

Diasporic Re-rooting: Michael Ondaatje's Exploration of 'Home' in Handwriting

*Pabitra Bharali.

(Assistant Professor, Department of English, Digboi College, Digboi, Assam, India.)
Corresponding Author: Pabitra Bharali.

Abstract: Diasporic persons are incessantly obsessed with memories of 'home' because of which they psychically remain one with the homeland / native culture. In an attempt to re-root in the original 'home', they often take intermittent visits to the homeland; contribute culturally and intellectually as well as financially to the development of the native country. Exploration of native history, geography and cultural beliefs and activities forms a vital part of diasporic re-rooting. Diasporic writers on the one hand, depict homeland issues including political turmoil, and on the other hand, describe cultural aspects and focus on the days they spent in the homeland. Socio-cultural developments of the native land receive key focus in the diasporic writings which are often structured in native mythic vision. The Sri-Lankan-Canadian diasporic writer Michael Ondaatje is sensitively concerned with both his personal-familial-cultural circumstances and experiences relating to his diasporic move as well as the national history and geography, myth and culture of the homeland. His poetry like his fiction is deeply tempered with diasporic sensibility. His poetry anthology '*Handwriting*' (1998) explores Sri Lankan history, geography, ceremonies and myths in his imaginative images. As an elegy, it brings out the writer's lost childhood and at the same time showcases the turmoil of Sri Lankan history. The objective of the present paper is to interpret Ondaatje's attempt of re-rooting in the original 'home' through an in-depth analysis of the relevant poems in the anthology '*Handwriting*'.

Keywords: diaspora, home, re-rooting, Ondaatje, *Handwriting*.

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I. INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Negotiation of affiliation to homeland and host land forms the core of diasporic sensibility and diasporic persons are obsessively concerned with their identity in relation to both the lands. Migrant authors cannot remain aloof from representing their problematic identity and ambivalent nature of existence of the diasporic people. Diasporas, in fact, as Joel Kuortti observes, are engagingly concerned with a 'matrix of diversity: of cultures, languages, peoples, place, times' (3). On the one hand, they take up homeland issues in an attempt to showcase their psychic affiliation to the native land and culture; and on the other hand, they do not, and cannot, dissociate themselves from the circumstances of the host land. Salman Rushdie calls this state of duality a situation of 'straddling two cultures' (17) while highlighting the creative possibilities of diasporic experience. Diaspora scholars like Robin Cohen, William Safran, Vijay Mishra, Avtar Brah et. al have thrown lights on the various ways the diasporic individuals attempt to re-root in the original homeland. While Cohen interprets 'material' and 'cultural' links of diasporas as 'agents of development' (168), Safran highlights the activities of 'maintenance' and 'restoration' of the homeland by the diasporas (83). In much the same way, Avtar Brah points to diasporas' sustained association with homeland when she calls homeland 'a mythic place of desire' (192). Vijay Mishra through his analysis of V.S. Naipaul's work, emphatically represents 'memorial reconstruction' (193) as a signifier of diasporic attachment to homeland / culture. On the other hand, James Clifford correlates diasporic identity with historical heritage (11). From such observations, it is evident that diasporic persons are incessantly concerned with negotiation of cultural root and heritage, race and language as well as national geography and socio-political issues connected with dispersion.

Diasporic re-rooting, i.e. reclamation of root in the original homeland and culture, that has been viewed as a 'positive diasporic consciousness' by Clifford (311) signifies the strong attachment of the diaspora to his/her native land as well as his/her irresistible sense of nostalgia for the lost paradise. It is for this strong sense of attachment and co-ethnic feeling that the diaspora not only takes intermittent visits to the homeland, but also makes financial, cultural and intellectual contributions to the homeland and native culture. Revisits to the homeland, homeland researches, reconstruction of homeland and involvement in homeland developmental activities are all that testify diasporic reclamation of root in terms of materials links. The cultural links basically

point to the psychic and linguistic connections. In fact, no diaspora can be free from their thoughts of homeland and native culture even though they may not continue to sustain material links. William Safran rightly observes that diasporic persons are characterized by their 'memory, vision and myth' about 'original homeland' (83) which justify their cultural links. Again, Rushdie's observation that 'past is home', (9) points to his emphasis on diasporic re-rooting in the original 'home' and culture.

It is inextricably necessary, at this point, to focus on the nuances of the term 'home' in the context of diaspora study precisely because the diasporic individual incessantly looks back to the security, peace and bliss of the 'past home'. In the traditional sense, home is a spiritual construct and not just a 'place of living'. While 'home' as space points to a place of living, as a concept, it is extended to other spatial scales. Culture plays a significant role in the conceptualization of home because people belonging to different ethnic groups view home in respect to their cultural practices. Moreover, spatially a country is a home for its citizens. Home, then, is a shelter for its inmates as well as a place of protection and preservation of culture and the notion stands for domestic, cultural and national spaces. The traditional concept of home as a set of material, communal and emotional securities, and a space of pastoral stability, has been contested and problematised in diasporic discourses. Home for the diaspora is the 'society of origin' (Basch et. al 8) although there are contestations as to the stability of 'home'. In the context of diasporic re-rooting, the concept of 'home' can be viewed as representing the whole range of physical-cultural and spiritual constructs associated with the nativity of the diaspora. As such, exploration of native history, geography, and cultural beliefs and activities forms a vital part of diasporic re-rooting. Diasporic writers are concerned with representation of socio-political and cultural issues of the homeland as well as delineating the days they spent in the homeland. And to give a voice to the socio-cultural and geographic phenomenon and aspects, the diasporic creative writer often take recourse to the mythic structure or at least, do make use of the popular myths as points of reference. With this theoretical framework, the present paper provides an interpretation of Michael Ondaatje's attempt at re-rooting in the original 'home' through an exploration of his poetry anthology *Handwriting* (1998).

