of Ondaatje's ability to transcend time and space-- the story ends at the beginning of the novel and begins at the end, as if Patrick has told his story not only to the young girl Hana, but ultimately, to readers: “This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through the darkness...” Ondaatje stresses how the story has to be retrieved from memory. The unhappiness of the past however passes, the novel does not end in the darkness but with ‘lights’ reflecting a movement towards the future.

Hana thus becomes the final catalyst in Patrick’s journey from isolation and otherness and connects him to community. The closing pages of the book find Patrick
embarking on another journey. A call from Clara sparks a trip with Hana, whom Patrick now acknowledges as his daughter, to rescue Clara from the same isolation from which Patrick suffered. During the journey, as Patrick tells Hana his story, the reader too travels full circle and comes back to the preface of the novel. Hana listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through darkness…The man who is driving could say, “In that field is a castle,” and it would be possible for her to believe him. She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story…”(In The Skin..., 2). The circulatory technique indicates continuation of life as also making of identity.

Thus the novel, as intended by its author, has all the ingredients of a modern epic. Ondaatje indeed, lives up to the John Berger’s quote mentioned at the beginning of the novel, “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.” The novel ends with the characters moving to reunite fractured families, pointing towards a re-establishment of order and balance in their personal lives. As Ondaatje demonstrates, Patrick interacts in multicultural setting and learns to be with new people, to create new bonds and relations, to find light in the darkness, adopting and mingling with other cultures, reshaping yet preserving the cultural roots. The migrants coming from different cultures and languages and finding themselves in an alien culture and amidst new language have to find ways to use elements of all cultures to be able to continue to exist. The novel, to agree with Glen Lowry’s observation, contains Ondaatje’s “critique of nationalism and multiculturalism.”(Lowry, 63). Ondaatje focus instead is on the histories of the immigrant labourereres in the 1920s’ Toronto. The novel depicts how different ethno-cultural groups make efforts to make a home of the alien land as also to forge a community based on cooperation and affinity. Ondaatje as Susan Spearey aptly points out, “rejects a
model of the juxtaposition of cultures within a nation or an individual, and focuses instead on processes of transformation and metamorphosis—of individuals, polities, and geographical spaces—as these notions of community, identity and affiliation are re-imagined re-enacted, realigned.” (Spearey, 134). Like other writers whose texts sit at the juncture between postmodern and postcolonial writing, Ondaatje successfully grapples with the problems of acknowledging history and cultural identity.

In *The English Patient* also, Ondaatje uses flashback sequences to allow his characters to travel back and forth in time in order to reveal the plot. The novel seeks to explore the problem of identity and displacement against the backdrop of history. The English patient narrates his story under the influence of morphine. At the beginning of the novel, the man has no identity, he is referred to as the English patient. His real name is Almasy, though this is not definitively confirmed until Chapter IX. He spent the years from 1930 to the start of World War II exploring the North African desert. Ondaatje portrays his characters as more open and ready to reveal their true selves to each other.

Just as *In The Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje makes reference to the Epic of Gilgamesh, in a similar manner, in *The English Patient* also, Ondaatje draws from *The Histories* by Herodotus. In the novel, The English patient often quotes from *The Histories* in a fragmentary manner. Gregory O’Dea compares Herodotus to the English patient, “it is a figure of the patient himself, a kind of repository of thought, memory, and feeling that takes on the character of its creator. And so it is. But what has made him this way, so full and so shattered at the same time, and what has he then in turn shaped the book to be? The answer, simply put, is love and history.” (O’Dea, 9). Through the intertextuality in the novel, Ondaatje seems to draw a parallel between the past and the
present. Hutcheon in “Historiographic Metafiction…” aptly points out, “Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context.” (Hutcheon, 118). In a similar vein, Ondaatje writes there is nothing fixed in the novel, the gap between binary opposites such as reality and imagination, truth and fiction are deconstructed and the lines separating them are erased.

Ondaatje’s treatment of the immigrant experience questions the colonial construction of race and identity. As the pages are turned, the English patient relives his journey and contemplates the legend he is leaving behind. “It is when we are old, concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future. We become vain.” (The English Patient, 151). Ondaatje uses the English patient as a way for Hanna to deal with her past. Hana thinks of the English patient as a “despairing saint” (The English..., 45) with the “hipbones of Christ”-- as someone she can love and care for, as a replacement for her step-father, Patrick Lewis, who was killed in the war. As we travel back and forth through Hanna's memories, we discover that she has lost her father, her husband, and unborn child during the war. The English patient serves as an outlet for her desires. She finds solace in serving him as she regrets her absence during the time when her father needed her to nurse him. She not only takes care of the English patient, but also of Caravaggio in an attempt to halt a process of self-destruction that had started during the war.

