Chapter I

Introduction

Survival: The Core Symbol for Canada:

“Canada began as an obstacle observed the late Northrop Frye in 1965, blocking the way to the treasures of the East, to be explored only in the hope of finding a passage through it” (Riggan 222). Frye picked up after seventeen years by using the 1908 novel Canadian Born by Mrs. Humphry Ward. At roughly at the midpoint between Frye’s two statements came Margaret Atwood's classic analysis:

Every culture has a unifying symbol at its center. This symbol helps the people to come together and contribute to the common goal. The core symbol for Canada as it is depicted in numerous French and English Canadian literatures is Survival.

Our [Canada’s] central idea is one which generates, not the excitement and sense of adventure or danger which The Frontier holds out, not the smugness or sense of security, of everything in its place, which The Island can offer, but an almost intolerable anxiety. Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience - the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life (Atwood 220).
Multiculturalism in Canada:

The palette has become considerably more complex since the 1970s. “Fiction writers such as Richler, Gallant, Munro, Atwood, Laurence, and the late Davies, as well as Roy, Hebert, Blais, Theriault, and Maillet have continued to grow both technically and thematically to the point where such generalizations no longer hold entirely. . .”(229). The emergence of first-rate immigrant authors as Michael Ondaatje (Sri Lanka), Rohinton Mistry (India), Cyril Dabydeen (Guyana), M. G. Vassanji (Tanzania), Joy Kogawa (Japan), and Sergio Kokis (Brazil) as well as Native writers as Thomas King and Tomson Highway has made Canadian literature a truly multicultural (as opposed to formerly bicultural) entity, “at the same time declarifying even further the very nature and idea of a single Canadian literature and arguing instead for a multiconstituent set of Canadian literatures” (230).

What is Survival?

The meanings of the terms ‘survival’ and ‘cross-culturalism’ are given as follows. The Cambridge Dictionary explains the term ‘survival’ as “when a person, organization, etc. continues to live or exist.” The Oxford Dictionary gives the meaning as “the state or fact of continuing to live or exist, typically in spite of an accident, ordeal, or difficult circumstances.” The Merriam Webster gives the meaning as “the act or fact of living or continuing longer than another person or thing.”
Maggie Ann Bowers in her paper “Negotiating the Problem of Identity in “Multicultural” Canada: The Canadian Writing of Suniti Namjoshi and the Case for ‘Cross-culturalism’” states,

. . . the use of the term “cross-culturalism” by contemporary North American feminists such as Elizabeth Meese poses a radical change of approach, away from “multi-culturalism” towards a notion of cultural identity which assumes a complete equality based on mutual respect through the recognition of mutual influence (Bower 52).

What is Multiculturalism?

Bower explains the meaning of the term “cross-culturalism” as different from “multi-cultural” and “mosaic” as follows:

The term “mosaic” assumes the retention of differences between distinct cultures which together produce a whole yet varied cultural pattern. The term “multiculturalism,” likewise, carries the implication that each cultural group, while contributing to society, remains separate and distinct. So, “multi-culturalism” allows for those with privilege to abuse the notion of “difference” as a means to fix and stereotype cultural identity and imposes a hierarchy of value upon separate identifiable cultural groups. “Cross-culturalism” offers a preferable alternative as it dispenses with the notion of separate cultural groups by acknowledging the fluidity of cultural identity and the mutual influence of one cultural identity on another (Bower 52).
Significance of the study:

Survival is a universal theme and not confined to Canadian Literature alone. In the twenty-first century we encounter diverse experiences of survival and alienation, the major characters are drawn from varied classes, occupations and races. The struggle for a sense of rootedness amidst cross-culturalism where the entire world is considered to be a global village is prominent in the works of these two writers. The immigrant experience and the expatriate sensibility are highlighted.

Ondaatje and Mistry:

A parallel study is done among the authors who write on the same settings. For example Micheal Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* is compared to the Srilankan writer Sunit Namjoshi. There is a comparision made between Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and James A. Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific*. Mistry’s works are compared to the other Indian writers: Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* with Gita Mehta’s *Raj*. In the present study a parallel study between Michael Ondaatje and Rohinton Mistry, from different settings is made as a new venture.

Ondaatje is considered to be a versatile writer, but Mistry focuses on India. All of Mistry’s works have the setting of Mumbai highlighting the minority which is his Parsi community. Thereby his novel *A Fine Balance* which is more widespread by including a number of other communities is ideal for the issues related to casteism. It does not come under Dalit Literature and thereby gives the opinions about casteism from different class perspectives. The issues of racism are also discussed in his novel. Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient* includes characters from different nations under a larger setting of World
War II. Thereby his work is ideal in discussing the issues of racism which is not confined to a particular country but to the world.

World War II and Emergency in India:

The role of history is not to simply state facts when it is documented in the form of literature. History begins to be re-written when it is subjected to thought process. As it is said by new historicists “the word of the past replaces the world of the past”. History of the past does not remain static within that period of time; new perspectives are added with changing times and situations. A literature written during World War II and Internal Emergency in India sheds new light on the reader when it is placed in the present context. The problems and sufferings faced by the characters would be very relevant to today’s society. It may be widely different but not completely changed, for the root cause remains the same. The rich becoming richer and poor becoming poorer is a current problem too. Corruption, societal status, power, money, influence are the curse of our country still. The characters in the studied novels depict the art of survival amidst such problems which can be applied to the present situation as well.

Review of Literature:

Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable talks about how religious prejudice segregates the low classes with the stigma of untouchability. The need for change that can only be achieved by an ideological revolution is seen in Anand’s novel. He deals with the misery and wretchedness of the poor and their struggle for a better life. Alastair Niven says:

Anand is not speaking merely of class barriers or economic poverty or the crippling intransigence of industrialization, but of a society whose philosophy and orthodoxy traps and imprisons will, aspiration and
sensitivity. This discrepancy between what man is and what he is capable of lies at the heart of Mulk Raj Anand’s compassionate vision (Bheemaiah 19).

Kancha Ilaiah is of the view that though Anand wrote this novel from a Gandhian perspective it actually served the purpose of Ambedkar at a crucial period of his struggle to put the problems of untouchables on a global map. His novel suggests the “flush system” as a plausible solution to end untouchability. Thus Anand remains in Indian history as a great friend of the most oppressed castes and communities.

