Chapter  V

Migrant Duality and Multicultural Resonance

We are both doomed and blessed, to be
suspended between two worlds, always looking
back, but with two gorgeous places to inhabit, in
our imaginations or our hearts.

- Anita Rau Badami (qtd. in Paranjape, para 1)

Culture in ordinary parlance means a way of life and social expression. In other
words, culture is the way by which one makes sense of the world. But, after the
emergence of Cultural Studies as a separate discipline, the term ‘culture’ has
academically become a contested term. Cultural Studies is essentially interdisciplinary
in character and “cuts across diverse social and political interests and addresses many
of the struggles within the society. It is politically engaged and it questions the
inequalities within power structures and seeks to discover models for restructuring
relationship” (Prabahar 26).

According to Foucault, Cultural Studies is a discursive formation, and its central
arguments are rooted in poststructural and postmodern idioms. “It is a political
epistemology which considers the production of knowledge a political practice and
asserts that knowledge is never a neutral or objective phenomenon but a matter of
positionality of the place from which one perceives and speaks” (Prabahar 24).
A considerable focus of cultural studies is centred on questions of representation, that
is, how reality is constructed and represented. The postmodern representations of
reality involve positionality. The perceptions of reality involve signification, difference
in language, sex, gender, identity, ethnicity, multiculturalism and antiracism in immigrant society. The postcolonial world is, invariably, multicultural and the people invariably experience the cultural differences.

All Canadians, including the Native People, can trace their origins to an immigrant past. Immigration has played and continues to play a key role in shaping the character of Canadian society. Although only a minority of Canadians have first-hand experience of immigration, all Canadians have a parent, grandparent or a relative who came to Canada as a stranger to a strange land. All Canadians share an immigrant past and so it could be said that there would be no Canada without immigration. Centuries before the coming of the first European settlers, ancestors of Canada’s Native People migrated across a frozen icepack linking Asia to North America. Over many centuries they spread across the continent, forming a rich tapestry of cultural and linguistic groupings. Irina Kovalenko in a web article “Multiculturalism in Canada” notes:

Approximately 500 years ago, Europeans arrived in what would eventually become Canada. The French colonists came first and settled along the St. Lawrence River and its tributaries. They were followed by settlers from Britain who gradually established competing colonial outposts in the Maritime Provinces. The 18th century victory of British arms at Quebec, followed by the British defeat in the American Revolution sent Loyalists northward to British North America (Canada) in search of new homes and virgin pastures. (1)

At the dawn of the twentieth century, hundreds of American farmers moved northward into the Canadian prairies in search of farm lands. During the same period,
people from other countries including Egypt, China and India were also recruited by the Canadian immigration agents in Canada’s expanding lumber, mining, railway, manufacturing and construction industries. But whether they settled permanently or not, each migrant played a role in the building up of modern Canada. Prior to World War II, Canada was already the home to people belonging to diverse cultural backgrounds. But, in the post World War II period, the movement of the coloured migrants was restricted to Canada. Canada and North America in general were populated mainly by people of the western European culture and tradition. The others who followed them were often considered “foreigners” because of the difference in race, colour, religion, or customs.

Though, coloured immigrants were permitted into Canada because of the labour requirement, especially to farm the Prairies, work in forests, factories and mines, and to build the country, racial fears surfaced gradually. Many whites feared that an influx of strange people, speaking strange languages, could not assimilate into the Canadian society. Some Anglo-Canadians believed that immigrants took away jobs. Anglo French-Canadians feared that immigrants whose growing numbers might tilt Quebec’s delicate French-English political and social balance in favour of non-French speakers.

As anti-immigrant sentiment spread, existing rules prohibiting Asian immigration were further tightened. With the end of World War II, the Canadian economy began a period of expansion. Fearing that the economy might stall, Canada lifted its restrictions on immigration to bring in tens of thousands of workers and their families from Europe and Asian countries. But the preference for people from Britain and Western Europe remained. However, unlike the earlier immigrants, most of those who came after World War II did not settle on farms or in remote mining and
lumbering towns. The majority settled in cities. Nor were they all labourers. Many were well-educated and trained professionals.

Consequently, immigrants and refugees from the developing world and from other non-European countries outnumbered European immigrants. As a result, visible minorities became an increasingly important part of the national fabric. The greater the diversity of the racial and cultural mix, the greater was the need for tolerance and openness in accepting one another as fellow Canadians.

Canada applauds itself as the first immigrant country to become thoroughly pluralistic because of its ethnically diverse population. Cornwall and Stodda in Global Multiculturalism: Comparative Perspectives on Ethnicity, Race and Nation writes: “according to official multiculturalism, no individual is forced to retain his or her culture, but all cultures are granted a universal right to celebrate and even to develop their particularities… immigrants are accepted for what they are and valorised for their differences” (323).

However, the actual situation is ambiguous and complex, and the earlier pride driving the country has altered drastically and rapidly over the past several decades. In contemporary Canada, critics of multiculturalism have emerged both from conservative and radical outlooks. Tony Bennet, Grossberg, Morris and Raymond Williams in New Key Words: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society point out that left-radical critics like Stratton and McLaren have found fault with multiculturalism because, “it allegedly depoliticises or aestheticises difference by emphasising the cosmetic celebration of cultural diversity, rather than the socially transformative struggle against racism or white supremacy” (227). Multiculturalism, for them, stands for a strategy of
containment of resistance and revolt rather than for a true desire for the elimination of racial/ethnic oppression. In a more postcolonial vein, the multicultural festivals organised by the government in areas with a high presence of migrant populations is often dismissed by cultural critics because of its folkloristic and consumerist nature.

*The Columbia Encyclopaedia, Sixth Edition* (2004) characterises multiculturalism or cultural pluralism as “a term describing the agreement, coexistence and negotiation of many cultures in a locality, without any one culture dominating the region” (Multiculturalism). Julian Wolfreys, Ruth Robbins and Kenneth Womack in *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* explain:

> [Multiculturalism] refers to the social and political movement and/or position that views difference between individuals and groups to be a potential venue of cultural strength and renewal; multiculturalism celebrates and explores different varieties of experience stemming from racial, ethnic, gender, sexual and/or class difference. (57)

Multiculturalism, as an order of the day, seeks to overcome racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination by making human differences acceptable to the largest number of people. It celebrates human diversity by willingly promoting cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences through legal and political means. Ideally, multiculturalism can be construed as a situation in which all the different cultural or racial groups in a society have equal rights and opportunities, and none is ignored or regarded as unimportant. But, in reality, multiculturalism signals a heightened awareness and concern with the increasingly problematic relationship between race,
ethnicity, and national identity. This also accounts for the reason why multiculturalism remains a contested concept even today despite its common circulation.

To understand the ways in which multiculturalism has become part of the Canadian imagination and identity, it is essential to grasp the historical experience out of which multiculturalism has emerged in Canada. Canada became the first country in the world to declare multiculturalism as an official state policy in 1971. The policy was codified in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, 1988 which affirmed the ethnic and racial diversity of the Canadian society as a fundamental feature. The bold step charted the path to a vibrant and evolving cultural mosaic premised on mutual respect for Canadians from diverse backgrounds and ancestry. Yet, the roots of multiculturalism in Canada can be traced to the country’s earliest three founding cultures - aboriginal, British and French. Soon many more ethnic groups from across the globe joined them, making Canada a pluralist society. Yet, the reality is that people of French or British origin alone do not constitute the largest segment of Canadian society. Indeed, the majority of the people in all the provinces and territories west of Ontario are of non-British and non-French origin, making multiculturalism a touchstone of the Canadian national identity and a point of pride for all Canadians.

However, the term multiculturalism is not just used to describe the reality of the co-existence of the Canadian population of diverse origins together. It also refers to a social value as practised in Canada that regards pluralism as a positive aspect of Canadian way of life worth preserving. Accordingly, a multicultural Canada is accepted as a country in which the norms of civic behaviour and the modes of social interaction are respectful, even supportive, of ethno-cultural and ethno-racial pluralism. In this way, the idea of multiculturalism envisions a society characterised by inter-ethnic and
inter-racial harmony, ethnic group cohesion and respect for cultural differences. Rather, multiculturalism can be realised when individuals and communities are given space to define their cultural identities in an atmosphere of respect for the right of others to do likewise.

It must also be noted that the term multiculturalism is no longer unique to Canada. It is being applied to similar phenomena in other countries, including those of Western Europe, Australia, and the United States. In recent years, for example, Harold Troper in a web article “Multiculturalism as a Social Ideal and as Public Policy” writes:

Americans have come to use the term to describe a particular social and political configuration of interest groups including women, the differentially-abled, gays, and the economically disadvantaged, in addition to the ethnic and racial communities who fight to redress the power imbalance in the United States. (para 3)

While all these groups are also part of the Canadian social mosaic, in this country multiculturalism remains most closely associated with ethnic or racial phenomena.

Situated on such a historical grounding, the chapter *Migrant Duality Multicultural Resonance* seeks to identify and map out the broad multiculturalistic and diasporic contours apparent in Michael Ondaatje’s writings using cultural and postcolonial literary paradigms. Besides addressing issues like racial and cultural hybridity, this chapter also deals with Ondaatje’s views concerning migration, relocation, identity, nostalgia, hybridity and transculturalism.
Michael Ondaatje hails from the Burgher community, a Creole in Sri Lanka similar to the Anglo-Indian community, which constitutes a tiny fraction of the Sri Lankan population. The Burghers are descendant of the people of mixed European origin, especially of Portuguese and Sri Lankan. Burghers are mostly Christian, the majority being Catholics or Presbyterians. The Burgher community was already English-speaking and has few barriers to their integration into mainstream Canadian economic life. They are the westernised ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. Caught between the crossfire of the Sri Lankan ethnic strife, most of the Burghers have migrated from Sri Lanka to various European destinations. Ondaatje too, had initially settled in England with his mother but, has finally migrated to Canada and lives there now.

In the context of globalisation, which triggers large-scale internal dislocations and cross-border migrations, subjects like homogenous national, ethnic or cultural identities have yielded place to hybrid, multicultural or transnational identities. Moreover, Derrida’s concept of difference or the instability of meaning in language, leads one to think of culture, identities and identification as always a place of borders and hybridity rather than fixed stable entities. As Homi Bhabha in “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Difference” argues that “Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other” (156). Pieterse in, “Globalization as Hybridization”, argues that “Introverted cultures, which have been prominent over a long stretch of history and which overshadowed translocal culture, are receding into the background, while translocal culture made up of diverse elements is coming to the foreground” (62). It is in this context the concept of diaspora comes into play. As Avtar Brah opinions in Cartography of Diaspora: Contesting Identities, “Diasporic identities
are [today] at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing “imagined” and “encountered” communities” (183). He further adds:

Diaspora space as a conceptual category is ‘inhabited’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendents, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words … [t]he diaspora space is the site where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is a native. (209)

The concept of diaspora enables a person to think about identities in terms of contingency, indeterminacy and conflict. In other words, as Avtar Brah further says, “identities [are] in motion rather than absolutes of nature and culture. Routes rather than roots. Identity now means creolised, syncretised, and hybridized identity” (209).

The concept of hybridity also remains problematic in so far as it assumes or implies the meeting or mixing of completely separate and homogenous cultural spheres. Robert Young articulates in, “The Cultural Politics of Hybridity:”

Hybridity … implies a disruption and forcing together of any living things, grafting a vine or a rose on to a different stock, making difference into sameness. Hybridity is a making one of two distinct things…. Hybridization can also consist of the forcing of a single entity into two or more parts, a severing of a single object into two … thus turning difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the difference no longer simply the different” (158).
In this context, to think of South Asian Canadian identity is problematic because neither South Asian nor Canadian culture is bounded or homogenous. Each culture is already in a hybrid form, which is also divided along the lines of religion, class, gender, age, nationality, caste and so on. Hybridisation is a mixing of that which is already hybrid. Identities are not only hybrid but also multiple because articulations of subject positions are drawn from a variety of discourses and sites. Ondaatje’s identity is multifarious: a Sri Lankan, a Canadian, and Burgher with Tamil roots. Hence, his writings fall within multiple subject positions constituted by the criss-crossing of discourses of race, gender, age, nation and class.