Her maternal quality as a nurse is deeply entwined with a deliberate act of self-mutilation, an act prompted by the presence of “destroyed bodies which were fed back to the field hospitals like mud passed back by tunnellers in the dark.” (The English..., 51).
She cuts off her hair, “the irritation of its presence during the previous days still in her mind, when she had bent forward and her hair had touched blood in a wound.” (*The English...*, 52). She breaks with her past by acknowledging her miscarriage and the deaths of her lover and father. She feels drawn to the Villa San Girolamo which “had the look of a besieged fortress, the limbs of most of the statues blown off during the first days of the shelling.” (*The English...*, 45). Not only do these statues represent the physical destruction, but they also mirror the characters' mental fear of destruction and cruelty.

In Kip, a displaced person, the sapper, Hanna discovers emotional support, compassion, and intimacy, which are commiserated in the physical sense as well as on an emotional level. Caravaggio, a thief turned spy, he was a thief in *In the Skin of a Lion* but is a spy in *The English Patient*, for practical rather than political reasons, “They couldn’t believe their luck, they were falling over themselves to use me.” (*The English...*, 37). The readers however are told very little about Caravaggio’s personal history, except that he was involved with a group of thieves. One of the most telling descriptions of Caravaggio is that of a man who has consigned himself to the shadows through his choice of lifestyle. As a thief (*In The Skin of A Lion*), he moves through society like a shadow, “he would never leave his name where his skill had been. He was one of those who have the fury or sadness of only being described by someone else. A tarrer of roads, a house-builder, a painter, a thief—yet he was invisible to all around him.” (*In The Skin...*, 199). Caravaggio’s scars tell part of his story, “He saw his neck for the first time in a mirror, scarred from the prison attack three months earlier.” (*In The Skin...*, 182). Caravaggio, carries his history with him, his is written on, and through his body. His escapades as a thief have left scars and deformities on his body. He has been robbed of the use of that body part which previously
constituted the most essential part of his identity, his hand. During the war Nazi officers cut off his thumbs. He now is the “man with bandaged hands.” (*The English Patient*, 29).

In *The English Patient*, Caravaggio enters the story because he has heard that Hanna, a child he knew before the war, is in a small villa caring for a wounded man. He thinks Hana has ‘tied herself to a corpse for some reason … a twenty-year-old who throws herself out of the world to love a ghost.” (*The English Patient*, 47). Caravaggio believes that Hana should not stay in this dangerous Villa, and cannot tie herself to this man, whoever he is. Caravaggio however is obsessed with the English patient. He looks at him as a kind of text to be read, interpreted, excavated, and revealed, or re-created under a new skin. Gregory O’ Dea observes, “The English Patient himself is thus seen a palimpsest, like his copy of Herodotus, a dangerous and ambiguous kind of text, written over many times.” (O’Dea, 16). According to Caravaggio, English Patient is in fact not English at all, but a man named Almasy, a Hungarian desert explorer turned spy-helper for the Germans. Here it is necessary to mention that Count Ladislau or Laszlo Almasy was a real person, a historical figure, though greatly transformed by Ondaatje to become a fictional figure in this novel. The character and the facts of the historical figure Count Ladislaus de Almasy have been well researched by Steven Totosy de Zepetnek in his article “Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Questions of History.” The historical Almasy was born in 1895 in a part of Hungary that is now within the borders of Austria. Like Ondaatje's character, he was a self-taught desert explorer and pilot, and in the 1930s he took part in several international expeditions, notably with British explorers, to find Zerzura, a legendary lost city buried in the deserts of Egypt, or Libya. “Count Almasy was assigned to the German army as a liaison officer and that in July 1944 he helped Vince Gorgey, a Royal Hungarian
army officer to escape Berlin with the aid of the German SS.” (Zepetnek, 118). In the early 1940s, the historical Almasy worked for the Germans under Rommel’s command as a desert guide, helping spies find their way across the shifting borders of the North African theater. He may have been a double-agent, though, delivering intelligence to the British as well. After the war, he spent time in a Russian prison, and then was tried for treason by the new communist regime in Hungary, but escaped, perhaps with the help of British intelligence. Ondaatje borrows some facts from Almasy’s life and adds to the ambiguity by making English patient a vague character and the novel The English Patient a complex text.

Before the war, Almasy was an internationally-neutral desert explorer who fell in love and began an affair with Katherine, the wife of one of his associates, an undercover British agent named Geoffrey Clifton. Clifton found out about it later, and attempted to kill all three of them by crashing his plane in the desert. Clifton died in the attempt, Almasy survived, while Katherine was mortally injured. Almasy sheltered Katherine in the Cave of Swimmers and made the long journey out of the desert to seek help. He was captured by German forces and made to serve as a guide, particularly for Eppler. In his criss-crossings of the desert, Almasy attempted to return for Katherine, though she was by now certainly dead. When he did manage to find her again, he repaired the plane that had been buried in the desert, loaded her body aboard, and flew away. The plane caught fire, and he fell burning from the sky back into the desert, where he was tended to by Bedouin nomads until he was taken to an Allies hospital. All of this is pieced together by Caravaggio from fragments, sketchy intelligence reports he already had, bits and pieces from the English patient's Herodotus text, snatches from the rambling narrative given by the patient himself.
while under the influence of morphine.