Lerzan Gültekin has written an article titled “Identity Crisis in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient”. The identity crisis in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient is analyzed in this paper from a postcolonial perspective through the concept of nationalism and national identity, emphasizing cultural, psychological and displacement “due to colonization, travelling, exploration and space or place, referring to the theories and views of Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Franz Fanon, Edward Said, and so on” (1). The characters’ unreliable national identities that are fragmented and varied because of their traumatic personal experiences in this alien landscape and culture is metaphorically represented by the desert. The paper emphasizes the fragility of identities and selves even for those who represent “European civilization and Imperial Rule as hegemonic powers together with the colonized Kip who is shaped by these powers as a hybrid identity” (1).

Donna Joan Lund has written an article titled “Herodotus and The English Patient.” In this paper the role of Herodotus’ The Histories in the novel is portrayed. “Just as Herodotus wove together a melange of ancient stories, gossip, battle plans, body counts, geography, and astronomy, so has Almasy, the main character in The English
Patient overlaid the pages of Herodotus with his own drawings, letters, maps, and notes”(101). Ondaatje's goal in his book reflects Herodotus' claim to have sought out the "supplementary in the main argument... to find the cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history, how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love" (Ondaatje 119). “The English Patient is more than a love story in the movie Casablanca mode; it is a profound statement of the essential commonality of human dreams and aspirations, as expressed in art, adventure, and, unfortunately, in war”(101)

Patricia E. Roy’s article titled “The Fifth Force: Multiculturalism and the English Canadian Identity” says:

Canada officially adopted a policy of multiculturalism in 1971. Since then, immigration patterns have changed. The number of immigrants has increased, and the major source has shifted from Europe to Asia, Africa, and their diasporas. Indeed, a fifth force has emerged. Examples from the 1993 federal election, from conflicts especially in metropolitan Toronto and Vancouver, and the observations of writers on multiculturalism suggest that the laudable ideal of multiculturalism has neither prevented racism nor helped English Canadians establish an identity. English Canadians face a challenge in melding diverse cultures into a unity that all can share (199).

Madhumalati Adhikari’s article titled “History and Story: Unconventional History in Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient and James A. Michener's Tales of the South Pacific” says: “Literary history is a cross between conventional (scientific) history and pure fiction. The resulting hybrid provides access to history that the more conventional sort does not” (43). This is brought about by the analysis of two novels about World War
II, *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, and James A Michener’s *Tales of the South Pacific*. The writers like the novels do not hold much similarity; they are from different times with different perspectives. Both these novels examine the destruction on both the physical and emotional level of the victims of war. The search for peace, balance, and kindness is frequently highlighted though they resist any kind of preaching. The facts of scientific history are woven into the loom of their unconventional histories. “The sense of infirmity created by the formal barriers of traditional history is eased and new possibilities for historical understandings are unveiled” (43).

“Misrepresentations”, an article written by Steve Vineberg talks about how the *The English Patient* is misrepresented by the academic award winning movie also of the same name directed by Anthony Minghella. He says, that the movie is “some unholy, preposterous mixture of Casablanca and Doctor Zbivago, but with a marked difference” (25). The viewers miss the fact that Almasy is a Nazi collaborator. The movie's justification for his actions appears to be that the Allies are not helpful when he wants to get back to Katharine, so why not bond himself to the Nazis? “The English Patient is Casablanca in reverse: this crazy wartime world doesn't amount to a hill of beans compared to the troubles of three little people” (25).


Much has been written about *The English Patient's* rich intertextuality, because Ondaatje's novel is filled with physical descriptions of books and excerpts from them, as well as libraries, scenes of reading and writing, and
characters who delight in marginalia. I too am interested in the relation between Ondaatje's book and the books it contains, but instead of exploring the thematic symmetries between *The English Patient* and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, Tacitus's *Annals*, or any of the other works of fiction and history that appear in its pages, I ask the following question: what is the connection between reading and writing in books and the forms of national violence, namely war and colonialism, that obsess the *English Patient*? . . . . (200)

If it is true that Ondaatje's novels are fascinated by the acts of reading and writing, it is also true that they are often “peopled by characters who defy fixed citizenship or the constraints of law: they are new immigrants, political agitators, outlaws, saboteurs, spies, and thieves” (200). *The English Patient* is about an Italian Canadian thief turned spy, a Hungarian Nazi collaborator, and a Sikh sapper at the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the end of the British Empire. “It is also a book about books, because as the Indian sapper Kirpal (Kip) Singh intuits, the war made print both weapon and shield of embattled nations” (200).

“Herodotus and *The English Patient*” by Thomas Harrison states that he would consider both the movie and the novel as a “seamless whole” (48). Both the structure of *The English Patient* and some of its themes find echoes in *The Histories* (48).

Like Minghella, Herodotus - by conjuring up some psychologically plausible pillow-talk or by supplying (generally less plausible) numbers where none are available,46 slips from a focus on historical truth to one on verisimilitude. If *The English Patient* has given rise then to a controversy
over the boundaries between history and fiction, it has only reawakened an argument as old as history itself. Herodotus may be the 'Father of History', as Almasy has it, but certainly not history as we know it (63).

“Echoes of the Past: Nomad Memory in Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient” by Mlrlja Lobnik Emory University says that the desert significantly becomes one of the major settings as Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient provides significant insights into the elusive concept of memory. Memory is used as the narrative device as events reveal themselves mainly through acts of remembering. A scenic backdrop "where nothing was strapped down or permanent" (Ondaatje 22), the shifting sands of the desert evoke the perpetual, largely unfathomable movement of figural articulation and dispersal that underlies memory in Ondaatje's novel. “The trompe l'oeil of time and water” (Ondaatje 259), they display the retentive yet infinitely malleable and often deceptive qualities of memory. Memory's very unfolding indeed constitutes, as the author subtly suggests, “a world of nomads” (Ondaatje 248).