In *Kid* and *Slaughter*, Ondaatje portrays the artistic biographies of two legendary but, marginal characters neglected by the colonial metanarratives – Billy, the American outlaw and Bolden, the legendary Jazz musician. Billy and Bolden are not historical novels, but texts that use historical characters. These characters exist on the periphery of the mainstream culture or outside the accepted moral and social boundaries of canonical law. Billy is the outlaw hero consumed by violence, while Bolden is the alienated and isolated artist unable to live within the structures of order and control.

In *Kid* and *Slaughter*, Ondaatje follows a postmodern polyphonic narrative method that blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. The story line of both these works is similar in that these novels record the struggle between the body and the mind and shows the increasing duality or instinct and consciousness in the characters. Ondaatje emotionally indentifies himself with Billy and Bolden. Like Billy, Ondaatje too is forced to struggle for his survival against all odds even at a younger age. In the
process of achieving artistic acclaim, Ondaatje too experiences, like Bolden, an emotional turmoil and psychological confusion as an outsider.

Ondaatje’s own life-story is apparent especially throughout *Slaughter*. Ondaatje’s selection of a suffering artist in Bolden for the artistic treatment suggests the author’s personal identification with the subject. Many of Bolden’s problems like modest celebrity, vanguardism and emotional anxiety are strikingly similar to the problems Ondaatje has encountered in his life. The identification between the narrator and the character become complete when the narrator, Ondaatje speaks: “When he went mad he was the same age as I am now (*Slaughter* 133). This self-reflecting experience is strikingly brought out when the author empathises with the character:

> The photograph moves and becomes a mirror. When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be. He comes into the room. Kneels in front of the mirror and sits on his heels. Begins to talk. Holds a blade between his first two fingers and cuts high into the cheek. (*Slaughter* 133)

Ondaatje, through his self-identification and re-creation of Bolden finds the legendary musician a recognisable mirror image of his own self-perception. Ondaatje associates his anxieties regarding the creative process with that of Bolden’s musical output that echoes his own life:
We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it. He tore apart the plot – see his music was immediately on top of his own life. Echoing. As if, when he was playing he was lost and hunting for the right accidental notes.... He would be describing something in 27 ways. There was pain and gentleness everything jammed into each other.  
(Slaughter 37)

Bolden, has been catapulted from the margins of the American society towards the centre of fame and success. Ondaatje also suffers a similar kind of pain and angst along his road to success. As victims of success, the palpable emotions of both Bolden and Ondaatje finally converge and coalesce. Ondaatje writes:

Why did my senses stop at you? There was the sentence, ‘Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade...’

What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body. (Slaughter 134)

Ondaatje’s treatment of issues and aspects concerning multiculturalism is vivid in Family, his personal memoir. Family echoes, Salman Rushdie’s Imaginary Homelands which can be read as a paradigm of the discourse of writers of the between-world condition. Immigrant writers, like Ondaatje experience a duality of mind. As claimed by Ondaatje, they are “born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere,
fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives” (*Patient* 188). Rushdie too analyses the theme of the homeland in the works of this breed of writers, who attempt to portray one’s land of origin:

> It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

Like Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje also in his fictional memoir, *Family* dwells on the complexity of a “homeland” – which is elusive and in a constant state of flux. Recognising that the distances of time and space distort facts, Ondaatje is careful not to fall into the trap of having to confirm his remembered experiences with objective realities. Ondaatje explains in *Family*: “While all the names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or ‘gesture’” (*Family* 206). He knows that what he actually attempts is a novel of memory and about memory, and his attempt is to recreate the era of his parents. But, any writer, who writes about his/her homeland from outside, as Rushdie claims in his *Imaginary Homelands* must necessarily “deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (11). Nonetheless, it is precisely the fragmentary nature of these memories and the partial explanations they offer that make them particularly evocative for the diasporic writer.
The attempt to build a novel about one’s homeland on the basis of memory has been both an irresistible challenge and a compelling necessity for many exiled or immigrant writers. Rocio G. Davis says in “Imaginary Homelands Revisited in Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family” immigrant writers encounter, “considerable obsession to set down, with or without the help of fiction, the collection of memories that form the writer’s idea of his homeland, perhaps in an attempt to reconcile oneself to both past and present” (267). This is the case with a great number of ethnic minority writers in Canada and in other countries. The Anglo-Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro, for instance, sets out to write the Japan he had not seen since the age of six, says, “I wanted to make it [homeland] safe, preserve it in a book before it faded away from memory altogether” (Ishiguro 76). Following this premise, it could be said that a narrative of identity rises out of circumstances of estrangement or loss, because what cannot be remembered must be narrated. The imagination fills in the gaps that cannot be remembered or is remembered incompletely. Ondaatje, too, as an expatriate writer undergoes a similar experience.

In a way, Ondaatje’s writing is an attempt to reclaim his lost past, even while experiencing a sense of in-between world condition. Ondaatje is neither native nor alien, neither settler nor expatriate, and yet, at the same time he is all of these. In a number of interviews in 1992 following the publication of Patient, Ondaatje clearly stated his affiliation with two very diverse countries – Canada and Sri Lanka. When quizzed by an interviewer for SBS TV, Australia whether he still feels he was “in a sense a Sri Lankan person”, he replied, “Yes, very much so . . . being Sri Lankan born and growing up there, I feel it’s half my life. Sri Lanka was my culture [but] Canada was the culture I adopted …so these two things are very important to me” (Ondaatje 2).
The question of “double identity” needs to be redefined at this point. Categorising Ondaatje simply as Canadian-Sri Lankan might force one to ignore two other important ethnic constituents of his genealogical identity: the Dutch and the Tamil. Hence, Ondaatje’s identity is a classic case of hybridised and hyphenated multiple identity. It is transnational and multicultural, displaced and fragmented.

Ondaatje’s *Family* is based on the memories of the author, who leaves his homeland, then under the colonial rule of the British. The departure was more for personal purposes than for political, social, or economic reasons. Ondaatje writes: “I would be travelling back to the family I had grown from – those relations from my parents’ generation who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words” (*Family* 22). Ondaatje lends his name and all his family history to characters with the same name, with an intention of journeying back home for the reconstruction of a lost past. It is a journey to a lost home. The novel may not qualify as an autobiography as the author-narrator suggests that the narrative is not only inaccurate but also consciously modified and reinvented.

Rosemary Marangoly George in her article “Home Countries: Narratives across Disciplines,” argues:

> Today, the primary connotation of “home” is of the private space from which the individual travels into the larger arenas of life and to which he or she returns at the end of the day. And, yet, also in larger geographical place where one belongs: country, city, village, community. Home is also the imagined location that can be more readily fixed in a mental landscape than actual geography. The term “home – country” suggests
the particular intersection of private and public and of individual and communal that is manifest in imagining a space as home. (11)

Similarly, Ondaatje in *Family* undertakes the trip to Sri Lanka, which makes it clear that the concept of home goes beyond the boundaries of a mere private aspect. His trip to Sri Lanka becomes an intricate weave of geographical as well as emotional dislocation, from place to time, from the public to the private, from motherland to fatherland, from fact to fantasy, and from autobiography to memory.

To a diasporic writer, home is a contested domain and mostly it is an imagined entity. The physical sense of discontinuity and dislocation creates a deep sense of loss of identity. John McLeod in his *Beginning Postcolonialism* observes that “this disjunction between past and present, between here and there makes ‘home’ seem a far-removed concept in time and space, available for return only through imagination” (211).

In migrating from one country to another, migrants inevitably become involved in the process of setting up home in a new land. But in the new land the migrants experience a sense of crisis as they are not fully accepted as natives, but only as aliens. Their actual home is seen to exist elsewhere, back across the border from where they hailed. Rushdie succinctly explains this experience: “It’s my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the minds of lost time” (9). This creates in the minds of the migrants a sense of living in an in-between land, a sense of neither here nor there. But even though there is loss in displacement, one need not be nostalgic in this loss. On the other hand, the displaced position of the migrant is a valuable experience because those migrants treasure a plural view of the world.
The migrant is in a better position than others to realise that all systems of knowledge, all views of the world, are never totalising, whole or pure. In the new historicist perspective, knowledge is always incomplete, muddled and hybrid. McLeod in his *Beginning Postcolonialism* stresses this idea:

To live as a migrant may well evoke the pain of loss and of not being firmly rooted in a secure place. But it is also to live in a world of immense possibility with the realization that new knowledges and ways of seeing can be constructed out of the myriad combinations of the ‘scraps’ which Rushdie describes – Knowledges which challenge the authority of older ideas of rootedness and fixity. (215). Such a migrant does not have a secure *roots* which fix him in place, in nation or an ethnic group; rather, he must continually plot for himself itinerant cultural *routes* which takes him imaginatively as well as physically, to many places and into contact with many different places. (215)

Homi Bhabha in his seminal book *Location of Culture* also comments on the condition of those who live border lives on the margins of different nations and in-between homelands. For Bhabha, living at the border, requires a new skill and the border is a place where conventional patterns of thought are disturbed by the possibility of movement. Bhabha defines it as an in-between site of transition:

The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor leaving behind the past … we find ourselves on the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present,
inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond.’ (1-2)

At the border, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion no longer remain separated as binary opposites. Instead, they commingle and conflict with each other. From this emerge new, shifting complex forms of representation that deny binary patterning.

*Family* marks the focussed attention of Michael Ondaatje's interest in issues like migration, hybridity, multiculturalism and displacement. It is visible in the host of expatriate characters he has portrayed and the issues he has discussed in his novels. In *Family*, Ondaatje travels back to map the most treasured and troubled places for the individual, the family and the nation. Accordingly, *Family* is an attempt by the ‘between-world’ writer, Ondaatje to revisit the histories of his homeland, his community, his family and his self.

The compulsive need that will take Ondaatje back to Sri Lanka springs from the realisation in his mid-thirties that he had “slipped past a childhood [he] had ignored and not understood” (*Family* 22). Not to know one’s family and not have a role in history is to be denied the very basis of identity. Hence the yearning springs in the author’s mind to establish an identity for himself in Sri Lanka and to recreate his family’s story. This involves looking back both at a history that began its process of formation three centuries ago and at the individuals who lived that history and constituted the family. Chelva Kanaganayakam in his article “The Anxiety of Being Postcolonial: ideology and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel,” comments:
The novel’s principal achievement lies in the manner in which it projects the claims of both “History” in the national sense and “history” in the private sense to express what is at once a profound personal quest and a statement about the country that has chosen to remain, in many ways, oblivious of the realities that edge its complacent vision of itself. (39)

Therefore, the task Ondaatje sets for himself is that of articulating both the complexities of a colonial inheritance and the intricacies of family connections. The interrelationship among the different national and cultural identities that formed and are present in Sri Lanka have created a complex social network. The interaction among the Tamils, Sinhalese, Burghers, Dutch and colonial English forged a Sri Lankan identity almost impossible to categorise. It was a society in which inter-marriages had caused everyone to be vaguely related, where cultural differences were indefinable, and in which “God alone knows” (Family 41) each one’s nationality. This intricate maze of social affiliations, charged with the colonial ethos and the native propensity for invention, is what Ondaatje must try to disentangle.