The remembrance of Katherine, the English patient's lover, re-ignites the love of life in Hana and all it has to offer. Kip, as he deals with the everyday dangers of disarming bombs, relives childhood memories of his father. The section entitled “In Situ,” meaning “in its place,” has most important information to offer about Kip. In sapper terminology refers to the need to dispose of a bomb as one finds it, without moving it. This section of the novel also details Kip's training as a sapper, his first-hand encounter with the English culture and his feeling very much out of place. As an Indian, of course, he has long had a distant view of the English; India is at this time part of the British Empire, after all. But his military training under Lord Suffolk, his mentor, has inspired in him a long standing admiration of the English, and of Western European culture in general—a culture to which he wishes to belong, though he cannot. Kip clings to his carefully layered turban and his long hair, the only markers distinguishing him from the British soldiers. Yet he knows that his attempt to establish a whole and monolithic identity is doomed to fail because in many respects he is the most British among his fellow soldiers:

I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from your country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world…I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out. (The English...,301).

Kip's elder brother is a political agitator against British rule in India, a view to which Kip does not subscribe. Kip worships and adores all signs of the western culture, the cathedral frescoes, the white marble Italian statues, the madonnas and prophets; indeed, he
falls in love with Hana partly because she seems like one of his virgin madonnas come to life, even as he seems to her a figure from a Kipling novel. The English Patient, too whom he calls ‘uncle’ is read by Kip as quintessentially English, and becomes a replacement of sorts for Lord Suffolk, his surrogate father lost to the war. Kip is devastated and disillusioned when he hears about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he hears it over his wireless radio near the end of the novel. All his life he had been diffusing the bombs, but to hear about a bomb--the text of which cannot be read and defused, deployed against entire cities of the brown races by the English: “you're an Englishman,” (The English..., 304), he says, by these people he has come to love. It is thoroughly devastating.

Kip, who seems to Hana to have stepped out of the text of a Kipling novel about the white man's burden, a reader of bombs, has heard of the great unreadable text one that brings his entire world to an end. He speaks bitterly against the English while leveling a rifle at the English Patient. His disillusionment with the British comes out in angry words. He tells of a time when his father would disguise his hands and have Kip distinguish between the different fingers. Ondaatje uses these flashbacks to reveal Kip's strong family bond and his desire to honor them. When his older brother is put in jail, Kip sees no other choice than to join the army in his brother's place. Through Kip Ondaatje reveals the plight of the other, as the mutilation of his name indicates. His name is Kirpal Singh but the British gave him the nickname Kip when some officers interpreted the butter stain on one of his reports as “kipper grease. A kipper is “a salty English fish,” (The English..., 93-94) usually smoked or dried. Kip's identity has been "smoked out" so to speak, and “within a week his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten.” (The
On an intertextual level, the mutilated name Kip evokes Rudyard Kipling and his titular hero, Kim. In his own mutilation, Kip turns to the English patient. The relationship between Kip and the English patient “seemed to Hana a reversal of Kim.” (The English..., 117). Yet it is more than a simple reversal of Kipling's narrative into “the young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English” (The English...,117) because “English” as applied to the “patient” and “Indian” as applied to Kip are classifications of nationality that do not acknowledge the new sense of identity in the postcolonial and postwar context. It does not matter to Kip whether the English patient was on the side of the Germans or the British; what prompts Kip to return to India as a doctor is his inclusion of the English patient into the category of those who dropped the atomic bomb.