Rachel D. Friedman has written an article titled “Deserts and Gardens: Herodotus and The English Patient.” When Anthony Minghella adapted Michael Ondaatje's novel The English Patient into a film he changed the novel's ending. The novel ends with the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and how they have a dramatic effect on Kip’s life. It's as if their fire ("If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire," 284) and their clarity wake him up from the illusion under which he had been living (47).
In a coda that has long puzzled readers, the *Histories* ends with a suggestion made by a certain Artembares to Cyrus that the Persians emigrate from their country because it is small and rough, and take over a better land elsewhere. Cyrus opposes this proposal since "soft lands tend to breed soft men": they must be prepared to become slaves instead of rulers if they move. Then the final sentence of the *Histories* ends with the Persians choosing to stay "to live in a harsh land and rule rather than to cultivate fertile plains and be others' slaves." (12) This becomes an odd ending, not just because Herodotus’ does not completely support this claim of the Persians content with their own small, rocky allotment. But the difference between Artembares and Cyrus does emphasize the importance given to the connection of a people to its place, which deeply resonates throughout the *Histories*. How influential is this connection between a people and their place? Does the land in which they reside determine who they are? Do people become the ‘other’ if they move to a different place? “In the *Histories* this vision of movement as "a mode of being in the world" emerges in Herodotus’ depiction of the nomadic Scythians and of the thalassic Athenians who become transformed from land-based autochthones to creatures of the sea, able to reconstitute their polis wherever they go” (Friedman 65).

Almasy, is drawn to Herodotus because being a lover of the desert he sees such a migrant perspective in Herodotus. But this is not the only Herodotus we see in the *Histories*. There, as in *The English Patient*, these stirrings of new ideas and new consciousness rise from a “matrix of deep appreciation for how fiercely compelling the longing for roots that are palpable, placeable can be” (65).
Despite the oaths, the iron bar, and the near-certain enslavement that they would suffer, in the end, the failure of their raid boils down to longing (pothos) and sorrow (oiktos) for their homeland, their inextirpable attachment to their native land. Herodotus also highlights the experience of longing for home in a group of logia placed prominently at key points in his narrative of the escalation of the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians. His accounts of the causes of the first Persian inroads into Greece, the first Persian attack in Greece, and the beginning of the Ionian Revolt, the event he designates as the arche kakon, the "beginning of evils" for both Greeks and barbarians alike (5.97), are all driven by someone's overpowering desire to return home. (66-67)

The novel ends with Almasy's post-national desert space becoming unviable. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has destroyed the denial of national identity in the Villa San Girolamo. The novel's brutal ambiguity is brought out through Kip, now Kirpal, who is a doctor now in India, where he has belatedly embraced his family tradition. The ending portrays the hopelessness of the characters noble efforts to erase nations and family names and finding way to live in this world. “We are left wondering if it is possible to live in such a world, without names, nations, and family connections, and still be fully human”. Kip back in India has accepted family traditions and his own rootedness, but still thinks of Hana who is half-way across the globe and remembers the post-national space of the villa. She is back in Canada but still "even at this age, thirty-four, has not found her own company, the ones she wanted” (301). What has
displacement and dislocation done to them? Are they happy in their own places with family and friends? The novel does not give any definite answers to these questions. "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one." This from John Berger is the epithet that Ondaatje chose for his novel In the Skin of a Lion. At the end of The English Patient, nothing is resolved, but we have been allowed to hear both sides of the story. We have come to understand both the destructiveness of national boundaries and the power of the longing to be confined by them. We can appreciate, with Ondaatje, both the appeal of the desert and the beauty of the garden.

At the end of the Histories too, more questions are raised than are answered, but we are left with a similar appreciation of the author's valuing of multiple perspectives. Clearly the Persians did not heed Cyrus' advice that they stay put in their own small and rugged territory. . . . Even if the ending does imply this sort of critique, surely this does not mean that Herodotus would prefer a world in which people stay firmly locked in their own territory . . . . Carolyn Dewald has suggested that "Herodotus has constructed an ending that deliberately sustains . . . different and even contradictory interpretations because he did not think there was any one authoritative version of who the Greeks were at the end of the Persian Wars."(54) One of the questions still up for grabs is the nature of their relationship to the territory they inhabit.

“. . . Is there a way of being in the world that respects the human desire for emplacement but also finds a way of validating movement that is not imperialistic, that recognizes both the need for roots and the dangers of identity models that are overly fixed and rooted?"
These important questions are not answered by either Herodotus or Michael Ondaatje in *The English Patient*, but both texts exquisitely articulate the depth of the problem and the consequences both personal and political of any resolution that is sought.

The essay written by Mary Alice titled “Island Indeterminacies and the Shifting Desert Landscape: Analyzing Displacement in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*” states that:

Most critical treatments of displacement, particularly within post colonial theory, lapse into one of two polarities. They either relentlessly mourn the postcolonial subject's dislocation or, alternatively, repeatedly celebrate the exile's emancipatory insight. In both constructions, alienation from the homeland produces irretrievable loss and generates reflective distance. Yet what about those contemporary writers who deliberately place their works in other contexts, other countries, in order to write about "homeland" or a place to which they themselves may choose never to return?

Mary Alice’s essay works to theorize an "aesthetics of displacement," which is to say, an aesthetics informed by political urgency, in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). In her introduction to *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, Angelika Bammer endeavors "to put the 'place' back into 'displacement'" (xiv), underscoring "the tension [...] between marking and recording absence and loss and inscribing presence" (xiv). With Bammer entering the realm of identity politics, Caren Kaplan's *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* considers its political and historical resonance, querying, "How can we pose the question of widespread displacement in such a way as to render it historically and politically viable? How can we theorize the emergence of specific subjects in the
midst of vast changes in the economic and social order?” (140). Extending both Bammer and Kaplan's projects, Alice is guided by these central questions: “How and toward what end do these two authors, both of whom are arguably themselves displaced, craft unsettled texts and characters that linger perpetually in motion? Because the places they create, populated by itinerant and at times intentionally exotic "others,” often seem more dreamlike than real, what cultural, aesthetic, and political work do they enact?” Through the examination of undulating landscapes that defy definition and the lens of liminal, wandering figures, Alice contends that Ondaatje and Mootoo purposely leave their works in flux; thereby while highlighting alternative narrative histories, they destabilize the totalizing effects of Western European dominance.