The “hybrid” nature of Family reflects the writer’s speculation on his mixed lineage and ancestry. The text personalises the history of his family in Sri Lanka and contextualises the life of the upper class Burgher community to which Ondaatje himself belongs. As Neluka Silva in his “‘Everyone was Vaguely Related’: Hybridity and the Politics of Race in Sri Lankan Literary Discourses in English” argues:

Family vignettes in Running in the Family functions as a microcosm for the world of the upper-class Burgher, whose relationship with the
colonizer, both through lineage and association during the colonial era enables the reader to understand the repercussions of this legacy in the aftermath of colonization. The representation of this social group (Burgher) serves another purpose: it enacts the traumas of nations, communities and individuals who have to grapple with the rupture of hitherto-accepted realities and identity in the transitional era of decolonization. The key events occurred during this historic juncture concerned with the dismantling of the colonial structure of power and hegemonic alliances. All these events combined in the formulation of individual and group identities. (28)

Likewise, the description of Ceylon as “the wife of many marriages” (Family 64) is more than a reference to the egregious effects of colonialism. It also reveals that some of the colonisers who settled in colonial Ceylon, “a pendant off the ear of India” (Family 63) stayed back and intermarried. The christening of Ceylon during the various stages of colonisation indicates the creolisation of the island nation. Ondaatje writes:

The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape, - Serendip, Ratnapida (“islands of gems”), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon – the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language. (64)
That Ceylon was seduced by many invaders and claimed power by force, religion, or language obviously refers to the vicious effects of the institution of colonialism. Ondaatje writes:

This pendant, [The Island] once its shape stood still, it became a mirror. It pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities, some of whom stayed and intermarried — my own ancestor arriving in 1600, a doctor who cured the residing governor’s daughter with a strange herb and was rewarded with land, a foreign wife, and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own.

Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language. (Family 64)

On a literal level, the larger political and economic insecurities impact upon the marital relationship of Ondaatje’s parents. This is particularly relevant to the inter-ethnic marriages, as reflected in the marriage of his parents. The ethnic hierarchies of the pre-independence period encroach on the workings of personal relationships, as witnessed in Ondaatje’s maternal grandmother, Lalla’s dismissal of the news of her daughter, Gratien’s engagement to a Tamil man, Mervyn. Ondaatje writes: “When my mother eventually announced her engagement to my father, Lalla turned to friends and said, “What do you think, darling, she’s going to marry an Ondaatje … she’s going to marry a Tamil!” (Family 118).

The ethnic superiority displayed by Lalla, Gratien’s mother has long-term ramifications. It undermines the relationship between Mervyn and Lalla. When Lalla laughs right through the wedding ceremony, it marks “the beginning of a war” (Family 199) between the mother-in-law and son-in-law. They proceed to provoke each
other in the most outlandish ways. These incidents, although, encoded in a comic vein, capture the irony that neither Mervyn nor Lalla has a claim to ethnic superiority and points to the futility of the larger contemporary reality, of a war on ethnic differences.

The marital relationships in the text are, for the most part, antagonistic. The overtones of disenchantment inscribed within the power politics of marriage are invested with a symbolic value. The representation of discord in the marriages here resonates with the novel’s sub-text: the instability of a beleaguered British colony. Indeed, the mentioning of Ondaatje’s grandmothers, especially Lalla, his paternal grandmother’s position after the death of her husband, as liberated portrays the euphoria that existed after the liberation of Sri Lanka. Both “my grandmothers lived cautiously, at least until their husbands died. Then they blossomed, especially Lalla who managed to persuade all those she met into chaos” (Family 41). This reflects the state of affairs in Sri Lanka, in the immediate post-independent scenario.

Ondaatje’s parents, Mervyn and Doris’s marriage is one of the most entertaining but poignant narratives in the text. Initially, the romantic element in this relationship is made almost mythic through the hyperbolic description of their courtship and wedding. The tenor of this description changes later when Ondaatje deals with the ensuing marital strife. Distinctions between reality and “acting” are frequently blurred by these two figures. In this context, Ondaatje publishes the only photograph in which he finds his parents together:
Though their histrionics are amusing at the beginning of their relationship, later the theoretical and hyperbolic strains work to conceal the intimate details of private trauma (Family 170).

The external rendition of the description of his parents’ “one-act plays” staged during his father’s intoxication, and subsequently his mother’s appearance in court for her divorce relies heavily on the theatrical. Doris, Ondaatje’s Portuguese mother responds to her husband, Mervyn Ondaatje’s alcoholism by drawing on “every play she had been in or had read” (Family 171) and employs it as her strategy of resistance. In Ondaatje’s narration of the following episode, the theatre functions on both the real and metaphoric levels:
It was she who instilled theatre in all of us. [. . .] Whenever my father would lapse into one of his alcoholic states, she would send the three older children (I would be asleep – too young, and oblivious) into my father’s room where by now he could hardly talk let alone argue. The three of them, well coached, would perform with tears streaming, “Daddy, don’t drink, daddy, if you love us. Don’t drink,” while my mother waited outside and listened. My father, I hope, too far gone to know the extent of the wars against him. These moments embarrassed my older brother and sister terribly; for days after they felt guilty and miserable. Gillian, the youngest of the three, threw herself with eagerness into these one-act plays and when they returned to the living room my mother would pat her on the back and say, “Well done, Gillian – you were by far the best.” (Family 70-71)

Underlying the comic vein is the consciousness among his older siblings that they are battling out their parents’ vendetta and this heightens the pathos of the moment. Ondaatje’s staging of this incident reveals the trauma of remembering.

Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan in his Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing writes that contemporary writers intend to “reexplore regions of the world that, although discovered, remain mysterious to us, or making strange those territories, and the values and attitude we ascribe to them, that we might imagine to be familiar” (xvii). This seems to be one of Ondaatje’s purposes in his journey back to Sri Lanka. Ceylon’s history is one aspect. Together with the narrative of the country’s history the narrator searches for his family’s roots and is excited when he finds family names registered in old documents and carved on church stones:
To kneel on the floor of a church and see your name chiselled in large letters so that it stretches from your fingertips to your elbow in some strange way removes vanity, eliminates the personal. It makes your own story a lyric. So the sound which came immediately out of my mouth as I half-gasped and called my sister spoke all that excitement of smallness, of being overpowered by stone. (*Family* 65-66)

His feelings towards his family had been one of shame for many years in his life back in London. He writes that he had some friends who played tennis and once they came back to London after participating in a tournament in Ceylon. The narrator confesses that he never returned their calls, for he believes his friends had found out “what a disgraceful family I had come from. Mummy had drummed this story into us about what we had all been through there. I had this image that Ondaatjes were absolute pariahs” (*Family* 177).

The way Ondaatje presents the multicultural ethos of his unusual family and their peculiar memories seems to placate part of his guilt for being away from his family and country for twenty five years. The guilt for never coming back to his father, for not giving his father and himself a chance to really know each other makes his behaviour comprehensible. Travelling back as an outsider, but looking for the moments and places that will transform him again into an insider, the narrator comes into contact with his family. This time he is empowered by distance and adulthood. The fact of growing up as a western subject also gives him a new perspective of who he is and this helps him reclaim his past. The narrator can finally justify why he never returned to his father and to his homeland. He reasons that the only way to stay sane and free from the weirdness of his family was by leaving and not looking back. Now, the journey to the
past restores his history and private memories and helps him come to terms with an eccentric family, and transforms this adventure into a process of restoration and repossession of his history and his past.

Most importantly, Ondaatje stitches together this image of fluidity with historical pieces of information – “reading torn 100-year-old newspaper clippings that come apart in your hands like wet sand, information tough as plastic dolls” (Family 69). The fractured perception he collects by travelling from place to place helps him further construct his identity. This perception can be explained through the postmodern idea that Rushdie holds in his Imaginary Homelands that the diasporic individuals like him do not comprehend things fully:

We are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death. (12)

Moreover, as an emigrant writer who writes from outside his homeland, Ondaatje tells his story and the country’s history mirroring each other. He pretends to be emotionally and psychologically detached from the facts and from his family’s stories to better understand them. He sits in a dark room and recollects the irretrievably lost broken fragments of his lost childhood:
But I do not turn on the light yet. I want this emptiness of a dark room where I listen and wait. There is nothing in this view that could not be a hundred years old that might not have been here when I left Ceylon at the age of eleven. My mother looks out of her Colombo window thinking of divorce, my father wakes after three days of alcohol, his body hardly able to move from the stiffness in muscles he cannot remember exerting. (203)

The historical facts as well as his personal stories come in waves like nationalities and languages did in the past. One comes to replace the other, but at the same time they interact with each other.

The journey Ondaatje takes to Sri Lanka is a journey to the past. This is a restorative process either to come to terms with a father he barely knew or to restore his origins through travelling back home. The journey back to his homeland therefore implies another deeper and more personal journey, not only for him but also to his other family members including his brother Christopher and his sister, Gillian. Hence Ondaatje’s journey into the past is both an individual as well as a “communal act” besides being partly real and partly “imagined”. The following passage from the section “Acknowledgements” make things clear:

A literary work is a communal act. And this book could not have been imagined, let alone conceived, without the help of many people.

The book is a composite of two return journeys to Sri Lanka, in 1978 and 1980. On each occasion I stayed for several months, travelling alone and then joined by my wife and children .... (Family 205)
Ondaatje’s accounts are organised as a collage of fragmentary narratives, which juxtapose the narrators past and the search for a father whom he had lost in childhood.

Ondaatje writes his story in the postcolonial context, and Pratt terms this memoir as “autoethnographic,” in his book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Autoethnographic text, Pratt further writes, is one in which,

the colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms. These texts are generally heterogeneous as they involve partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms [and customs] of the conqueror …the idioms appropriated and transformed are those of travel and exploration writing, merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous modes …addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker’s own group, bound to be received very differently by each. (7)

The narrator, in the postcolonial context, is the product of the interaction between generations of mixed cultures, who resided in the in-between cultures and constructed their voices in the margins. Ondaatje writes from a double perspective. Ondaatje is conscious of the duality, of being both “native” and “foreign”, the recognisable between-world position when he says: “I am the Foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner,” (*Family* 79). He may act as a colonial subject to create a fictional image of his country as if he were a foreigner, visiting and discovering the island’s beauty and miseries, or as a victim of colonisation who uses writing to try to articulate his identity and to reclaim a past he misses. He takes a journey into language, images, and tradition to accomplish his task. The narrator reclaims his past
by appropriating the English language to write to English readers and by portraying the Sri Lankan traditions and images to western readers. But, this past can never be fully reconstituted, but only partially that resembles the organisation of the text, constructed in fragments of reality and fiction.

Whereas emotion and proximity can blur his judgment, language can restore the past by writing his family history mixed with the history of his homeland with the necessary detachment. In the interview with Linda Hutcheon, Ondaatje remarks that, “I hadn't been back for a number of years and that gap allowed me a certain objectivity” (196). The expression “certain objectivity” refers to the distance Ondaatje took from his homeland, where the “certain objectivity” turns to be the new perspective in which one sees his past and home. Therefore, writing may accomplish the task of stitching the fragments together and of giving the seemingly chaotic tales and events some sort of order and credibility.

Barry Curtis points out in the article, “‘Getting There’: Travel, Time and Narrative,” “travel is conceived as a restorative process and restoration involves necessary regressions and returns” (203). Barry Curtis further observes:

The separation that precedes all journeys reprises the first separation from the mother and the psychological birth of the individual. It is possible that the experience of travel, what has been called the flow state of passage, may reprise a time of early childhood, when the temporal and the social were still integrated, when their mutual constraints were not understood or experienced. (204)
By restoring the image of a lost past and lost grandparents, Ondaatje also restores the chain that links him to a lost father as it “produces new insights and forge new connections” (204) between past scenes and experiences of old family members and the present, thus restoring and making possible the rebirth of the narrator.