Caravaggio explains to Kip that Almasy isn't an Englishman, and Kip replies, “American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English.”(The English..., 304). And Caravaggio admits to himself that Kip is right; “They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation.” (The English..., 304). The ‘sudden’ transformation in Kip when he hears the news on the radio of the atomic bombing of Japan should not be viewed as an isolated incident, for there are many times throughout the story where Kip is reminded of his otherness and inability to perform the patterns of Englishness perfectly and thus for Kip’s subsequent break with the English. He feels that he is the only thing that is safe and never allows himself to become attached to anyone. He views his relationship with Hanna to be a temporary arrangement to pass the time; “Later she will realize he never allowed
himself to be beholden to her, or her to him.” (The English..., 135). The difficulties for Kip in repeating the patterns that affirm his belonging to the English and keep him seeing them as superior can be seen in his relation to his fellow soldiers. His service in the army is for him of crucial importance. At the villa, he “is the only one of them who has remained in uniform. Immaculate, buckles shined, the sapper appears out of his tent, his turban symmetrically layered, the boots clean.” (The English..., 79). That he is basically working on his own, without contact with the rest of the forces, does not change his determination to wear his uniform, since it affirms his sense of being a part of the English army and thus belonging to the English. In the end, Kip realizes that he has been subjected to othering just like the Japanese. In resentment, he channels his anger toward the man whom he assigns to the place of those who forced their culture upon him. He directs his rifle away from the statue and instead “points at the Englishman.” (The English..., 301). He wants to kill what he sees in himself. This decisive moment occurs when Kip puts the earphones of his radio set on the English patient's head and forces him to listen to the account of “One bomb. Then another. Hiroshima. Nagasaki.” (The English..., 302). He wants to rid himself of the guilt he feels because he helps defusing those bombs the colonizers throw on each other's countries instead of using his part of the “tremor of Western wisdom” (The English..., 302) to prevent the “bombing of the brown races of the world” (The English..., 304) by “the deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers.” (The English..., 302-303). He resents and acknowledges his complicity with the colonizer “the moment the eyes of the sapper and the patient meet in this half-dark room crowded now with the world.” (The English..., 303). Also, that the English are never going to change, so he feels betrayed. In this sense, the atomic bomb forcefully reconstructs the binary which the characters have
gradually and painfully deconstructed in an attempt to emerge from differences.

Kip gathers his belongings and leaves the villa, traveling against the movement of the war to return home. For Almásy too, this is clearly not just a physically painful process. He recognizes a change in himself: “I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states.” (The English..., 147). His sense of nationlessness is further deepened by the realization that the creation of nations and the notion of nationality are destructive and lead to warfare. Joseph Pesch aptly observes, “With the sense of historical progress and civilization at an end, the characters are shown returning to the past in an attempt to stabilize their lives.”(qtd. in Bolland, 67). Since the past cannot be changed, it must be revisited for its better understanding.

The world of the Villa San Girolamo is destroyed as the outside world breaks in. The glances the reader gets at Kip and Hana at the very end of the novel when they are both back in their native countries show a new kind of imprisonment and make Caravaggio's earlier statement that “the trouble with all of us is we are were we shouldn't be” (The English...,129) appear as a dark prophecy. Stephanie M. Hilger rightly opines, “While Ondaatje's novel might, at first sight, appear more pessimistic than many other postcolonial theorists' and authors' celebration of hybridity, it provides the reader with the possibility to participate in the writing of history and therefore also in the shaping of the future.”(Hilger, 47). The English patient remains a mystery, as do most events in history.

To sum up, as Ondaatje demonstrates, it is only through a retelling of the personal stories and inter-connecting the various narratives with one another that the personal histories may usurp the ‘official’ histories. Each character throughout the novel reveals something about his/her life that creates a different picture of history. Through their tales
Ondaatje successfully re-evaluates history and focuses on the relations between the margins and the centre, the personal and the public to solve the problems related to defining the identity. The process of identification however is always under construction; a process that never gets completed. As such, the characters grapple with the inner conflicts and external issues of migration, belonging and acceptance while facing chaos and difficulties. They may come to terms with their present only after they are able to relate with their past; their history, which may not always be what it really was, or rather, what they believed it to be. Identity thus as Ondaatje demonstrates, is always constituted within the historical, mythical and fictional discourses. The novel reveals the inner conflicts that the characters experience even as they journey through the external incidents of death, discrimination, domination and seclusion. Ondaatje becomes the voice of these people attempting to come to terms with their cultural past, to negotiate identity through the complexities of the present and to secure a place for themselves in the cultural memory. Ondaatje continues with this theme in *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) also.

In *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje contaminates the forgotten history of Buddy Bolden's with a self-conscious synthesis of memory and imagination. The intermingling of individual perspective along with the history presents Bolden as a dynamic character, shatters the silence of nearly forgotten figure, confronting the history. Jon Saklofske views,“Coming Through Slaughter, composed from partial accounts, bits of official records, multiple perspectives, and invented fictions, can thus be viewed as a private narrative collection that has been publicly produced in a non-traditional form, simultaneously challenging the past with its own forgotten fragments and affecting present expectations.” (Saklofske, 73).
Charles "Buddy" Bolden (September 6, 1877--November 4, 1931) was an African American musician. He is regarded a key figure in the development of a New Orleans style of rag-time music which later came to be known as jazz. He is sometimes referred as “The First Man of Jazz” (N. Albert, 87). The novel covers the last months of Bolden's sanity in 1907 when his music becomes more radical and his behavior more erratic. Ondaatje’s concern however is not as much with the actual life story of Bolden as with the world of the time, where, as he says, “There is little recorded history…History was slow here…” (Coming Through Slaughter, 2-3). The novel portrays this historical figure in a way that draws on his actual life, but as Cynthia F. Wong succinctly points out, Ondaatje “blurs the generic distinctions between poetry and prose, factual verisimilitude and fictional reconstruction.” (Wong, 289) in order to explore the novel's central theme. The novel comprises of a series of events strung together as snap shots demanding from readers to imagine and retrieve the self of Bolden from them.