*Cereus Blooms at Night* closes “amid the suggestion of future possibility, curiously inscribed in the past and fashioned as an alternative narrative history”. Ondaatje, too, concludes *The English Patient* with a peculiar moment existing outside linear time and dimensional space: Kip the Indian sapper and Hana the Canadian nurse, long after returning to their respective native lands, telepathically connect across literal oceans of difference. Through the ambiguous "shadows of memory" (Ondaatje 172), “these novels, like the intoxicating yet double-edged scent of the cereus, alluring in its "vanilla-like sweetness" and revolting in its "curdling" moldiness (Mootoo 152), remain in states of flux that both invite and repel narrative closure”. Their metaphorical figures of flight, in harnessing the power of displacement to trouble and destabilize, powerfully challenge what Ondaatje terms "the tremor of Western wisdom” (274). “Indeed, both authors’ present timeless, placeless narratives that moves well beyond the confines of their pages” (Alice 19).
The article written by Patricia Goldblatt titled “Tailors Struggle in India” states: The heroic struggle of two tailors whose attempts at survival become the microcosm for all the suffering poor in India is the story line of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. “It is through the eyes of the affable Ishvar and cynical Omprakash (Om) that we become encompassed in their tale, one painted in shades of green, brown, and ultimately black” (94).

And life, Mistry seems to say, is like a quilt, each piece separate, unique, but the odd one colourful, bright, standing out, holding together the many dull, frayed and monotonous ones. In the final scenes of the story, the quilt that was to be Om's wedding present serves as a kind of cushion for Ishvar to rest his body upon: a comfort and a support, a visual patchwork of a life filled with many sorrows and few joys (94).

The title of the essay “Visible and Visitable”: The Role of History in Gita Mehta's *Raj* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*” by Beverly Schneller is derived from Henry James' comments in his preface to “The Aspern Papers” about the qualities of the novel. He liked to read about a past that was both "visible and visitable," i.e., a past which was alive, relevant, and the creation of its author. Recent post-modern discussion of historiography has taken a similar approach to the meaning of historical writing. Hayden White states that “. . . history is an authorial creation: history is a text shaped by its writer's intention and interpretation of what should be fact” (233). *Raj* and *A Fine Balance* are two examples of historical fiction which bear the implications of White's ideas.
Hypothesis:

The review of literature reflects that not much of study has been made on the problems related to cross-culturalism. Demarcation in the name of caste and race has been abolished by law in the very early stages of democracy. Education has been considered to be the solution to eradicate the differences and pave the way for a unified future. The daily news records provide enough evidence that casteism and racism have not been abolished even with education which is widespread in the twenty-first century. Though changes have been made it has not been abolished. This study critically examines, why these two dominant forces of oppression are still prevalent.

Aim of study:

The main objective of the study is to bring out the concept of survival amidst caste and racial demarcation by attempting a parallel study of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*. The study reveals the socio-cultural problems such as casteism and racism. These problems do not belong to the world of the past; its significance in the present scenario is emphasized by being represented in the word of the present. Modernization has not changed the basic mentality of the people instead it aggravates the burning social issues. The study is supported by relevant news reports.

Dalits and Black Americans:

The plight of the Indian Dalit’s, is argued by Prof. Larry Glasco as similar to that of the black Americans. Because dalits are not racially different from their upper caste neighbours, casteism may not be racism by formal definition, but caste based discrimination bears enough similarities in practice, in outcome, in struggle to end it that
it way well be called as closed cousin”. Dalits have much in common with the black Americans, in a way Martin Luther King’s civil right movement inspired the dalits to be more aggressive in their struggle.

The association of untouchability with pollution is not because the dalits are subjected to do menial jobs as majority of the dalits are landless agricultural labourers. Many dalits work for debt slavery rather than chattel slavery. The interests of these debts are too high thereby the bondage of slavery is passed from one generation to another. Therefore both casteism and racism is a stigma which the individual can not escape.

Commenting on racism Kenneth C. Clark says, “A system of racism and segregation corrodes the human spirit from the first conscious awareness that one is rejected and stigmatized because of the colour of one’s skin” (Bheemiah 24). However in the urban areas the conditions of the dalits are better compared to rural ones. But the point remains that it is still not abolished.

* A Fine Balance published in 1995 depicts the traumas suffered by the marginalized and subaltern section of Indian society. This book deals with the realities of Indian society and “the predatory politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence and bloodshed” (Randhawa 80) and discusses the social evils and shortcomings existing in rural and urban areas of India. The novel throws light on the injustice, cruelty, the traumas and the disparity suffered by the untouchables in rural India. Through a complex, splendid and merciful story, Mistry has brought out a very dark but prevailing side of India in which the subaltern section and marginalized people of Indian society, like Dalits, women and minority, inhabit and inherit their lives in margin.
Dalit - a social stigma:

A Dalit is someone who is simply born to dalit parents. Casteism is seen to be different from racism in the sense that it is based on religion and not biology. But a dalit who leaves Hinduism and becomes a Christian, is simply a Dalit Christian. It becomes a stigma from birth to death no matter how the circumstance of the individual is improved. In A Fine Balance Mistry is conveying one more latent message - that is the division of India caused by the disparity. He seeks the spirit of oneness which has been generally promoted by religious and cultural practices. He looks for:

If European nations can see themselves as culturally united because of Christianity and the entire Arab world because of Islam, then India can also see it as united by religion. But the very same religion has also divided people on caste lines as backward, most backward, forward and so on. As a result, ancient and primitive feelings come to the fore resulting in ugly caste rights. No part of the country is safe from casteist politics and violence (Randhawa 145).

The stories of Mistry’s four main characters illustrate, in different ways, how the degeneration of community and social capital undermines individuals’ capabilities to move forward, to overcome obstacles, to challenge injustice and, for some people, to face life’s harshness and simply go on living. “Learning is sought and knowledge is created, but their potential is all but lost” (Roy, Pillai 196).
Racism:

All the four characters in the *The English Patient* are from different nationalities, a Hungarian known as the English patient, his Canadian nurse, a Canadian thief, and an Indian Sikh working as a British army sapper. They try to make them useful during the war and the British acknowledge their services as long as they are useful and later they are caught and destroyed because they belong to a different nation.