*Skin* is the first of Ondaatje’s works to approximate to a conventional novel. It is also the first to engage a political theme explicitly. The novel deals with the role of immigrant workers excluded from the official history during the building of the city of Toronto. The political theme thus coincides with the postmodernist challenge to dominant narratives and with Ondaatje’s concern to reclaim untold stories. Ondaatje spent time at the city archives and with the resources of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, to establish the historical context of Canada and in particular Toronto in the 1920s and 1930s. Notable events and figures in the written record, like the Commissioner of Public Works, Harris and the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct, are described and juxtaposed with the untold stories and the oral narratives of the Macedonian migrant workers who were actually involved in the active construction of the giant structures.

However, in settler colonies like Canada protests against dominant political and economic structures are often complicated by a sense of collusion with the exploiting elite. In Ondaatje’s case, the experience of his Canadian cultural politics permeates his own sense of being a migrant and by the recognition of his family’s ambivalent relation to British imperial power and culture in Sri Lanka. His mother is an Occident and his father is an Orient. It is significant, therefore, that he chooses as his central protagonist a figure who experiences a conflictual sense of identity and loyalty. Patrick Lewis’s family had been homesteaders since the nineteenth century, and their lifestyle typified
the ascetic industriousness seen as defining national identity by the early Canadian historians (Patrick Lewis is Hana’s stepfather who dies of burns in Patient).

Despite being part of the dominant race and tradition, Patrick feels himself to be an alien. Like Ondaatje he sees himself both as a foreigner and a son of the soil. When he finds work as a construction worker on the viaduct, Patrick joins the ranks of the immigrant workers whom he had previously regarded as a mysterious other. He finds new forms of solidarity, based not on genealogical descent but on collaboration in labour and in socio-cultural association and activities. He befriends the Italian-Canadian thief, Caravaggio when the latter is a victim of racial attack, and he becomes a political revolutionary. However, Patrick’s personal relationships are shown to be potent forms of resisting capitalist economic interests. His conversation with Alice reveals this quality. He says: “I don’t believe the language of politics, but I’ll protect the friends I have. It’s all I can handle” (Skin 122).

Modern Canadian history has little to say concerning the immigrant experience because history is told by the class or race in power. As such, there is little one can discern about the lives of the ethnic groups from official textbooks and encyclopaedias. Ondaatje’s portrayal of the immigrant experience in his Skin reveals their actual struggles in early twentieth century Toronto and the effects of being anonymous in the annals of history.

Issues concerning migration abound throughout the novel, Skin. Ondaatje explores the textual, ideological, geopolitical and spatial boundaries as he investigates the multifarious and shifting positions occupied by the migrants. These include Nicholas Temelcoff’s harrowing passage from Macedonia to Canadian shores;
Patrick’s voyage from hinterland to metropolis, followed by repeated journeys between various peripheries and corresponding centres; Ambrose Small’s mysterious disappearance underground and subsequent calculated movements about the province; the equally strategic manoeuvres of Cato in his efforts to fortify workers union while avoiding the reprisals by company authorities; and Caravaggio’s numerous and clandestine odysseys.

Ondaatje’s own multiple cultural positions – as a postcolonial by birth and by naturalisation, as a male from a privileged Sri Lankan Burgher background, as a migrant, and as a Toronto writer working within the academic arena – place him in a most interesting situation from which he can address such issues. These multicultural positions also enable him to examine the implications of wearing a succession of skins. J. E. Chamberlin in a review of Ondaatje’s early poems entitled “Let There Be Commerce Between Us: the Poetry of Michael Ondaatje” observes:

Ondaatje is in a curious position as a poet, but a position that is close to that of other contemporary poets writing out of situations that define essentially colonial predicaments, where language or audience or the identity and role of the poet are indeterminate [ … ] Canada offers Ondaatje a geography, but no inheritance; Sri Lanka offers him a family history, but no traditions, no way of passing things on; the English language offers him both an inheritance and a history, but no time and place. (1)

Skin provides Ondaatje all these things at once. By referring to and reappropriating received stories, tradition and generic conventions, Ondaatje stakes claims to a cross-
cultural inheritance and pieces together an alternative literary tradition that answers his concerns as a migrant writer.

*Skin* offers insight into a multivalent development of radicalised writing, both in terms of Ondaatje's work and Canadian literature as a whole. Ondaatje in *Skin* critiques on nationalism and multiculturalism. The text focuses on the depiction of Toronto in terms of a complex history of shifting social spaces and the ethnic and cultural identities of the novel's two central characters, Patrick and Caravaggio. Commenting on Patrick's movement toward the centre from the periphery, Ondaatje writes,

Patrick Lewis arrived in the city of Toronto as if it were land after years at sea…. [A]t twenty-one, he had been drawn out from that small town like a piece of metal dropped under the vast arches of Union Station to begin his life once more. He owned nothing, had scarcely any money…. He was an immigrant to the city" (*Skin* 53).

For Patrick, “the searcher,” whose life and actions knit together the characters and plot of the novel, entering the city means arriving in modernity, in a space of contradiction, alienation and possibility:

Now, in the city, he was new even to himself. He saw his image in the glass of telephone booths. He ran his hands over the smooth pink marble pillars that reached into the rotunda. The train station was a palace, its niches and caverns an intimate city. He could be shaved, eat a meal, or have his shoes coloured (*Skin* 54).
In the station, Patrick notices “a man well-dressed with three suitcases, shouting out in another language” (Skin 54). Two days later, “[h]e 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” (Skin 54). The juxtaposition of these two migrants – Patrick and Nicholas - suggests both Patrick's reluctance to move into this spectacular new world and the importance of the city in his reconstruction of self. Sitting on a nearby bench and watching the “tides of movement,” Patrick feels the powerful “reverberations of trade” (Skin 54). When he speaks out his name, however, it becomes “lost in the high air of Union Station. No one turned. They were in the belly of a whale” (Skin 54). The use of the third person plural articulates an affinity between the Canadian born Patrick and this figure of the well-dressed alien both of whom transforms and is transformed by the city.

In “The Representation of “Race” in Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion”, Glen Lowry points out that in the city of Toronto, Patrick while searching for the lost millionaire, Ambrose Small, ultimately identifies himself with Toronto’s working-class communities. Glen Lowry observes that Patrick’s “identity develops in relation to a host of “other”, not “white” subjects - Greek, Macedonian, Russian, and Italian. His actions and the kindness for others, rather than his name or his country birth, become the determining factors in his self development. (64). Glen Lowry is also of the opinion that Ondaatje's concern about class difference or working-class “experience challenges the notions of Canadian identity as a racially neutral basis upon which a “just” multicultural society is built” (64).

Patrick's cultural displacement is negotiated rather than static. At times, his cultural background allows him access to spaces of privilege like the Muskoka Hotel
and Harris's office. However, in general Patrick moves through a complex social network in which cultural differences between “us” (Canadian) and “them” (foreign) are seen in terms of class as the labourers and the rich:

“I’ll tell you about the rich,” Alice would say. “The rich are always laughing. They keep saying the same things on their boats and lawns: *Isn’t this grand! We’re having a good time!* And whenever the rich get drunk and maudlin about humanity you have to listen for hours. But they keep you in the tunnels and stockyards. They do not toil or spin. Remember that . . . understand what they will always refuse to let go of. There are a hundred fences and lawns between the rich and you. You’ve got to know these things, Patrick, before you ever go near them - the way a dog before battling with cows rolls in the shit of the enemy.”

(*Skin*132)

Patrick is happiest amongst people with whom he shares little ethnic affinity. His personal growth is predicated in a trajectory away from his Anglo-Irish roots. Rather than the inculcation of a kind of parochial Englishness, it points toward a more extensive sense of cultural awareness and identity. Significantly, Cato’s letters teach Patrick the identity of the Finnish loggers with whom he shared his childhood landscape. In the city, as a worker, he learns that the separation between himself and the peripatetic loggers is more apparent than real. Listening to Alice and reading Hana’s archive, he deciphers the unacknowledged social networks, and fundamental material relations, that have, in part, structured his life.
Similarly, Alice Gull, the former nun who is rescued by Nicholas Temelcoff is another interesting personality in Ondaatje’s text. Patrick attempts to unravel the secrecy behind this mysterious character: “Alice came to him it seemed in a series of masks or painted faces,” (Skin 128). Alice’s reluctance to reveal her past identity or to commit to a future intensifies Patrick’s search for her. Her past includes that of her being a nun, and her relationship with labour leader, Cato and, “in the midst of his love for Alice...he watches her face...half expecting metamorphosis as they kiss” (Skin 153). Alice “gave nothing away of herself not because she held tight to an essential identity, but because she embraces impermanence” (Skin 137).

The migrants are in a constant state of flux and never certain of who they were, who they are, of who they will be. They cling to their communities while accepting Anglicised names and learning English from songs or films. The act of embracing or refusing an identity happens with simple name changes as well as with life-altering choices. The bodies of the migrants are considered essential signifiers in the negotiation of their identities and as a way of exploring the spaces in which they find themselves. Immigrants Nicholas Temelcoff and Caravaggio rely upon their sense of space to earn their livings, Temelcoff as a daredevil bridge-builder and Caravaggio as a thief. Patrick’s personality is read by Alice immediately through his movements: “He slides through company, she notices, as anonymously as possible,” and is “always comfortable in someone else's landscape” (Skin 77, 138). The dyers sacrifice their bodies for their survival, soaking in colour as they dye animal skins, risking tuberculosis, and destined to have the odour of their labour on their bodies for years to come. The spaces of physical geography are perhaps the most obviously important to the migrant, and Ondaatje differs in his chosen method of using specific spaces.
Ondaatje's area is Ontario, Canada, and he uses the place for specific detail, as a way of
telling the stories of the immigrants who laid the foundation for its growth. Ondaatje
though shows some affinity to apparent personal westernisation, the very fact that he
has chosen to write about immigrants is evidence enough of his own otherness.

Stuart Hall in his critique “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” provides two
definitions to the term cultural identity. First, he defines, cultural identity “in terms of
one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self,’ hiding inside the many other,
more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves,’ which people with a shared history or
ancestry hold in common” (224). The second definition of cultural identity is “a matter
of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being.’ It [cultural identity] belongs to the future as much as
to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history,
and culture” (236). Hall apparently prefers the second definition and asserts that, “like
everything which is historical, they [cultural identities] undergo constant
transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are
subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (236). Hence, as Hall
points out, identity is “unstable, metamorphic, and sometimes even
contradictory” (233) and not a fixed entity.

Ondaatje’s Patient, with its multidimensional perspective, questions the concept
of national identity and racial otherness. Set in a damaged Italian villa near Florence,
Patient portrays four different characters from diverse backgrounds dwelling in a
dilapidated villa at the end of the Second World War. The ruined structure now
functioning as a hospital, shelters one last casualty, an Englishman slowly dying of
burns received in an air crash over Libya. His body is charred beyond recognition and
he seems to have lost all his identity: “A man with no face. An ebony pool. All
identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid, that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin” (Patient 50). Hana, a young Canadian nurse, stays on devotedly, nursing him with morphine and foraged food. They are joined by David Caravaggio, a friend of Hana’s family from Toronto who is a professional thief turned military spy, and by Kirpal Singh, a Sikh soldier, charged with defusing bombs and mines in the area. For this quartet of traumatic characters, the villa becomes a sanctuary in which identities damaged or erased by the war can be remade.

All the characters in Patient are dislocated and displaced from their origin. They are war-damaged wanderers, twentieth-century versions of Ulysses. The time when the incidents in the novel occurs, 1945, is as Hana calls “a period of adjustment” (Patient 57), each one of them seems more comfortable without home, without possessions and without traditional kinds of attachments. Hana, for instance, prefers “to be nomadic in the house with her pallet or hammock, sleeping sometimes in the hall, depending on temperature or wind or light…. Some nights she opened doors and slept in rooms that had walls missing…. She was living like a vagrant” (Patient 14-15). She takes refuge in the ruined villa and feels safe amidst devastation. Freedom for her means days without routine, without rules, without limits. This state is reflected in the landscape that she has chosen to inhabit:

The Villa San Girolamo, built to protect inhabitants from the flesh of the devil, had the look of a besieged fortress, the limbs of most of the statures blown off during the first days of shelling. There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth. To Hana the wild
gardens were like further rooms. She worked along the edges of them aware always of unexploded mines. (*Patient* 45)

It is with a mixed sense of having survived a traumatic event, as well as an awareness of imminent danger in her semi-enclosed space, that she goes about performing her daily chores.