In Coming Through Slaughter, Ondaatje attempts to capture Bolden’s thought process and understand Bolden’s actions by factually and fictionally recreating the setting of New Orleans in the heyday of jazz and by exploring Bolden’s relationships to his music and to other people in the context of that setting. According to Garry Giddins, “Racism, in fact, stimulated the creation of jazz: as a result of the city’s discriminatory policies, the disenfranchised Creoles were forced to mingle with blacks. The social and musical blend of French, Spanish and Negro influences helped give New Orleans jazz its distinctive character.” (Giddins, 69). At the start of the novel Bolden is a normal, if hard drinking and gossiping, barber by day and jazz musician by night. His life has “a fine and precise balance to it” (CTS, 7); he is a “good husband and father, and an infamous man about
town.”(*CTS*, 7). He is, however, also committed to exploring change, to resisting the probable, and resents his wife, Nora Bass, “breaking chairs and windows glass doors”(*CTS*,10) for her “certain answers.” (*CTS*,10). He is “almost completely governed by fears of certainty”(*CTS*,9) which he detects in her “delicate rules and ceremonies.”(*CTS*,15). He tries to get his wife in “exact focus”(*CTS*,9); with “utmost curiosity,”(*CTS*,9) he studies her, “questioning her long into the night about her past.”(*CTS*,9). But his investigations fails, he cannot “put things in their place”(*CTS*,9) or achieve the focus he seems to desire. In any case, the certainty Buddy detects in Nora’s behavior and statements enrages him to an extent that, “he attacked it again and again in her, cruelly, hating it, the sure lanes of the probable.”(*CTS*,10). Bolden, “the loudest and most loved jazzman of his time, but never professional in the brain,”(*CTS*,8) suddenly disappears from New Orleans after slashing and fighting with a customer he is barbering in Joseph's Shaving Parlor. Buddy has learned that Tom Pickett is having an affair with his common-law wife, Nora. In this ordinary world, Ondaatje takes up the issue of infidelity.

There are no accusations, no cold revenge, no plotting, no cursing, no murdering; but silent suffering-- an ache in the soul--a sublimation and pouring out of the heart in the art i.e. music. As Ondaatje portrays, the cruelties of external world pervade the personal one too. Shakespeare’s Hamlet could rightly aver, “Frailty- thy name is woman”. But here both men and women are frail. Why so? Not an easy question to answer. In an unjust world where the primary struggle is that of survival, pure bonds of love are impossible to forge. Infidelity has remained curse of all ages, civilizations and tribes. Wounds and woes of infidelity lead to unbearable pain that becomes difficult to express. Why one falls in bondage, why seeks solace in this bondage, one does not realize. Why man and woman
wish to break this bondage? Perhaps no one can ever describe. Buddy has learned that Tom Pickett is having an affair with his common-law wife, Nora Bass. Pickett is an extremely handsome pimp in the city of New Orleans. Bolden’s wife, Nora, was formally part of Pickett’s business endeavors. After Pickett boasts about his relationship with Nora, Bolden doubts the stability of his construction of Nora, “If Nora had been with Pickett. Had really been with Pickett as he said. Had jumped off Bolden's cock and sat for half an hour later on Tom Pickett's mouth on Canal Street. Then the certainties he loathed and needed were liquid at the root.” (CTS,75). What emerges in the novel thus is the murky world at the very "rag and bone shop" of society where alcohol and sex make up for pain and love, and music exudes ineffably from the fabric of blasted lives. Bolden’s musical progress is differentiated from that of his contemporaries and followers as clear and even transcendental, particularly at the point where he becomes irretrievably insane. But why such a talented and pure spirited man should linger on in the mental asylum for all his life and die anonymous. Herein lies the true ache of novel and its genuine pathos. Buddy is neither killed or murdered nor crucified but is slaughtered on the altar of infidelity.

He withdraws from Nora and Storyville fame to resume a silent life with Robin and Jaelin Brewitt. Buddy explains, “Where I am anonymous and alone in a white room with no history and no parading. So I can make something unknown in the shape of the room…And the fear of certainties I had whenI first began to play …Robin and Jaelin brought me back to that open fright…”(CTS, 83). Here he enters into a love triangle rather than his escape from certainty and possession. He again breaks windows and chairs due to feelings of jealousy and possessiveness:

Look, you’re either Jaelin’s wife or you’re my wife . I’m Jaelin’s wife and I’m in
love with you, there’s nothing simple. Well, it should be. (CTS, 66).