Kip's experience highlights the fallacy of being "nationless." Though he is born of a different nation-albeit part of the British empire-Kip finds a nation to which he attaches himself both in nature and in action. Such an understanding of Kip's connection to a nation sheds light on the English patient's connection to his own nation, as the patient himself invites this comparison. The patient has left his European home and joined the nation that is the desert. There, like Kip, he has found his skills were most useful, and feels able to erase his past so that he may be known and valued for what he has to offer the people of his new nation, the desert. Escaping one's nation, then, becomes a larger metaphor for escaping one's past, and creating a new identity: one that is based on personal character.

Nationality and identity are interconnected in *The English Patient*, functioning together to create a web of inescapable structures that tie the characters to certain places and times despite their best efforts to evade such confinement. Almásy desperately tries to elude the force of nationality, living in the desert where he creates for himself an alternate identity, one in which family and nation are irrelevant. Almásy forges this identity through his character, his work, and his interactions with others. Importantly, he
chooses this identity rather than inheriting it. Certain environments in the novel lend credence to the idea that national identity can be erased. The desert and the isolated Italian villa function as such places where national identity is unimportant to one's connection with others. Kip, who becomes enmeshed in the idea of Western society and the welcoming community of the villa's inhabitants, even dismisses his hyperawareness of his own racial identity for a time

The comment on racial discrimination and political distancing is what Proust calls the "gross dimensions of social phenomena," and yet fictionalized history "evokes the essentially non-finite quality of existence." The imagination, perception, and communication of human experiences through fictionalized history open up many new dimensions of life that history cannot dream of. *The English Patient* is a human story in the loom of history (Adhikari 51)

Ultimately, however, the characters cannot escape from the outside reality that, in wartime, national identity is prized above all else. This reality invades Almásy's life in the desert and Kip's life in the Italian villa. Desperate for help, Almásy is locked up merely because his name sounds foreign. His identity follows him even after he is burned beyond recognition, as Caravaggio realizes that the ‘English’ patient is not even English. For Kip, news of the atomic bomb reminds him that, outside the isolated world of the villa, western aggression still exists, crushing Asian people as Kip's brother had warned. National identity is, then, an inescapable part of each of the characters, a larger force over which they have no control.
Surviving Casteism and Racism:

How do the characters survive amidst casteism and racism is the key point of discussion. As survival and victimhood go hand in hand they are compared together. Margaret Atwood *Survival* becomes the touchstone with which the argument can be built. The central symbol for Canada is undoubtedly survival. Like the ‘Frontier’ and the ‘Island’, it is a multi-faceted and adaptable idea. For early explorers it meant bare survival in the face of hostile elements. But the word can also suggest survival of a crisis or disaster, what might be called ‘grim’ survival. There is also the cultural survival, hanging on as a people, retaining a religion and a language under an alien government. But the main idea in Canadian Literature is bare survival: hanging on for dear life. The central idea in Canadian Literature is not one which generates excitement and sense of adventure or danger which The Frontier holds, nor is it the sense of security, of order, which the Island can offer, but an almost intolerable anxiety. “the survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival, he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life” (Atwood 33).

A preoccupation with one’s survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival (Atwood 33). In earlier writers the obstacles were external- the land, the climate, animals and so on. In later writers the obstacles were not physical survival but more of a spiritual survival. Sometimes fear of these obstacles engulf the character and thereby becoming the obstacle in itself. If a man can survive only by being castrated or being maimed for life what price is survival? asks Atwood. In the English Patient Ishvar is maimed, Om is castrated and the English Patient is burned beyond recognition. Some contain attempts to survive which fail. Some contain bare survival.
Some contain crippled successes. In *A Fine Balance* there is Ishvar and Om who have crippled success, then there is Dina who comes under bare survival, and Maneck fails to survive. In *The English Patient* there is Carravagio and the English Patient whose real name is Almasy who falls under crippled success. There are Hana and Kip who come under bare survival. Then there are others like Katherine, Clinton, Patrick, Madox who fail to survive. Both these novels have their major characters to portray the effect of caste and race specifically. Caste is highlighted through Ishvar and Om in *A Fine Balance* and race is highlighted through the English Patient and Kip in *The English Patient*.

Atwood states, at some point the failure to survive, or the failure to achieve anything beyond survival, becomes not a necessity imposed by a hostile outside world, but a choice made from within (Atwood 34). For example there are Dina, Ishvar and Om in *A Fine Balance* and Hana and Kip in *The English Patient*. Pushed far enough, the obsession with surviving can become the will not to survive. An example for this is seen in Maneck in *A Fine Balance* and the English Patient in *The English Patient*.

Voicing out for the Voiceless:

Cross-culturalism talks about the impact of one culture over another. It stresses on unity rather than demarcations. While ‘multiculturalism’ or ‘mosaic’ stresses on the demarcation in maintaining one’s individuality and thereby contributing to the society at large, cross-culturalism stresses on the acceptance of cultural influence of one over the other and thereby seeing how similar we are than how different. This attitude would pave the way for unity with the change in mentality over the social demarcations. Voicing out for the voiceless becomes a great responsibility. This responsibility in every citizen will
pave the way for a better society if we could stand together and voice out for the right cause.

Mistry’s novel tells about two harijan tailors who attempt to flee poverty and find a quietly rewarding life in the city are thwarted by bureaucracy, the greed of others, powerful rivalries and the arbitrary punitiveness of Mrs. Gandhi’s Emergency policies in the 1970’s. a wrenching tale one which the reader resist finishing (but must finish) because a few pages from the end it comes to seem inevitable the characters are doomed. 

*A Fine Balance* is, however, as deeply, if implicitly, critical of reactionary politics in, say, Ontario as it is fiercely critical of Gandhian imperatives (W.H. New).

The Evolution of the Individual:

“But Rohinton Mistry’s sometimes Dickensian genius for portraying human goodness, and creating characters and predicaments too magically absurd to be anything but real, is at least partly equal to the task” (Davenport 444). A few of the many examples that could be cited among them, a Yeats-quoting proofreader who has had to abandon his job because of a disabling allergy to printers ink, a fleet-footed collector of hair (for wigs) who takes his victim on the wing and disappears before they notice their rape of their locks, and a small-time soft-drink manufacturer (Maneck’s father – hence Kohlah’s Cola) who loses an eye to a flying bottle cork and becomes an obsessive eater of carrots to keep his remaining eye fit for its double duty, the charm, the humility, the courage and mutual love and understanding manifested by dozens of such characters seem at times to transcend the desolation of *A Fine Balance* but are very far from even having a voice. In
any case it is these large elements, rather than the effects of prose style and narrative technique, which gives this impressive novel its considerable distinction.