Another highlight of the text is the multiethnic and multicultural nature of the residents of the villa: Hana was born in Toronto, Kip in Lahore, Caravaggio was from Canada but was of Italian origin, the English patient has a Hungarian tag, although he actually belongs nowhere. Yet, they all serve His Majesty although none of them is British. Kip hails from Lahore in Punjab and his situation is particularly striking. While his brother is in jail for fighting against the British colonial power, Kip is helping the British to win a war. His job as a sapper is really to his liking but his relationship with the English is that of a stranger.

*Patient*, from another angle can be analysed as a story about trapped people – people who are trapped in their past casting its shadow on their present, and struggling to somehow possess a hold over life. Almasy is trapped in his past, relieving it constantly to escape the pain of the present. Hana too does not have the freedom of mind and is yet to overcome the loss of her lover, child and father in the war. She retreated from everybody around her except the child with whom she shares everything in her mind. She wanted to go home, but was unable to do so. Consequently, she opts for the next possible action – stepping outside the war and staying with a patient. “She hardly talked during the war. She needed an uncle, a member of the family. She needed
the father of the child.” (Patient 90). With grit and determination she finds solace in her “despairing saint” (Patient 3) the English patient.

Ondaatje has presented a picture of life pitted against death which is reflected in the setting of the Tuscan Villa. Mined and ruined, its surroundings are littered with death and devastation. In sharp contrast, the Villa itself is painted – each room with a different season, as if in celebration of life. Inside the Villa, Hana is brought back to life once again by the English patient in whose presence she “could turn away from being an adult” (Patient 54), and Caravaggio who brings back her past to her. Hana’s journey towards life completes with her passionate love for Kip. Though intimate, their passionate relationship is rather unsure and tentative. Kip does not allow himself “to be beholden to her, or her in him” (Patient 135). Yet, Kip, who remains a foreigner to others, is able to overcome his colonial hangover in his relationship with Hana, till the tragic occurrence of the dropping of atom bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Their passion for each other is suffused with a lyrical note, as the love they have known remains with them forever.

The four main characters – Hana, The English Patient, Kirpal Singh (Kip) and David Caravaggio - all experience different ups and downs during the war, although all of them share a common multicultural space at the Villa. All the four are living in an earthly refuge which is similar to a glass bowl. The image bears out one of the features of Ondaatje’s style that of building stories around images. The glass bowl is paralleled with the spider’s nest:

She notices where water spiders have nested beneath the upper bowl of the fountain, her face in the shade of its overhang. She likes to sit in
this cradle of stone, the smell of cool and dark hidden air emerging from the still empty spout near her, like air from a basement opened for the first time in late spring so the heat outside hangs in contrast

(Patient 60)

Nevertheless, it suggests that the villa becomes a sanctuary for the characters retreating from the world outside. Here, the stories of the different characters are rebuilt even while they interrogate themselves about identity and history.

Hana, the twenty-year-old Canadian nurse of mixed parentage has volunteered for war services and is posted in Italy. She leads a nomadic and anarchic existence in the Villa, where she seeks to escape from her roles both as woman and member of the allied army. The father of her unborn child has been killed and the news of her father’s death almost leads her to a nervous breakdown. Unable to face the prospect of bringing a child into such a world, she prefers an abortion. She takes up the responsibility of nursing the dying burnt figure partly as retribution of not serving her father when alive and partly as a means of achieving some semblance of inner peace to her troubled soul. Hana rebels against her identity, symbolically putting aside all the mirrors in the villa, “she has removed all mirrors and stacked them away in an empty room” (Patient 25) and cutting her own hair:

When [Hana] woke up, she picked up a pair of scissors out of the porcelain bowl, leaned over and began to cut her hair, not concerned with shape or length, just cutting it away – the irritation of its presence during the previous days still in her mind – when she had bent forward and her hair touched blood in a wound. (Patient 52)
This gesture on Hana’s part symbolically indicates her giving up her femininity at this stage in the text and retreating from the world outside to nurse the English patient. She renounces her perceived traditional roles in the society as daughter, lover and mother. In a text that questions the dominant discourses of colonial ideology, the empire can also be construed as a patriarchal institution which fails to respect the sensibilities of women, while at the same time the narration also shows a movement towards redefining the traditional roles and relationships of women in a post-World War II scenario.

At the same time, the characters of the English patient himself and Kirpal Singh, the Sikh sapper in the British army represent a cultural hybridity which rejects national borders, even though the ending of the novel sees the reaffirmation and the assertion of the nationalist identity. Kirpal Singh shows an alienation from his own family, familiar to Ondaatje’s life and works. Kip rejects his family’s traditions and in contrast with his more anti-colonial brother, joins the British army in England. Despite some initial feelings of exclusion, he finds a new family in the bomb disposal squad commanded by Lord Suffolk, who becomes a surrogate father. Rechristened Kip, he becomes a lover of things English and also imbibes the traditions and behaviours of the English. The death of Lord Suffolk and his assistant Miss Morden, removes the points of reference that offered him temporary stability in his life. He quits the bomb disposal squad and joins the sappers in the Italian campaign. Here he discovers Hana caring for her “despairing saint” (*Patient 3*). At first self-sufficient and introverted, Kip begins to re-establish bonds of relationship again through his love for Hana and his affection for the English patient. He feels integrated into a community once more and celebrates this
by organising a birthday dinner for Hana. Caravaggio and Hana find rows of light arranged for the occasion by Kip:

They still didn’t understand. Caravaggio bent over the flutter of lights.
They were snail shell filled with oil. He looked along the row of them; there must have been about forty.

‘Forty-five,’ Kip said, ‘the years so far of this century. Where I come from, we celebrate the age as well as ourselves.’ (Patient 283)

But the sense of community proves to be short lived. News of dropping the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki confirms to him the fundamental barriers between the West and the East, between the white and brown races. Abandoning the group at the villa, he rides on a motor bike, seemingly on a new quest. The novel’s epilogue shows him having re-established his identity as a Sikh, Kirpal Singh. He becomes a doctor serving the local community in a Punjab village.

Moreover, of all the characters in Patient, the one who feels more as an outsider is Kirpal Singh, the sapper from Punjab, India. Through Kip, Ondaatje comes closer to writing about the experience of the ethnic other. Kip’s ethnic origin, his Indian identity, is conspicuous. Through him Ondaatje raises issues of race and racial prejudice in a predominantly western culture. The novel emphasises Kip’s isolation and his dark skin repeatedly. Ondaatje describes Kip as “a black figure, the background radicalising the darkness of his skin, and his khaki uniform” (Patient 193) when he descends, down into the giant white chalk horse of Westbury, into the whiteness of the horse. Initially, he feels that his race is a negative factor in England. “Distanced from his family in the Punjab,” Kip was the “only Indian among the applicants” (Patient 199) for Lord
Suffolk’s experimental bomb squad. During the exam, he sensed that “he would be admitted easily if it were not for his race. He had come from a country where mathematics and mechanics were natural traits” (Patient 200). Though, he becomes one of the best sappers of his time, the white men do not accept him easily. People tend to ignore him, and he feels excluded because of his otherness: “It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world. He had built up defences of character against all that, trusting only those who befriended him” (Patient 209).

Kip, the dark-skinned man and the English patient are the protagonists of the novel. Black and brown skins are images that reoccur in the novel. The fact that the colour of one’s skin is linked to one’s identity is emphasized by association, as in this early description of the English patient: “A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid, that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin…There was nothing to recognize in him” (Patient 50).

Similarly, at the British base, the colour of the patient’s skin confounds his interrogators: “Everything about him was very English except for the fact that his skin was tarred black, a bogman from history among the interrogating officers” (Patient 102). Homi Bhabha in Location of Culture notes:

Skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as ‘common knowledge’ in a range of cultural, political and historical discourses, and
plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies. (112)

Another quality that permeates the text of *Patient* is the duality that exists about the fixity of identity. In her article “Trade and Power, Money and War: Rethinking Masculinity in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient,*” Susan Ellis announces that “[r]elationship is the key to identity through names” (28). The problems of naming in the novel resonate in the perception of identities, either by those who name or by those who are named. The motif of naming is appropriate as Ondaatje employs a cartographer as his protagonist. However, the process of naming is complex. Susan Ellis further observes:

Both Kip and the English patient have dual identities, two names – Kip/Kirpal Singh, and the English patient/Almasy respectively. Kip’s name may be known to the other three main protagonists, but it is used in the novel to address him only after Kip’s violent reaction of all things English in reaction to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (28)

Ondaatje’s *Patient* suggests that allowing oneself to be named, and the creation of a sense of self that goes with it, can be a political act of empowerment.

But, Almasy in the text prefers to lose his identity by refusing to be named or labelled. He constantly tries to erase his name and nationality in the novel. When Hana asks the patient in the beginning to identify himself:

Who are you?
I don’t know. You keep asking me.

You said you were English (*Patient* 5)
The identity of the patient is fabricated from the beginning of the story. He has deliberately invented a new identity only to escape from the old one. The new identity is not an identity at all. The story of the English patient is reconstructed in the novel through the fragments of his memories apart from the information supplemented by his interrogator Caravaggio. As Count Ladislaus de Almasy, he had joined a group of German, English, Hungarian and African explorers in the early 1930s searching for the lost oasis of Zerzura. In the process, gradually they became nationless. He says, “I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states.” Even his friend, “Madox died because of nations” (Patient 147). The desert had taught them an important lesson that it cannot be claimed because it is borderless or it defies any fixity of meaning. Hence he exclaims, “Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert” (Patient 148). The desert liberates Almasy from what he perceives as boundaries and burdens. As he admits, he “wanted to erase [his] name and the place [he] had come from” so that it becomes easy for him “to slip across borders, not to belong to any one, to any nation” (Patient 148).

Furthermore, the novel questions artificially erected national boundaries and the attendant phenomenon of crumbling national affiliations. In Patient the issue of identity and nationhood is explored through a number of related textual practices associated with postmodernism like intertextuality, the crossing of generic boundaries and the disruption of conventional narrative form. The image of the desert captures such displaced and eroded national identities that defy any precise definition. The desert eludes a definite border and it can be defined only in terms of its indefinability:

The desert could not be claimed or owned – it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred
shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and
treatise quilted Europe and the East. … All of us, even those with
European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the
clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into the
landscape. (Patient 148)

Caught in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of its disappearances and appearances,
folding and unfolding itself in diverse permutations, the desert refuses to be mapped.
It denies any single pattern of understanding imposed by outside observers or by those
cartographers. The desert has imparted a lesson to Almasy. He says: “I wanted to erase
my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the
desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation”
(Patient 148). The activity of creating desert maps therefore translates itself into the
imposition of artificial boundaries and fabricated identities. It is out of such an
uncharted territory, emerges people enjoying a multiple and multi-layered view that
fans out and spills across state boundaries.

The English patient or Count de Almasy is a personality standing at the
multicultural intersection embracing diversity. He is both English and Hungarian and
yet neither of the two. But as World War I approached, Almasy notes that they began to
betray personal loyalties for the sake of nationalistic rivalry. It was then the aristocratic
English newlywed cartographer couple, Geoffrey Clifton and Katharine Clifton joined
the group. Almasy after an initial animosity towards Katharine, soon developed an
intense adulterous passion for her. Katharine’s husband who is secretly tracking the
exploration for British intelligence discovers his wife’s infidelity. He nose dives the
private plane he is flying on Almasy and Katharine. The Cliftions perish in the process,
but Almasy escapes with fire burns that obliterate his physical identity. He is rescued by a group of nomads for whom the concept of nation or border is meaningless. “These were water people. Even today caravans look like a river, still, today it is water who is the stranger here” (Patient 20).