The actual cause of insanity of Bolden is ambiguous. The reader is in dilemma. His wife and his friends all present different portraits of Buddy. “Buddy had lived a different life with every one of them.” (CTS, 60). After he has been missing 5-6 months, Nora contacts Detective Webb, Buddy's friend since adolescence, who worries about Buddy surviving on his own. Webb is worried that without friends and family, Bolden will “fall apart.” (CTS, 14). To track him down Webb talks to Bolden’s other friends and acquaintances, including Bellocq, a hydrocephalic with a “stoop” and a “hump” (CTS, 52) who photographs ships by day and the town’s whores by night. Webb visits photographer E. J. Bellocq and obtains a photograph of Buddy. He learns that Buddy convinces whores to pose for Bellocq. Bolden’s wife Nora sees Bellocq as the cause of Bolden’s problems. When Bolden tells Nora about the suicide of Bellocq and tries to defend Bellocq, she screams at him: “Look at you. Look at what he did to you. Look at you. Look at you. Goddamit. Look at you.” (CTS, 127). Bolden explains that Bellocq fascinated him because of his dedication to making photographs that were “like…windows. He was the first person that I met who had absolutely no interest in my music.” (CTS, 55). Bolden on the other hand, took an interest in the varieties of silence in Bellocq’s portraits. Willy Cornish, a member of Bolden’s band, also believes “Bellocq corrupted him (Bolden) with that mean silence.” (CTS, 147). Through interviews Webb learns that Buddy is in Shell Beach, living with Jaelin and Robin Brewitt and making love with Robin.

When Bolden meets Robin Brewitt, Ondaatje observes that he "nearly fainted" (CTS, 27); he loses control of his senses, and, perhaps in more romantic terms, his heart.
The early stages of Bolden's relationship with Robin are marked clearly by an ongoing loss of control or, more accurately, by the loss of the balance that characterized his life with Nora. Robin seems to represent an alternate 'other’ for Bolden-- a second chance, as it was, for his constructing a kind of truth for himself. It is stated repeatedly that even though Bolden has numerous women throwing themselves at him, he truly loves Nora. However, after Bolden runs from New Orleans, he finds himself without Nora. As Ondaatje portrays, Bolden does not really love Robin. Robin is his outlet. She blurs into Nora and Nora is not his. He is completely alienated and devastated- devoid of everything-- including his kith and kin. Only a slow and anonymous death is his destiny-- a destiny of every modern man. The story is told in many fragments and many voices: Actual accounts of Bolden's life and performances, oral history, lists of songs, biographical facts, narrative, dialogue, interior monologues, psychiatric reports, bits of poetry and lyrics, the author's own voice through which Ondaatje weaves a series of brilliantly improvised sets. There are blues, there are the hymns, there is rhythm, there is free jazz, there is melody, soul, mood, wild aggression with notes flung out in pain and hurt and it all creates an atmosphere, an environment. New Orleans’ whores, pimps, drugs, booze, clarinets and cornets, jazz and jazzmen, ship builders and photographers and love and lunacy.

Buddy also breaks the boundaries of love; he sacrifices his wife and children in order to pursue something more with Robin. In the Parade on fifth morning, Buddy gives his last performance. In the Liberty-Iberville concert, during the performance, Bolden is fascinated by a dancing girl who follows the rhythms and dances to his tunes intoxicatingly. Bolden’s self is completely immersed into music, so much that he even forgets the audience. The mounting tension between Bolden and the girl is reflected in the
prose of the passage as run-on sentences break into fragments and then continue to the climactic point of Bolden's complete immersion into music: In fact, the following passage reads much like a metaphor for the act of sex. Bolden’s love life is revealed when he describes the beautiful dancer as a culmination of his lovers. Then with the gorgeous dancer at the parade who pushes him to further limits leading to his destruction:

All my body moves to my throat and I speed again and she speeds tired again, a river of sweat to her what her head and hair back bending back to me, all the desire in me is cramp and hard, cocaine on my cock, external, for my heart is at my throat hitting slow pure notes into the shimmy dance of victory…feel the blood that is real move up bringing fresh energy in its suitcase, it comes up flooding past my heart in a mad parade, it is coming through my teeth, it is into the cornet, god can't stop god can't stop the air the red force coming up can't remove it from my mouth, no intake gasp, so deep blooming it up god I can't choke it the music still pouring in a roughness I've never hit, watch it listen it listen it, can't see I CAN'T SEE. Air floating through the blood to the girl red hitting the blind spot I can feel others turning, the silence of the crowd, can't see. (CTS, 131-32).

Thus the instrument and the player become one. Diffusing himself, rather melting himself, blowing out himself through the cornet, his body, nerves, veins, sperms and aches of the soul find release. The whole scene is so built; the pitch of the music is raised to such sublimity that everybody is purged of his or her sin. The pathos of the jazz turns lyrics into hymns. The dancing girl appears to be a nymph and Buddy becomes the mystic piper. The appearance of a dancing woman who reminds him of both Nora and Robin releases his latent insanity, which is manifested in a stroke that he suffers while playing his cornet.
Bolden spends the rest of his life in an asylum in nearby Jackson, returning to New Orleans only for burial in 1931. It is devastating to watch him confined, suffer abuse and gradually slip into madness.