Mistry creates a cast of interrelated characters “whose lives offer different but complimentary visions of lower caste Indian life in the 1970s” (Schneller 235). Indians are the villains and the heroes in *A Fine Balance* and what people do to each other seems as bad if not worse than what happened during the colonial period. Evolution of the individual in the nation and the evolution of India as a free country provide a common, parallel quest in his work. The lives of the four main characters are changed utterly as a result of their vulnerability in this critical period of Indira Gandhi’s rule in the 1970s.

The Settings of the Novels:

Ondaatje was the first Canadian writer to win the booker prize in 1992 for *The English Patient*. Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* were shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for best book. Mistry, unlike Ondaatje has chosen not to concentrate on life outside South Asia, and works hard to make his setting as convincing as possible. Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* is set in Italy during the World War II. One of the main characters Kripal Singh, an Indian Sikh, is his first fully developed South Asian fictional character. On the other hand, Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* and have the settings of Bombay, highlighting the Parsi community. *A Fine Balance* is the depiction of the lives of impoverished workers struggling for existence in Bombay during 1975 martial law period, called the Emergency, decreed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.
Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* and Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* are chosen because they have similarities on the symbolic and thematic levels which would throw light on the cultural aspects. The symbolism of the unfinished patch work quilt in Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* has a structural parallel to the narrative, much like the quilt. The novel leaves the reader depressingly disturbed. The atomic bomb in Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* symbolizes the western aggression and reawakens the characters to reality. On the other hand the Italian villa symbolizes the spiritual death and rebirth of the inhabitants. Eventhough war destroyed the villa; nature replaced the void with new life. This mirrors the way the characters learn to live again after the emotional destruction of war. The symbolism of the patch-work-quilt and the Italian—villa, talks about the art of survival amidst crisis. The major themes like, displacement and dislocation, love, victimhood, survival and identity will be explored extensively in the present study.

Rohinton Mistry’s fiction highlights the Parsi community of Mumbai, India. Unlike other South-Asian Canadian writers his setting is always Indian in origin. Being of Parsi descent his works raise and address important questions about the Parsi identity, the voice of the margins or the minorities in post-independent India. “This fact, coupled with his astonishingly vivid, sensitive, and compassionate portrayal of middle-class life in India, makes Mistry one of the leading postcolonial writers of the Indian diaspora” (Jaina C. Sanga 212). In the article written by Robert L. Ross from the University of Texas titled “Seeking and Maintaining Balance: Rohinton Mistry's Fiction” he states: the title of Rohinton Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance*, suggests a worthwhile way to explore his fiction.
Even Mistry’s biography constitutes a kind of balancing act. Born in India in 1952, he grew up in Bombay and received a degree from the University of Bombay in mathematics and economics. In 1975 he immigrated to Canada, working in a bank to support himself while studying English and philosophy at the University of Toronto, where he received a second bachelor's degree in 1984. Although an immigrant, an outsider in Canadian society, Mistry already understood this condition, for in India he belonged to the Parsi community, whose Zoroastrian religious beliefs set its members on the edge of Hindu society. After a few years in Canada, he started writing stories and gained immediate attention, receiving two Hart House literary prizes and Canadian Fiction Magazine's annual Contributors' Prize in 1985. Two years later, Penguin Books Canada published a collection of eleven stories titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, which appeared in 1989 in the United States as *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. Most of the stories had little to do with his experience as an immigrant in Canada, but focused instead on the uneventful lives of a group of Parsis who live in a ramshackle Bombay apartment block (239).

colloquialisms lend the stories greater authenticity. “Mistry showcases a startling variety of characters, each with a distinct personality and idiosyncrasies characteristic of Parsis” (Jaina C. Sanga 213). It is through the character of Kersi that Mistry directly addresses immigrant issues and the feeling of alienation. For instance, in “Lend Me Your Light,” Kersi states: “I am guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of my birth, paying the price in burnt-out eyes: I Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto” (Tales from Firozsha Baag 180).

Themes in Mistry’s Novels:

Mistry has written three novels all of which focus on alienation. Though each novel is distinctly different in its plot, treatment of characters and other details, there are striking similarities between them. All these novels foreground metropolitan and focus on family problems amidst economic hardships. There emerges a certain thematic unity as they all deal with the recurrent themes of loss, displacement and dislocation, love, home, identity, survival, victimhood and the eternal struggle between the traditional and modern. Most important, however, is the questioning of religious beliefs in an attempt to define the identity of the minority Parsi community in the wider Indian context.

Mistry’s first novel, Such a Long Journey (1991), launched him into the international literary circle. “It won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book, amongst other awards. It has been translated into German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Japanese and has been adapted for a film by Sooni Taraporevala, which was released in 1999” (Jaina C. Sanga 213). Set in Mumbai, the novel’s political backdrop is the Indo-Pakistan war, over the later emergence of Bangladesh. The plot is based on the real-life of Sohrab Nagarwala scandal that rocked the Indira Gandhi government in 1971. As the
novel traces the protagonist, Gustad Noble’s involvement with his friend Major Billimoria’s supposed embezzlement of a large sum of money, the public turmoil of the period is effectively mirrored in the private world of the Noble family.

Broad in its range, powerful in its execution, numbing in its reality, *A Fine Balance* asks what Hilary Mantel calls an "age-old" question: "In the face of the world's beauty, in the face of the self-evident fact of altruism, how can atrocious conduct occur, how can hideous beliefs survive? . . . . It is true that Mistry answers this overriding question only indirectly. The old proof-reader says, "Let me tell you a secret: there is no such thing as an uninteresting life," and goes on to tell Maneck that he would like to hear his life story because "It's very important. . . . It's extremely important because it helps to remind yourself of who you are. Then you can go forward, without fear of losing yourself in this ever-changing world" (Mistry 594-95). Although in this novel the characters' lives appear to have lost their importance, although the balance between hope and despair has almost tipped, the age-old question has been well asked. If it continues to be asked, then perhaps the significance of the individual and the necessity of spiritual balance will never be fully lost (244).