In an interview Ondaatje has said of The English Patient, “There are a lot of international bastards roaming around the world today. That’s one of the book’s main stories. Those migrants don’t belong here, but want to belong here and find a new home” (Wachtel 260). Clearly, displacement and exile are core experiences which the novel seeks to explore. The English patient announces in the novel: “Kip and I are both international bastards – born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives” (Patient 188). The group that gathers at the Villa San Girilamo are all exiles from their homeland.

The fourth member in the villa is the Italian-Canadian, Caravaggio, another character carried over from Ondaatje’s previous novel, Skin, where he was shown as a thief and a friend of Hana’s father. Recognising his brilliance as a thief, the British Intelligence employs him as spy working in Cairo. After some dashing escapades, he is captured by the Germans who amputate his thumps. Like the English patient who is obsessed with the failure of his relationship with Katharine and his failure to save her life, Caravaggio is haunted by the memories of his torture.

Therefore, in their own ways, all the individuals in the villa have endured physical and psychological wounds and as Ondaatje suggests, Patient “is a book about very tentative healing among a group of people. I think it is that most of all,” and the Villa “was an Eden, an escape, a cul-de-sac during the war and was where the healing

They are all victims of the violence of a war pursued for nationalistic ends; their complex heritage causes problems of identification and allegiance; their stories are linked by the theme of betrayal, which exemplifies a conflict between personal commitment to individual or group and the more abstract allegiance to nationhood and state.

(*Patient* 30)

The suffering that comes with war is inevitable and painful. When war occurs, life changes and it will not be the same again. The characters in *Patient* alter after the nightmare of the war. Almásy conceals his identity to live. Caravaggio suffers continuously as the memories of the amputation of his thumbs haunt him. It is a scar which will remain forever. These are but the physical sides which are less torturous than the deeper and lasting emotional wounds. For instance, Hana will forever remember the English patient’s stories of the Herodotus, and Kip, her lover during the war. The war also causes people to be suspicious of each other. The commander who chopped off Caravaggio’s thumbs represents the general fears of being betrayed. This incident indicates how heartless, cruel and wrong the whole war can become. When war occurs, both sides are wrong. Therefore, whose side a person is on is irrelevant, because war is fickle and unjustified. The most important thing for the characters is the friendship and the priceless bond of affinity they build among themselves.
It is in this context, love is shown to be the truest and most lasting of emotions during troubled times. Even though, love can be capricious and subjective in which no right or wrong can be defined there is no other option available. Amidst times of difficulty, Almásy and Katharine are able to develop a sensational relationship that is both romantic and inextricably complicated. In Kip and Hana’s case, love is born through simple things in life. Difficulties in life bring people’s communication and understanding of each other to a deeper level, because of the true self brought out during times of danger. For example, it is the desert that brings out the hidden feelings of love in Almásy and Katharine. These contrast with the couple avoiding each other during peace in the Villa they happen to stay in Cairo.

In *Patient*, though people are unwilling to involve themselves in the war, the fact is that it affects everyone. So even amidst calamity and misfortune, the characters still have to toil to restore peace, clear the mines even at the risk of getting killed, like Kip. But, the image of the Hiroshima bomb destroys the blank space in which they live, the fragile peace they try to construct. The sudden change in Kip occurs at the moment when he discovers his own colonial reality. Kip’s violent reaction gets manifested in his attempt to kill the English patient. Kip identifies the colonial power with the West, particularly with Britain. For the first time he shares with his brother the same vision of British colonial power:

My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. But, we, oh, we were easily impressed – by speeches and medals and your ceremonies. What have I been doing these
last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For this to happen? (Patient 303)

Ondaatje in Patient seems to promote a borderless world and advocates multiculturalism as a panacea in a world torn by war and violence. But, this transnationalism seems to crumble in the face of artificially constructed binary identities. Ondaatje’s hybrid ancestry and complex cultural backgrounds may be seen as catalysts frequently propelling literature of dislocation and displacement. His Ghost provides an examination of identity reflective of the cultural clashes that are an inevitable consequence with the interweaving of nationalities, histories, and border divisions. In his discussion in The Location of Culture, Homi Bhabha states:

The very concepts of homogenous national cultures … are in a profound process of redefinition … there is overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities. Contemporary Sri Lankan theatre represents the deadly conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese through allegorical references to State brutality in South Africa and Latin America. (7)

Bhabha’s work mirrors the cultural diaspora that is a result of the contemporary move towards multiculturalism. His reference to “imagined communities” echoes the title of Benedict Anderson's influential book of the same name, and opens up the possibility of “nation” and ‘nationalism” as being constructed modes of identification.

Ondaatje explores the notion of nationality as a construct and examines the roles played by syncretism and hybridity through the discourse of Ghost. Unlike Patient that challenges the traditional perceptions of Self and Other, Ghost is a novel that moves
beyond the interpretation as a postcolonial literature of resistance. It incorporates and transgresses boundaries in a way that invites interrogation from a transnational perspective. The central character of the novel, Anil Tissera, is a female forensic anthropologist: born in Sri Lanka and educated in the West. She returns to the country for the first time in fifteen years to investigate “unknown extrajudicial executions” (Ghost 18) on behalf of the United Nations in association with a local archaeologist Sarath Diyasena. Their discovery of a recently buried skeleton in an ancient burial ground points to a government killing, a fact that places them both in danger. But despite this Anil is determined to find the original identify of the skeleton she has nicknamed “Sailor.”

Closer examination of Ondaatje's construction of the identity of Anil Tissera raises a number of points: she is westernised; she has an adopted masculine name, which she “bought” for herself from her brother; she is a scientist and spokesperson for the United Nations - a combination of factors which render her the antithesis of Gayatri Spivak's subaltern woman. From a postcolonial perspective, Anil’s is a voice that not only breaks the silence previously imposed by an Imperialist discourse, but also speaks for those silenced by the neocolonialist ideology that Ondaatje exposes in his examination of the war in Sri Lanka. The language of transnationalism, which Ondaatje speaks through Anil, incorporates the contradictions and paradoxes that are displayed in human and cultural diversity.

In her book The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures, Sophia A. McClennen suggests:

Transnationalism renders the borders of a nation insignificant. People, goods and culture flow across borders, which become merely geographic
...and no longer culturally meaningful. There are no “Others” or “Aliens” and culture, goods and people are absent of national attachments. (24)

In the character of Anil Tissera, Ondaatje inscribes a cultural formation that could be described as postmodern. She transgresses the conventional notions of identity and boundaries of gender and position. Hers is, more accurately, a transnational perspective. Victoria Cook in the article, “Exploring Transnational identities in Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost” avers:

[Anil] does indeed cross and re-cross many ideological boundaries, but she does so as a migrant returning to her once colonial homeland. This is not to say that Anil is empty of any national identity at all, but rather that her multiculturalism demonstrates the possibility of a fundamental parity between various nationalist discourses, ascribing multivalency to each of the cultures she encounters. (7)

The examination of Ondaatje’s work from a transnational approach uncovers some of the clashes that occur between national cultures and the ambivalence inherent in a multicultural identity such as that of Anil’s.

Anil occupies a dislocated position, in terms of her name, her nationality and her family. In problematising notions of individual identity, Ondaatje explores the concept of self as something constructed, and yet whole and realisable. In other words, Ondaatje reveals that Anil’s transnational identity is continually changing and it is a mixture of a multicultural way of life, which incorporates, encompasses and contains various fragments in one unified being. Ondaatje in Ghost examines the way Anil’s
identity is constructed in terms of her name, language and culture. Robert Kroetsch in his treatise “No Name is My Name,” describes the problem of identity:

[Identity] is not so much that of knowing one's identity as it is that of how to relate that newly evolving identity to its inherited or ‘given’ names. And the first technique might be simply to hold those names in suspension, to let the identity speak itself out of a willed namelessness. (51)

Ondaatje moves beyond fixed expressions of identification in order to perceive identity in terms of a process of construction. Frank Schulze-Engler in his discourse “Changing Spaces: Globalisation, Migration, and the Post-Colonial Transition” speaks of, “a veritable maze of globalized spaces in-between - not between the ‘West’ and ‘the rest’, however, but between innumerable intertwined histories that … at one stage or another -- have all been caught up in modernity and yet have produced a unique reality of their own” (13).

In Ghost, Ondaatje focuses on the complications that arise from a multicultural reality. To Ondaatje identity – be it personal or public, individual or national - is always provisional and shifting. His works continually crosses and re-crosses the boundaries between real and fictional identification. For instance, as Anil follows her quest to discover the identity of Sailor, the skeleton of a murdered Sri Lankan man, and to solve the mystery surrounding his death, she struggles to identify her place in the country of her birth. She is remembered by the locals for her swimming prowess in her youth, a history that has been blurred by time for her. For example, as Anil arrives in the Archaeological Office in Sri Lanka, on a seven-week project to unearth human rights
violations, especially by the government, Mr. Sareth Diyasena asks her: “So – you are the swimmer!” and she retorts, “The swimming was a long time ago” (Ghost 16). Anil remembers incidents from her past that connects her to Sri Lanka and its people, uncovering aspects of her own history that reveal her sense of who she is and her place in the world.

Names and namelessness are central to Ondaatje’s concept of problematising identity. For instance, Ondaatje writes in the acknowledgements section of his semi-autobiographical work, Family, that the use of names “may give an air of authenticity” (Family 206). In other words, names have the power to distinguish, substantiate and confirm, and above all they confer identity and establish identification. To be named, therefore, is to belong and to be located. Rocio Davis comments in his “Imaginary Homelands Revisited in Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family,” that “not to know and not to belong to a family or not to have a role in history is to be denied the very basis of identity” (267). Ondaatje confronts this denial of identity when he examines the plight of the disappeared through the text of Ghost. Anil feels that by attempting to establish the identity of the skeleton Sailor and find the family to which he belongs, she will be locating all those who Sailor represents: “Who was this skeleton? … Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest” (Ghost 56). In this sense, to be nameless is indeed an existence without an identity. Sailor is representatives of all who cannot name themselves and who rely on others to locate them. Some of the implications of naming in relation to identity are foregrounded in Anil’s defiant act of self-naming. Anil was not the name given to her by her parents, but one that she acquired for herself from her brother:
She had been given two entirely inappropriate names and very early began to desire “Anil which was her brother’s unused second name. She had tried to buy it from him when she was twelve years old, offering to support him in all family arguments. He would not commit himself to the trade though he knew she wanted the name more than anything else. … Finally the siblings worked out a trade between them. …

After that she allowed no other first names on her passports or school reports or application forms. Later when she recalled her childhood, it was the hunger of not having that name and the joy of getting it that she remembered most. Everything about the name pleased her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its feminine air, even though it was considered a male name. Twenty years later she felt the same about it. She’d hunted down the desired name like a specific lover she had seen and wanted, tempted by nothing else along the way. (Ghost 67-68)

For Ondaatje, names and identities are not fixed entities, but cultural and ideological constructions. By choosing a new name for herself, Anil takes on a new identity. She becomes a stranger to her past self -- to the person she was before she became Anil. The name she was known by for the first twelve years of her life is not revealed. In fact, prior to becoming Anil, she remains un-identified. By missing a name, she resembles the nameless skeleton Sailor. In acquiring her name Anil ruptures the boundary between Self and Other. She does not merely take on a new mask or disguise, but is recreated, defining herself through the trade with her brother. It is significant that Anil does not choose a name at random. Rather, she desires one that she already has a relationship with, one that belongs both to her brother and to the grandfather she has
never known. Anil’s gesture is not only one that asserts her independence, but it is also a liberating and self-creating action that affirms her identification with her ancestry, and assimilates her origins into her new persona. Furthermore, it demonstrates a hybridity that is involved in the construction of identity, and is revealed through a transnational examination of this exploration of naming. From a transnational perspective Ondaatje constructs Anil’s personal identity as a figurative representation of nation, and as such individual identity is subject to the effects of transnationalism.