A blues musician, Bolden was unsurpassed in his time as his work influenced the music of several later generations. However in his time he struggled to transcend life’s miseries even as he frequently lapsed into despair, loneliness, and subsequently, madness. And he is terrified of death, a subject he returns to often in *The Cricket*, a scandal sheet he edits and publishes. In this novel, Ondaatje touches the issue of infidelity with gossamer perfection and adds new dimensions and understanding to it. He raises pathos to such poetic heights that his genius matches with that of the great Greeks and does not falter when compared with greatest Bard of Elizabethan era- Shakespeare. There are no kings, no queens and no princes. There is nothing halo about the mega character. Neither there are gods nor ghosts to guide the hero. However, there is wisdom of the blood feeling on the hair tips and a wild passion that guides. The milieu depicted in the novel is lewd and lascivious. As he writes, “By the end of Nineteenth century, the Storyville district of New Orleans had some 2000 prostitutes, 70 professional gamblers, and 30 piano players.” (*CTS*,3). But it had only one man who played the cornet like Buddy Bolden - he who cut hair by day at N. Joseph's Shaving Parlor, and at night played jazz, unleashing an unforgettable wildness and passion in crowded rooms.

The world that Ondaatje portrays is inhabited by people living at the margins of society; pimps, whores, barber, musicians playing in bars, etc. Through such a portrayal, he recreates the exciting world of jazz, as he describes how whores lay naked on the stage amidst a rendering of wild, loud and vibrant music-- sensuous and passionate in the
background. There is no talk of morality or other rules governing ‘civilized society’. Ondaatje takes us to the places where there are over 100 prostitutes from “pre-puberty to their seventies.” \(CTS,2\). Music players are barbers. It is a dead crowd where money is the most living thing. They are neither Titans nor war wrecks or winners, but blacks pulsating with vigor, strength, passion and promiscuity. Ondaatje thus gives a presence to people who have always been deprived from occupying the historical space.

The novel is explicitly about Bolden’s identity as expressed in his music, but implicitly, it is about his identity as a black man whose musical insistence on freedom is thwarted by worsening racism in New Orleans at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet as Ondaatje observes, many interpreted Bolden’s subsequent “crack-up as a morality tale of a talent that debauched itself…” \(CTS,7\). Ondaatje portrays Bolden, an American of African ancestry as a tragic artist, a man whose musical genius isolates him from friends and family and eventually leads to his insanity. The black-white racial conflict however does not become the focus of the novel. Rather structured like jazz music, the novel presents a fragmented, multi-voiced, episodic narrative that draws even an unwilling reader into its passion.

Inspired by actual events, the book makes use of the jazz archives at New Orleans’ Tulane University for portions of past interviews held with those who knew Bolden personally as well as those who only knew jazz personally. Another factual element Ondaatje uses is lists, lists of such things as brass bands, Bolden’s songs, and suburbs of New Orleans. He also uses time lines to establish the sequence of events that isn’t always so easy to follow on account of flashbacks and changes in narration. Ondaatje uses these facts to integrate the reader into some common knowledge of the people in the setting and
to serve as a foundation for his fictional extensions of the story. This novel flows in poetic form reoccurring patterns of images as representing the themes of an actual jazz piece, the kind of music Bolden played and tried to grasp into his understanding. As another interesting technique, Ondaatje brings his poetic experience into the book, which is his first full-length work of prose, by including two poems. Just as jazz uses improvisation on a single musical theme, “Train Song” and “Nora’s song” use repetition and variations of a particular phrase. Here’s “Train Song,” for example:

\[
\text{Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like sky. Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like sky. Passing wet chicory lies like the sky, like the sky like the sky like the sky passing wet chicory passing wet chicory lies. (CTS,82).}
\]

Ondaatje repeats this line later in the book in a prose passage, clarifying what the poem refers to. Also, for the portions of the book when Bolden is speaking in first person, Ondaatje develops a language that seems to create jazz with words. This language is most evident and powerful at the climax of the book when Bolden’s frantic music, inspired by the movement of a dancer, is reflected in his thoughts, “I speed again and she speeds tired again, a river of sweat to her waist her head and hair back bending back to me…my heart is at my throat hitting slow pure notes into the shimmy dance of victory, hair toss victory, a local strut, eyes meeting sweat down her chin arms out in a final exercise of pain.”(CTS,131).