The first chapter in *Family Matters* introduces Nariman Vakeel, an aged Parsi widower suffering from Parkinson’s disease and the last book closes with the narrative of his youngest grandson, Jehangir Chenoy. There is a great amount of sensitivity and tenderness in Mistry’s portrayal of the relationship between Nariman and Jehangir. “As the novel traces the profound changes that each character undergoes, attention is drawn to
the Parsi community’s struggle to preserve its identity, in the face of the threat posed by intermarriage and westward migration” (Jaina C. Sanga 214). The novel, in the word of Shashi Tharoor, is “a superb work that confirms Rohinton Mistry’s reputation as a novelist of the highest quality” (Jaina C. Sanga 214).

Rohinton Mistry’s latest short story “The Scream” is narrated by an old man living in India in the same house with several generations of his family. While sleeping upon his mattress he keeps constant vigil outside his window, commenting on the muscular men who hold court across the road. One night, the man is woken from his sleep by a scream from outside and the sounds of a stranger being assaulted. Is the scream real, or is the man’s entire narration the product of his old age gripping his senses with varied imaginations? The man’s children tell him that it is only his imagination playing tricks on him: “Every day they tell me I have lost my mind, my memory, my sense of reality.” There is evidence to support this claim: the old man mistakes his grandchild for a servant, and he harbours an irrational fear of losing “a few fingers or toes” to the mice that roam his room at night.

There is a dash of Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw” in Mistry’s narrative approach here; we are never entirely certain whether to take the man’s story at face value or whether his entire narration is the result of his steadily progressing dementia. The process of disentangling the skein of this brief narrative provides the story’s essential pleasure and interest (Beattie).
Ondaatje’s Diasporic Background:

Michael Ondaatje visits his relatives and friends in Sri Lanka to gather information for his autobiographical novel, *Running in the Family* (1982). Out of all these characters he highlights Aunt Dolly, who is 80 years old and a close friend of Ondaatje’s father. Ondaatje is thrilled in meeting her and he writes about her- “suddenly all these journeys are worth it” (111). He describes her as a delicate woman staying in a fragile home. Ondaatje has to force himself “to be gentle with this frailty in the midst of [his] embrace” (112). “This offers a paradigm for the way in which Ondaatje, the traveler, embraces his homeland Sri Lanka- a circumspect, tentative grip of a place and its people” (South Asian Literature in English  237).

Philip Michael Ondaatje was born in 1943 on a tea estate in Kegalle, Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. When he was 11, he left to study in England soon after his parents’ divorce. In 1962, he immigrated to Canada. Though his ancestry is a mixture of Dutch, Sinhalese, and Tamil, the family “was solidly British colonial in outlook” (Jeswinski 23). Ondaatje’s Ceylonese and English educational background formed the British streak in him. In Canada, however, he awoke to a new, robust literary tradition. Ed Jewinski, a biographer of Ondaatje, writes: “For the young poet there was now a sense of a new, vigorous, and vital outlook on the world” (31), one that was linked but different from the British tradition he knew. He attended Bishop’s University and then the University of Toronto where he received his B.A. in English in 1965. Having received his M.A. in 1967 from Queen’s University, he began teaching in the English department at the University of Western Ontario, and later joined the faculty of Glendon College, York University. He
currently resides in Toronto. Though Ondaatje has won some of Canada’s most prestigious literary awards with texts such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) and *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), he acquired international renown when his novel *The English Patient* (1992) won the Booker Prize. Besides being a documentary filmmaker and critic, the novelist is also a prolific poet, and his poetry collections include *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), *Rat Jelly* (1973), *Secular Love* (1984), *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems* (1991), and *Handwriting* (1998).

Ondaatje’s diasporic background has an impact on the themes in his works. Displacement and dislocation, identity, love, survival and victimhood, history and migration find a prominent place in his writings. Ondaatje’s representation of home and identity is textualized into the very fabric of his writings, his works are thereby highly textured and complex. Ondaatje’s representation of Sri Lanka, and the Sri Lankans have brought in much criticism. Critics like Arun Mukherjee comment on what they see as Ondaatje’s ahistorical and atemporal treatment of the island.

Mukherjee talks about Ondaatje as one who “does not get drawn into the acts of living, which involve the need to deal with the burning issues of his time” (“The Sri Lankan Poet” 34). Ondaatje’s success “has been won largely through a sacrifice of his regionality, his past and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada” (Mukherjee, “The Poetry” 50). Kanaganayakam gives his incite on the weakness of *Running in the Family* as the text’s refusal “to participate actively in the referential” (40). At the same time, however, there are critics who challenge these views and Suwanda Sugunasiri takes Ondaatje’s dissenters to task, saying that the writer’s works must be located within his particular sociopolitical context of the elite bourgeoisie, which he
depicts so vividly in his texts. Despite some reservations, Kanaganayakam is also compelled to say that *Running in the Family* manifests “the complexity of a colonial inheritance” (41), acknowledging the text’s engagement with history and location.

“I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (79). This statement made by Ondaatje in *Running in the Family* captures the predicament of the diasporic individual whose identity is in a flux. This is vividly picturised in *Running in the Family* where the Sri Lankan natives seem more privileged for sharing a special relationship with their homeland, than the Ondaatje’s who are varied and interesting people but rootless. Ondaatje’s search for identity is traced in this memoir. The protagonists in Ondaatje’s novels display this sense of rootlessness and their earning for an identity as they are also caught in the hybrid world.

*Anil’s Ghost* talks about discovering oneself by reconciling origins and the immigrant experience. In this novel, Anil Tissera, is a forensic anthropologist who is educated in the West and returns to her native place Sri Lanka to solve the unexplained deaths sweeping the island. Like Ondaatje she has to explore her own uncertain kinship with her native land to truly understand her identities. “In the overlap of cultures and spaces that distinguish the diasporic individual, identity then, is, as theorist Stuart Hall describes it, always a matter of “becoming” and not just “being” (394)” (South Asian Literature in English 238).