In the struggle to gain her chosen identity, Anil trades what she possesses, confirming that there is a price in the liberation from other into self-hood. However, the deal is negotiated and agreed by both parties – Anil and her brother. Anil’s brother receives “one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favour he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse” (*Ghost* 68).

The exploration of identity through the acquisition of a name has other complex elements of transgression. For example, there are indications of incest, and the challenge involved in the constructions of gender. Anil, after all, “was considered a male name” (*Ghost* 68) and reflects a masculine side to her identity that is revealed further in her choice of a career as a forensic scientist, one that is also seen as predominantly masculine. Anne McClintock suggests in her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* that in imperial terms naming is a “male prerogative” (26), and that in colonial discourse “the world is feminized and spatially spread for male exploration … explorers called unknown lands ‘virgin’ territory” (23-24). She points out that by “naming ‘new’ lands, male imperials mark them as their own” (29). As such, Ondaatje blurs the boundaries of gender in his
construction of the character of Anil Tissera. By naming herself, she claims the territory of her identity, her own state of self-hood, in what can be construed a neo-colonial and also a gendered, masculine action.

Anil abjures the position of Spivak’s gendered subaltern through her rejection of an imposed cultural identity and the traditional role of the colonial female. Instead she claims a gender construction that assumes both male and female traits, and is transnational in nature. Her individual state includes characteristics from areas that are traditionally constructed as either masculine or feminine. Thus, the concept of Anil's gendered self is one that is multiple, contradictory and fragmented in nature. In the novel, Anil makes it a point to “distinguish female and male traits as clearly as possible” (Ghost 137) in her work. She loves “being one of the boys” (Ghost 147) and yet also appreciates that being a woman makes her “better at dealing with calamity in professional work than men” (Ghost 137).

In terms of gender, Ondaatje bestows on Anil “the peculiar freedoms of ambiguity rather than the fixity of one identity” (McClintock 174). This is reflected in the fact that, in the business deal to secure the purchase of her name, Anil's behaviour is predominantly and stereotypically masculine, and yet part of the price she pays is a “sexual favour” that her brother demands. This act of moral deterioration on Anil's part serves to underline her subordinate female status prior to gaining her name, but it also reveals an ancient form of feminist resistance to patriarchal control: by bartering her sexual services for profit (her desired name), Anil gains a measure of economic power and independence. Ondaatje posits here the possibility of an incestuous relationship between brother and sister, one which may be usefully examined from the perspective
of transnationalism. Victoria Cook in “Exploring Transnational Identities in Anil’s Ghost” writes:

By making an incestuous act a prerequisite for the purchase of Anil's name, Ondaatje indicates that the origination of her transnationalism is the breaking of a taboo; to become transnational involves the transgression of the boundaries that differentiate between us and them, insider and outsider, national and international. (11)

Ramón Gutiérrez suggests in his “The Erotic Zone: Sexual Transgression on the U.S.-Mexican Border,” that to have American nationality one must either be “born into the nation (the order of nature)” or enter it “through a legal process (the order of law) and become citizens through a process called ‘naturalisation’. He confirms that “nature and law thus create citizens” (255). Ondaatje demonstrates that a transnational identity, such as that of Anil Tissera’s, is not created through either “nature” or “law but comes into being outside of the accepted order that is required for belonging to a single nationality. In order to gain transnational citizenship, Anil moves beyond the traditional modes of national identification. As a “Trans-national” then, Anil provides a figurative representation of the feminised nature of the land as an object of desire, the “earth mother” and in taking possession of a male name she also subsumes something of the patriarchal role: “she'd hunted down the desired name like a specific lover she had seen and wanted, tempted by nothing else along the way” (Ghost 68).

Anil’s brief, unsuccessful marriage to a Sri Lankan, Cullis while studying in England is a significant episode in this context. Her husband is a controlling and jealous character: “at first this presented itself as sexual jealousy, then she saw it as an
attempt to limit her research and studies. It was the first handcuff of marriage, and it almost buried her” (Ghost 144). Anil’s treatment of her marriage “as something illicit that deeply embarrassed her” (Ghost 144) is paralleled in her subjugation of her eastern cultural identity in favour of the west. However, Ondaatje highlights acculturation as being an evolutionary process, rather than a product, in Anil’s subsequent return to Sri Lanka. It is notable that Anil’s husband remains nameless throughout the narrative and after the marriage is over Anil “would never say his name out loud” (Ghost 144).

By refusing to name her husband, Anil erases him from the cartography of her life in an action reminiscent of the imperial map-makers that Ondaatje refers to in his mimetic reproduction of the National Atlas of Sri Lanka (Ghost 39). The extract from the Atlas concludes: “There are pages of isobars and altitudes. There are no city names. There are no river names. No depiction of human life” (Ghost 40-41). Here Ondaatje exposes the map as an usurpatative imperialist tool, as Renger points out in his “Cartography Historiography, and Identity in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient,” which may name “a territory into existence while simultaneously making the native population invisible” (112). The suggestive meaning is that naming, like mapping, is an act of “cognitive appropriation” that has “never been innocent” (4). As Jacobs in his article, “Exploring, Mapping and Naming in Postcolonial Fiction: Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient” underlines, “The effacement of Anil’s husband contrasts strongly with Anil’s desire to name the skeleton of the Sri Lankan victim that she calls Sailor. In the action of naming, in Anil’s emulation of imperial methods of control, Ondaatje demonstrates the construction of an individual’s transnational identity as being one of transgression, process, and fluidity” (7).
In conclusion, through *Ghost*, Ondaatje problematises notions of individual and national identity as being fixed and immutable, adopting instead a perspective that considers such boundaries as both flexible and permeable. It is possible to conclude that Ondaatje offers a tri-phasic model of the process of acculturation, as examined through the construction of Anil Tissera’s personal and cultural identity. Anil is initially dependent upon the cultural and individual identity given to her by her parents. However, she moves into an independent phase signalled by her desire for another name and her adoption of a different culture. Finally, Anil moves into the third phase of interdependency, when she returns to Sri Lanka developing a multicultural perspective that is transnational rather than global or universal in its construction.

Ondaatje’s *Divisadero* focuses primarily on the fragmented and the dislocated identity of people shaped by reminiscence both at the individual and the family level. It also focuses on the struggle of the self to come to terms with a personal past whose meaning always lies just beyond understanding. When quizzed by Mark Weisenmiller, a news channel correspondent about the primary themes that recur in his writings, especially in his recent book *Divisadero*, Ondaatje says, “We do live in an age of migration. In Toronto, eight out of ten people are here due to migration. So all of these things are something that takes place in our daily lives” (1).

*Divisadero* is a multi-layered narrative about the discordant demands of passion, family, loss, love, memory and the construction of identity. It begins with a harrowing familial violence on a farm in Petaluma in America and ends in Demu in France, at another time. That life can be analysed by the smallest details is central to *Divisadero*. As one of the principal narrator in the narrative, Anna paraphrases Lucien Freud, the fictitious French writer: “Everything is biographical. . . . What we make,
why it is made, how we draw a dog, who it is we are drawn to, why we cannot forget.
Everything is collage, even genetics’’ (Divisadero 16). It is especially about identity as Anna, the principal narrator in the novel remarks: ‘‘There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross’’ (Divisadero 16). The details of the past reappear in the present and the details of others reappear in ourselves.

Divisadero follows a web of interconnected characters and incidents. It begins with Anna, Claire and Coop, three makeshift siblings raised by a widowed farmer near Petaluma in California, in the 1970s. An unlikely romance soon leads to a traumatic act of violence that effectively shatters the fragile family. Anna and Coop go their separate ways, while Claire remains behind. From here on, these three characters begin to reinvent themselves. Anna becomes an academic at Berkeley University and her studies soon lead her to France. Coop, now Cooper, becomes a professional gambler and cardsharper working in Nevada before settling in Santa Maria. Claire works as a district attorney in San Francisco.

The novel examines the lives of these three near-siblings in fragmented pieces, shifting perspectives and leaving out long gaps of time that one gets only microscopic views of their lives since the violence that drove them apart. Ondaatje weaves back and forth between their lives, detailing the new loves, friends and acquaintances in each person’s orbit. Even after years of separation, the trio remains emotionally connected to one other and their shared history. As Anna nostalgically recollects:

With memory, with the reflection of an echo, a gate opens both ways.

We can circle time. A paragraph of an episode from another era will
haunt us in the night, as the words of a stranger can. The awareness of a flag fluttering noisily within its colour brings me into a sudden blizzard in Petaluma. Just as a folded map places you beside another geography. So I find the lives of Coop and my sister and my father everywhere ... as they perhaps still concern themselves with my absence, wherever they are. I don't know. It is the hunger, what we do not have, that holds us together. (*Divisadero* 268)

Transported to rural France and two decades later, Anna has “smuggled [herself] away” from her past and her “voice has become that of an orphan” (*Divisadero* 141). Like Hana in *Patient*, with her cropped hair and her noble but fractured heart, Anna also changes her name, loses her heart to another man, and returns to the safety of the past and the dead to find her stories. She decides to “plunder the past” (*Divisadero* 141) from the comforts of anonymity she experiences in a distant place. Because, according to Anna, “[t]here was nothing more assuring than a mask. Under the mask she could rewrite herself into any place, in any form” (*Divisadero* 142).

The questions of self-identity loom largest for Anna and Claire who “reflected each other, [and] competed with each other” (*Divisadero* 15). The adoptive sisters were born the same week and are near-twins. They are compared to the panels of a Japanese screen, autonomous, but reflecting different tones when placed together. Thus, it is only by defining “Claire” that “Anna” can exist. As Anna acknowledges, “In my story, the person I always begin with is Claire” (*Divisadero* 137). Even more than she knows, her self-identity is grounded in her relation to Claire. She is almost-Claire, and also not-Claire. Throughout their childhoods they cling onto their differences in a shared attempt to identify themselves from the other. Claire is the horsewoman and the one
with the limp, but Anna is a reader who always finds pleasure in reading a book. They stare at their photographs, searching for differences, watching how “one became more beautiful, or reclusive, one became more self-conscious, or anarchic” (Divisadero 17) as they grow into their “own version of ourselves” (Divisadero 18). It is clear that the girls constantly seek out these distinctions only because they have no internal sense of their separate identities.

Suddenly, events take a turn for the worse as Anna’s sexual rendezvous with Coop sets “fire to the rest of [her] life” (Divisadero 139). Consequently, Anna is forced to tear herself away from the fabric of sisterhood. She runs away from home and the sisters never see each other again. As an adult, Anna tells that she always waits for a telephone call from Claire or Coop, but slowly realises that she is the one who can contact her family but chooses not to. She feels the pangs of separation and the displacement from home, but chooses not to return, or rather she “knew already [she] would not be back” (Divisadero 140). Just as the stories of Anna, Claire, and Coop are inextricably entwined, so too are the novel’s three other narratives. Anna says:

It’s like a villanelle, this inclination of going back to events of our past, the way the villanelle’s form refuses to move forward in linear development, circling instead at those familiar moments of emotion.... For we live with those retrievals from childhood that coalesce and echo throughout our lives.... We live permanently in the recurrence of our stories, whatever story we tell. (Divisadero 136)

While living in the abandoned farmhouse of Segura, the fictitious writer in rural France, Anna uncovers details from nearly a century earlier that reflect her own
fragmented life and self. The parallels of Segura's world and her story become a novel within the novel. Thematically, Segura’s tale adds another layer of loneliness and alienation. Anna's relationship with Rafael, the gypsy is foregrounded in her familial drama, and Rafael's relationship with Segura and with his own family is an echo of the book's central characters. Thus, the stories of Rafael and his mother, Aria, Lucien Seguro and his childhood friend Maire-Naige reflect and become part of the sisters’ stories. As the same themes, words, and details reappear, they illuminate different characters and their fragmented lives. In the same way, *Divisadero* probes into the longing and a search of the human emotional landscapes.