II. INTERPRETATION

To begin with, Ondaatje's *Handwriting* is a record of his diasporic re-rooting, i.e. the diasporic writer's deep sense of attachment/affiliation to the homeland. This poetry anthology, in delicate, erotic, ironic and imaginative images, depicts the poet's diasporic consciousness through an exploration of the Sri Lankan history, geography and culture including its ceremonies, myths and beliefs. As an elegy it brings out the writer's lost childhood and at the same time, showcases the turmoil of Sri Lankan history. The poems in the anthology are memories of Sri Lanka, its rituals and traditions, history and geography, the smells and tastes and colours of his first home. Her are sunless forests, cattle-bells, stilt-walkers 'with movement of prehistoric birds', the statue of Buddha buried for long two hundred years as well as saffron and panic seed, lotus, sandal wood – all endeared by the diasporic person in an attempt of re-rooting in the original home and culture.

The anthology *Handwriting* contains three sections defining three aspects of the diaspora's association to the native land and culture. The first section is a record of the diasporic poet's journey not only through Sri Lanka's geography but also its history. In other words, Ondaatje's poetry is concerned with the buried history of the homeland and his poems refocus on the glory of the past. While rewriting the victories of the people and rejuvenating the inner and intimate life, these poems give expression to the endearing sites of the diaspora. The mythic life of Sri Lanka is brought out by the poet's references to the observation of public holidays on full moon as well as the theatres where 'human beings wonderously became other human beings'. In the same way, poems such as "The Distance of a Shout" and "Buried" are representations of historical changes in the country. Sri Lankan life on the medieval coast had been greatly affected with the coming of the colonizers. These poems highlight how harsh history was written 'on waves' and 'on leaves' ("Distance" 5). Again, how the Sri Lankan language was overpowered by one of the colonizers has been painfully delineated. The civil war massacres that silenced the voices are presented in a gruesome way, e.g.

Above ground, massacre and race
A heart silenced
The tongue removed
The human body merged into burning tyre. ("Buried" 6)

While the first section is a symbolic revisit to the native land, the second section expresses the poet's heartfelt sentiments for the human beauties of the native land. This second section entitled "The Nine Sentiments – Historical Illustrations in Rock and Book and Leaf" contains nine poems under Roman numerals. These poems focus on the sentiments of women in different times and different situations. For example, in the first poem in this section, the poet describes how women's laughter lead to an arousal of desire in men:

All day desire
Enters the hearts of men
women from the village of _____
move along porches

wearing calling bells (31)

The term 'calling bells' is symbolic of the joyous mood of the women. Again, the poem titled-"vii" is a description of the women by the river at Boralesgamuwa:

*songs to celebrate the washing
of arms and bangles
This laughter when husbands are away*

... ..

*The three folds on their stomachs
considered a sign of beauty (37)*

The poet discovers 'beauty' in the sentiments of the women of his native land and this aspects also signifies his psychic 'oneness', i.e. the desire to regain the sentimental life of his original country which is strongly reminiscent of the cultural links that Cohen speaks of. The nine sentiments corresponding to the nine *rasas* of Indian love poetry are symbolic of the poet's changing consciousness begotten by his diasporic status. This is in other words the fluidity associated with diasporic identity. Again the poet's use of the *rasa* theory - the aesthetic construct originating in Bharata's *Natya Sastra* – speaks for his veneration for the native culture since *rasa*, besides Sanskrit, also formulated poetic norms of the Tamils to which Ondaatje associates himself in the fictional memoir *Running in the Family*.

The third section is concerned with the poet's memory after he leaves his native land which is indicated by the very word in the title "Flight", the first poem in this section. In this poem the poet describes the elderly Sri Lankan woman sitting in the adjacent seat of the 'Flight':

*The seventy year old lady next to me begins to comb
her long white hair, then braids it in the faint light*

... ..

*Pins in her mouth, she rolls her hair,
Curls it into a bun, like mother's (45)*

The comparison of the old lady to the poet's mother speaks for his attempt to showcase his attachment to family and native land. He discovers his mother in the old lady from the native land; in a sense, this old lady stands not only for the poet's mother but also for all Sri Lankan women. The poet's sense of endearment to the mother speaks for his love of the country. The sense is carried out in the succeeding poem entitled "Wells". Here the poet refers to his ayah Rosalin and expresses his love for her while pining for his diasporic losses. He says:

*The last Sinhala word I lost
was vatura
The word for water.
Forest water. The water in a kiss. The tears
I gave to my ayah Rosalin on leaving
The first home of my life. (Wells-ii 47)*

It is worth noting that the poet is concerned with his linguistic losses as well for which he refers to his forgetfulness of the Sinhala language. His dispersion from the homeland resulted not only in the separation from the ayah or her endearments to him but also his detachment from his love of the native language. Ondaatje here attempts to focus on how language plays an vital 'cultural link' for the diaspora as theorized by Cohen.