The Ondaatje’s protagonists are depicted as one who are always in a state of uncertainty and the places are equally mobile and transient. Here are few examples, in his novel *Running in the Family* there is no detailed description of Sri Lanka. “A sense of place is created by atmospheric nuances evoked by the abundant sights, sounds and
smells that surrounds the writer- the monsoon rains, old newspaper cuttings, buildings, even a gesture. “The outline of a large fish caught and thrown in the curl of a wave” (69) (South Asian Literature in English 238).

Identity Crisis:

*The English Patient* is noted down for its spatial representation. As the other novels, one of its major themes is identity. The novel, just like Ondaatje’s other texts, asserts that it is in the weaving of fact and fiction, the merging of different modes of discourse, and the overlap of the personal and the public that spaces for self-definition are created. There are four major characters namely Hana, who is a Canadian nurse, who clings onto the dying English patient, whose identity seems to be mystery as he is burnt beyond recognition during the Second World War. However, he turns out to be an Hungarian named Almasy, who was a desert explorer. Then there is Kip an Indian Sikh bomb defuser, and Caravaggio, a Canadian thief who is a friend of Hana’s father. The characters are transported to different places and times though set in Italy at the end of World War II. The past and the present intermingles to form a seamless flow.

*In the Skin of a Lion* is in part sequel to *The English Patient*, as the lifes of certain characters like Patrick and Caravaggio are represented in both the novels as a continuation. The novel depicts the immigrant experience and describes Toronto in the 1920s. Ondaatje highlights the contribution of the early settlers in Canada through their labour who remain as outsiders to the mainstream society and were forgotten in the pages of history. "It is a novel about the wearing and the removal of masks; the shedding of skin, the transformations and translations of identity (*In the Skin of a Lion*).
The novel *Divisadero* centers around the nuclear family Anna the natural daughter, Claire the adopted daughter, and Coop who is a hired hand taken in when he was orphaned at the age of four. Anna’s sexual relationship with Coop results in an incident of violence and the family is torn apart. Then the novel proceeds with each of the character’s separate journey in life, and how they are interconnected.

Ondaatje said in an interview with Ramona Koval:

I think at the age of 16 or 17 we are almost nothing, I really do think that. We don't think that, but if you look back on yourself—God! Myself at 17 was this callow, callow person. What you become 10 years or 20 years later or more is so much more complicated and good and bad and all these things. So for people to make decisions at that age or people who are judged at that age, it's a terrible thing to happen to them, I think (*Divisadero*).

He goes on to say that he was exploring how strong this nuclear family is, albeit not blood-related, and how “they have to kind of deal with the rest of their lives with this one moment of trauma” (*Divisadero*).

Ondaatje’s most recent work includes his novel *The Cat's Table* published in November 2011.

As we read into *The Cat's Table* the story becomes more complex, more deadly, with an increasing sense of lives twisted awry, of misplaced devotion. It seems at first as if it might be a picaresque novel set in a constricted space, a favourite choice of many writers since Sebastian
Brant's 1494 Ship of Fools. Ondaatje gives us the cat's table, the opposite of the captain's table, and the most undesirable dining assignment aboard the cruise ship Oronsay. This allows Ondaatje to lay out an extraordinary assortment of characters like cards on a table, shuffle and redeal them. It gives the passengers a sense of invisibility and the freedom to behave as they wish. (Proulx, The Guardian).

In *The Cat’s Table* Ondaatje takes the reader on a journey through his three deeply submerged weeks in his memories of travelling in an ocean liner Oronsay from Colombo to England. It was the year 1954, at the age of 11 where his past is being transformed into his future self. The novel opens as prominent passengers are given seats at the Captain’s table but young Michael (nicknamed Mynah) and the two boys he befriends, Cassius (a troublemaker) and Ramadhin (a contemplative asthmatic), are relegated to a table of dubious characters. There is a lady who hides pigeons in her pockets and gives the name to their table as “the cat’s table” as they are in the most unprivileged place. The boys soon realize that their insignificance means that they will not be noticed by the officials and put their sly skills into play by ranging across the ship. In Oronsay, he and his friends begin to pay attention to the human beings who color their circumscribed universe. “We came to understand that small and important thing, that our lives could be large with interesting strangers who would pass us without any personal involvement.”
As Mynah grows older he keeps in contact with some of his shipboard friends but loses track of Cassius. In his late 20s he sees a work by Cassius displayed in the London art gallery. In his friend’s paintings, Mynah finds again “the exact angle of vision Cassius and I had that night” as they looked down at the dockmen “working in those pods of light. An angle of 45 degrees, something like that.” Instantly he feels himself “back on the railing, watching, which was where Cassius was emotionally, when he was doing these paintings. Goodbye, we were saying to all of them. Goodbye.” Through the act of painting those “interesting strangers” and the act of writing about them, the artist and the writer say: Hello again.

Not all the mysteries Ondaatje explores in his account of Mynah’s sea passage - revisited in adulthood from the remove of decades and from another continent - have clear resolutions, nor do they need them. Uncertainty, Ondaatje shows, is the unavoidable human condition, the gel that changes the light on the lens, altering but not spoiling the image. When Mynah walks down the gangplank at Tilbury, new confusions will find him, and Ondaatje embraces them. “What is interesting and important happens mostly in secret, in places where there is no power,” the boy Mynah had thought, relishing being “one of the insignificants” at the Oronsay’s cat’s table. But Ondaatje knows there is really no place without power, if only you can find the angle where it can be seen and felt and communicated (Schillinger, The New York Times).
Ondaatje’s writings have a postcolonial dimension in spite of a number of features in the narratives that lead toward a postmodern sensibility with its portrayal of multiplicity and a borderless world. “In all his novels, the writer does not, indeed cannot, overlook historical realities that shape narratives of identity” (South Asian Literature in English 238-239). The lingering effect of colonialism on the Sri Lankans is seen in *Running In The Family*. The turbulence in the war-torn island in an ethnic strife is captured swiftly in *Anil’s Ghost*. “Ondaatje’s narratives show that the diasporic writer, by imposing imaginary homelands on an actual geographical location, may seek out firmer ground than abstractions to build ways of belonging to places” (South Asian Literature in English 238-239), though postmodern writers question the very concept of home and the sense of belonging to a particular place.