Anna quotes Annie Dillard, an American writer talking about foetuses that are absorbed into the body of their twins in the womb, remaining forever a foetus locked inside the growing twin. She reflects: “And perhaps this is the story of twinship. I have smuggled myself away from who I was, and what I was. But am I the living twin in the story of our family? Or is it Claire? Who is the stilled one?” (*Divisadero* 141). This idea animates *Divisadero*. Within every story lie the embryos of other stories and the parallels between different stories help demonstrate this. Lucien Segura sees Rafael’s father as “almost like a mirror” to him, while the briefly narrated story of Segura’s observations of his own daughters echoes the relationship between Anna, Claire, and their own silent father. One family’s story is presented from the father’s viewpoint and the other from the daughters’, but they could have easily been reversed.

Ondaatje’s structure focuses the reader’s attention on the convergence between individual identities and a larger structure. The characters wonder endlessly where they fit into the narrative of their lives. For instance Anna self-interrogates, “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody
else...’ (*Divisadero* 147). Claire clearly doubts her own role when she meets Coop again as an adult. She has no idea in his mind whether “she was perhaps the heroine of the meeting” (*Divisadero* 158). The narrator continues, “we relive stories and see ourselves only as the watcher or listener, a drummer in the background keeping cadence” (*Divisadero* 158). Similarly, Coop, Lucien Segura, and Rafael also find themselves at the centre of stories they’d never known existed.

Despite its concern with issues of identity, *Divisadero* does not propose to address them from a Canadian or national point of view. Instead, its characters of different nationalities and ethnicities move freely between spaces in a narrative that covers parts of Canada, the United States and France. Its transnational character and multicultural perspective reinforces the idea that human experiences converge and coalesce cutting across national boundaries and time.

The novel collapses time and conventional narrative and employs Ondaatje’s usual method of mosaic which accurately reflects the puzzles and perplexities of life. His characters make unfortunate decisions but then, so do people in all walks of life. It is a bleak rendering of lives disrupted by brutality and loss. Coop falls, of course, for one of the sisters he is raised with. It happens to be Anna, the ‘true’ daughter, and while her blood-link to her father is the source of their love’s tragic outcome, the youthful desire that Ondaatje conjures up, gives the feeling that this was simply an unfortunate accident. Anna and Coop are discovered by her father, and Coop, who has escaped murder as a boy, almost falls victim as a young man to a physical assault in the casino. Anna saves her lover by nearly committing murder herself, then flees to become “the person formerly known as Anna,” (*Divisadero* 144) forever in shadow. Her past is hidden from everyone. It is this hiding that sets the rest of the book’s mechanism in
motion. Anna is, in truth, the orphan or at least, this is how she sees herself, in flight from her past. She laments: “Those who have an orphan’s sense of history love history. And my voice has become that of an orphan,” (*Divisadero* 141). She buries herself in archives, “where art meets life in secret,” (*Divisadero* 141). She discovers the work of a French writer, Lucien Segura, who wrote in Dému, in the Gers region of France, until one day he simply disappears: “His voice with the wound in it kept haunting me,” (*Divisadero* 143) which hardly seems surprising.

Claire intervenes and together they return to the farm of their youth to reconcile with their adoptive father and to reconstruct Coop’s imploded identity. Likewise, Segura too is older, trapped in an unhappy marriage and hopelessly haunted by Marie-Neige, his love. Segura literary fame offers no solace for his emotional scares. “He camouflaged his life. He seemed to them like a creature, who had slipped into a mistaken garden of celebrity” (*Divisadero* 222). And like Anna and Coop he seeks refuge to reclaim himself, sacrificing his identity and career as a respected poet to become invisible and write the “lesser” Claudile stories, each a helpless monument to his lost beloved, Marie-Neige.

The consummation of Segura and Marie-Neige's love comes as a brief respite from the raging World War I. Segura's final return to her is as heartbreaking as that of the helpless, destructive love between Almásy and Katharine Clifton in *Patient*. It is deeply romantic but vividly traumatic. Segura deliriously moves through a shattered French landscape back towards his beloved paramour, weakened by diphtheria. Perhaps all true desire is illicit, but it is a passion which tragically has already consumed itself.
*Divisadero*, in its melancholy and its joys, probes into the fragility of self-constructed identity. Repeatedly, characters mistake one for another. In his inflicted amnesia, Coop mistakes Claire for the lost Anna. In the strange, hallucinatory but exquisitely cruel postscript to their love, Marie-Neige mistakes the prodigal Segura for her absent husband. Divisadero Street is Anna’s address in San Francisco. She says: “I come from Divisadero Street. Divisadero, from the Spanish word for ‘division,’ the street that at one time was the dividing line between San Francisco and the fields of the Presidio. Or it might derive from the word divisor, meaning to gaze from a distance” (*Divisadero* 142). Anna realises, “I look into the distance for the people I have lost so I see them everywhere” (*Divisadero* 143). Ondaatje tenderly fights such loss, and again rescues these strangers from oblivion into history. He salvages these wounded mortals from their silent marginal lives providing them a voice, although a fragmented one.

At another level this is a story about orphans, and about events that drastically alter the landscape of family. Somehow after that traumatic incident, all the members of the family survive, but they exist now dislocated in four different locales, fleeing from the horror. Most of the characters are orphans of some kind. They either long for the dead mothers, adopted fathers, lost home, lost relationships or lost lives. Carmen Concilio and Richard J. Lane in their *Image Technologies in Canadian Literature: Narrative, Film and Photography* observe:

Past and present, place and history, individuals and events all mix and influence each other. Like Michael Ondaatje, when they write about what they have lost, or what they have left behind, their homelands/motherlands, they write elegies of homecoming with the voice of orphans not only of an almost-mother, but of history itself. (26)
Ondaatje through the characters in *Divisadero* reminisce at the past. The past cannot be erased. It will be remembered even though it is remembered only partially and in a fragmented state.

Name and identity is always synonymous in Ondaatje’s writings. In *Patient*, Count Almásy is fully conscious that Katharine will die because he has the wrong name, a name that sounds foreign and therefore suspicious to the British soldiers whom he asks for help. Anil, the forensic anthropologist who goes back to Sri Lanka to try and discover the truth about the mass murders of the civil war, had bought her name from her brother. In *Divisadero*, Anna speaks of “a ‘flock’ of Annas” (*Divisadero* 88); Coop himself has no first name, for Cooper was his surname. Moreover, all the card players, and card sharpers have nicknames, like “the Hippie,” or “the Gentile,” or even “the Brethren” by which they are known at the tables.

In *Divisadero*, the leitmotifs of masks take the reader to another core-concept in the novel that identity is constructed, fragmented and fluid. Georges Wage, who taught Collette, a French Writer who lived during the 1950s, instructs her, “That there was nothing more assuring than a mask. Under the mask she could rewrite herself into any place, in any form” (*Divisadero* 142). Characters like “the Thief,” and his wife do not have identifiable and identifying names:

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

And your name, then? Lucien asked.

I am not Roma, the husband said. […]

I cannot call you a thief all the time […] I need a name.

Augusta? Époque? Liébard? Any of those…

All right, Liébard it is. (Divisadero 175-7)

In the kitchen that Anna now inhabits, there are two photographs pinned up on the wall. One shows an elderly and content Segura coupled by a dark blur: “the only photographic capturing of Lucien’s friend Liébard, or Astolphe, who turned on the photographer with a surprising belligerence when he heard the shutter begin to slip into place, turning so quickly that he was able to dissolve his appearance” (Divisadero 188). This partly explains the sense of anonymity and obscurity that characterises the novel.

Each character in the novel is on the run from something, particularly a past life, a previous self, personal or collective memories. While on the run, Anna stops at Colonel Alensworth’s abandoned town which incidentally parallels to Hana’s life at the villa in Patient. In Divisadero, the Hippie lives in an old discarded plane in the no longer functional Jerico Army Base, and the card sharpers live an invisible existence to authorities and rivals, while their tricky hands must be invisible to the other card players, as well as to the eyes of cameras that survey the games in the casinos.

The central themes of the narrative, as the title Divisadero suggests are division and looking from afar. Many of the divisions are obvious: those between Anna, Coop, Claire, and their father; divisions between Coop and those who become his friends;
divisions in the story of Lucien Segura who leaves his wife and children to find a new home alone; and others besides. It is perhaps the most painful of all features of a broken, fallen world: relationships break down, families are ripped apart, people are injured and lose meaningful contact with others. Tony Watkins in a web article “Gazing Across Chasms” asserts:

We all know the heart-breaking agony of a division from someone we love which is, or looks set to be permanent. Even moving to another city can be painful because relationships are so integral to our nature as human beings. It’s why airports and train stations can be such emotional places: they resonate with separation and loss. Of course, we are often guilty of creating the divisions, through unbridled self-centredness, or through malice or anger (both usually an expression of the same thing). We may not care what pain we cause through our actions, but if we are full of regret we discover that healing divisions we have caused is costly and difficult. (para7)

There is a more important but less obvious division in this narrative. Anna especially suffers from this division. She is traumatised by the incident in her youth and her very sense of identity is fragile, vulnerable and uncertain. The phrase at the end of the epigram first page indicates this: “When my name was Anna.” Tony Watkins further observes:

Her name still is, but she feels no meaningful connection with the Anna of her youth. Then she knew who she was and her place in the world, and she could rely on those in her, albeit limited, life; now she is lost
and alone, trying to lose herself – or find herself – in the study of an obscure French writer. (para 8)

This questioning of her identity reoccurs often in text, prefigured by Coop confusing the two girls when he rescues them from an accident in the barn. The title of fifth chapter in part one of the novel expresses this loss of certain identity as “The person formerly known as Anna” (*Divisadero* 133).

The other key theme, of gazing at something from a distance, is related to the constant struggle of characters to see beyond their immediate circumstances. Locked in cycles of pain or escape, they are incapable of relating to anything outside. All they can do is to peer out from their fortifications with a sense of longing for the normality that others seem to have. Anna too looks from the distance of history at the life of Lucien Segura and she discovers in his story something that enables her to work on her own life.

Yet, Ondaatje fills the novel, *Divisadero* with numerous submerging and surfacing themes - orphanage, art, the natural world, human nature, isolation, self-denial, parentage, addiction, language, memory, violence, deformities, the complication of relationships between three people, and living through someone else’s life, whether it be through a book or archives. *Divisadero*, as a physical space, symbolises the place of Segura’s last and Anna’s current residence. In another sense, it is a human-made abstract derived from the Spanish word *divisor*, meaning “to look back at a distance” (*Divisadero* 142). Anna, the main narrator of the novel, *Divisadero* speculates that life is really a kaleidoscopic windmill that is always moving forward but going backward in fractured memory and history.
Divisadero can well be situated within the in-between cultures due to the multicultural perspective that it promotes. Ondaatje’s multicultural, un-nationalist, un-essentialist perspective is a core element of all his novels. In short, it is evident that Ondaatje by presenting the limitations of individuals in the host nation subscribes to nation without walls and a society without ethnic importance. To be precise, a search for one’s own subjectivity would ultimately lead one to understand the validity of multiculturalism. To be multicultural means one prides himself to be a part of ethnic group, yet realises the importance of other cultures too.