Jon Saklofske rightly observes, “Ondaatje rescues Buddy Bolden from obscurity, elevating and complicating his memory, the liberties the author takes with his subject to achieve this re-presentation…”(Saklofske,73). Ondaatje blends the musician's largely forgotten history with a self-conscious and largely fictional synthesis of memory and
imagination to recreate jazz musician. The liberties Ondaatje takes in "Coming Through Slaughter" with his subject to achieve this re-presentation and the ownership of the portrait that results, exposes this type of authorial activity as a problematic appropriation. As a collector, Ondaatje becomes the owner and an essential part of this transformed and personalized image of Bolden. Steven Totosy Zepetnek in Introduction of his book comments, “Saklofske rightly argues that Ondaatje preserves Bolden's presence, actively confronts historical exclusivity, and interrupts his own authority over his subject. Although his interaction with actual historical figures decreases with successive novels, Ondaatje's personal encounter with the impersonal machine of history continues, asserting itself repeatedly as a successful strategy against destructiveness or authoritative exclusion.” (Zepetnek, 4).

Ondaatje tells of Buddy Bolden's descent into his own hell, unwittingly or self-created, we do not know, but, in the process generating a level of art and beauty unsurpassed in the postmodern era. It is a story of despair, madness, loneliness, of the viciousness of life affecting high art, of art struggling to transcend life's miseries, not always successfully, but ultimately a tale of aching lyricism. Ondaatje's language is innovative and appropriate and his strong theme is rich with universal implications. Ondaatje uses technique of Repetition with regards to the title. Twice in the book, Ondaatje includes references to a town north of Baton Rouge called Slaughter, through which Buddy passes twice. The most concrete theme is the idea of the setting as slaughter. The acceptance of promiscuity is a major cause of conflict and downfall. Ondaatje includes a description of "the mattress whores" who have been kicked out of Storyville for showing evidence of having sexually transmitted diseases. They are literally rotten. Promiscuity
also seems to rot Bolden. By the time he has had his gratuitous fun in Storyville, married Nora, abandoned Nora, and had an affair with another woman, Bolden has lost his passion for jazz and is obsessed with sex. “I desire every woman I remember” (CTS,99), he says while he is isolated outside New Orleans.

Ondaatje thus explores the connection between creative talent and self-destruction. He however does not try to answer any questions for his readers. He gives the facts, filling in where needed, and lets the reader decide what to think. After Bolden's return to New Orleans, he is driven into deeper madness than before until he eventually experiences a climactic breaking point during a parade. Some say it was the result of "trying to play the devil's music and hymns at the same time." Others say it was from too many general excesses. Whatever the cause, Ondaatje makes it clear that, for Bolden living in New Orleans in the early 20th century, the road to anonymity was much more difficult than the road to fame.

To sum up, Ondaatje attempts to retrieve the story of Buddy Bolden which lies hidden beneath layers of time. He successfully fills the gaps as he draws as much from history, as from memory, re-mixing facts with fiction, reality with imagination, even reinventing the self of Bolden by mixing him with what he terms in the postscript as ‘personal pieces of friends and fathers.’ As Ondaatje rewrites the legend of Bolden’s tragic life, he also reflects upon what Lee Spinks succinctly describes as, “both the relationship between art and life and the social and political forces that determined the emergence of the New South.”(Spinks, 8). The novel ends on an ambivalent note where the story of Bolden is concerned, Ondaatje however successfully recreates the time and the unforgettable image of a Jazz artist, images that stay on with the reader. In the novel thus,
Ondaatje grapples with the intertwined notions of history, memory and identity portraying how memory affects history, to preserve, as also to distort. Identity as such has to be retrieved, reinvented and restructured from the obscure and impersonal discourse of history. The novel however leaves that task to the readers.

To conclude, Ondaatje thus emerges as a significant transnational writer who explores multiply located identities. Ondaatje frames the stories around actual historical events, yet at the same time his aim is to uncover the unwritten, hidden, ignored histories of the marginal characters. He refashions fragments of the past into a deeply personal narrative of affiliation and belonging. He breaks from conventional histories and writes historical narratives of individual characters. His shifting perspective helps accommodate individuals’ history and identity. He not only records and organizes the narratives of the past but also becomes the subject of it. His novels are self reflexive constantly drawing from his own experiences of life. As a transcultural writer, he is extremely sensitive towards the process of negotiations and compromises through cultural interactions. Ondaatje does not show his dislocated, decentered characters at odds with the world around. Rather these emerge as stronger individuals ultimately able to deal with whatever life lays out for them.

Ondaatje’s optimistic and positive approach indicates a new direction offering new solutions to the issues of identity. Thus Ondaatje attempts to create a narrative space where many stories/histories are projected from marginal perspective thereby reclaiming their sensibilities. Ondaatje adds to the discourse as he challenges and revises the already narrated one to incorporate the other histories. While doing so he does not ignore or silence the conflicting issues which invariably surround attempts to reconstitute identity, an idea
that he further explores in his next works *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) and *Divisadero* (2007) taken up for study in the next chapter.
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