Certain poems in the third section are concerned with Sri Lankan myths and beliefs. For instance, the poem entitled "The Siyabasalakara" is associated with a tenth century legend:

In the tenth century, the young princess/ Entered a rock pool like the moon/ Within a blue cloud (49). Similarly, in the poem entitled "The Story" (55-60), the poet describes Sri Lankan folk customs and beliefs. This poem in fact brings out both Hindu and Buddhist belief in the reincarnation of human beings:

*For his first forty days a child
is given dreams of previous lives.
Journeys, winding paths,
a hundred small lessons
and then the past is erased. (55)*

The mythic vision of Sri Lankan culture has been significantly implied here. The poet himself comments on the traditional flavours of his poems. In "Notes and Acknowledgments" to the anthology, while stating that these poems were composed between 1993-1998 in the two places he is associated with – the homeland Sri Lanka and the host land Canada, he writes that certain poems in *Handwriting* are expressions of traditions and 'aesthetic emotional experiences' (69) which are otherwise called *rasas* or flavours.

The analysis of the three sections points out that *Handwriting* is, at the first place, an intensive exploration of war-torn Sri Lankan history. Clifford's association of diasporic identity with historical heritage is applicable here since Ondaatje carries on the history of the native land. While mapping a new kind of discovery

and perception of the natural world and poetic language, Ondaatje in the mode of journeys and myths, highlights the 'performative contours of a particular time' as Eluned Summers-Bremner words it (110). In fact, *Handwriting* comes as a sort of precursor to the novel *Anil's Ghost*(2000) where the author treats the story of the homeward journey of a diaspora, Anil, who undergoes utter sense of homelessness not only in the places of her (Anil is a lady) work, but also in her original homeland. Just as the doors that should be open were closed to Anil (*Anil's Ghost* 40), the poet-diaspora in *Handwriting* discovers that the sense of attachment is gradually disappearing and has ceased to exist. In the poem entitled "House on a Red Cliff", the poet says:

*The flamboyant a grandfather planted
having lived through fire
lifts itself over the roof
unframed
the house an open net
where the night concentrates
on a breath
on a step
a thing or gesture
we cannot be attached to. (61)*

The above lines point to the gradual slackening of the diasporic attachment. In other words, Ondaatje's sense of detachment from home finds expression in his poetry. His observation that lots of his 'own world' gets into the stories (qtd in Bok 114) signifies that his stories serve as the vehicle of his inner sense of displacement and dislocation. He grows restless because of the loss of faith and the altering sense of love. In the poem named "Last Ink", he says:

*Our altering love, our moonless faith
Last ink in the pen
My body on this hard bed.
The moment in the heart
where I roam restless, searching... (66)*

Poems in *Handwriting*, secondly, depict Ondaatje's concern with memories and images of his early life in Sri Lanka. The poet here invites us to enter into the imaginative spirit of place and imaginative interpretation of it as well (Vigurs para 11) The poem entitled "A Gentleman compares his virtue to a piece of Jade" is an imaginative representation of his life in the native land Sri Lanka. And this, Ondaatje does almost as a way of giving a foreign touch to the speaker's voice and experiences as in the image of 'that tight rope walker from Kurumegela/ the generators that shut down by insurgents' (4). The central image of *Handwriting* recurs in such poems as "The Distance of a shout:

*Handwriting occurs on waves,
on leaves, the scripts of smoke (5)*

Similarly, in the poem named "Buried", he refers to a past event concerning the stealing of a Buddha statue:

*750 AD the statue of a Samadhi Buddha
Was carefully hidden, escaping war, the treasure hunters (7).*

III. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the poems brings to the forefront the fundamental fact that diasporic people cannot psychically remain aloof from both – the family from which they are detached and the country and culture from which they are distanced. The desire to regain the losses hovers in their mind incessantly. Ondaatje's visualization of his mother in the face the old Sri Lankan lady is symbolic of his earnest desire to re-associate himself with the family. He carries with him what Safran terms 'memory, vision and myth' of the homeland. Similarly, there are poems that delineate his love of the native language, Sinhala, as his cultural links to his root. His description of, and references to, various sites of Sri Lanka suggestively brings out not only his love of the native geography but also his material links. The poems in *Handwriting* are in fact filled with references to the sights and sounds, myths and history, beliefs and ceremonies of the diasporic poet's native land. Again, while capturing Sri Lanka's violence and political turmoil that lead to the erasure of an alphabet, this anthology bears witness to Sri Lanka's heritage and history. The very structure of the anthology – a revisit of a diaspora to the country of origin delineate several key diasporic issues –viz. diasporic persons do take intermittent visits as Cohen states but because of their diasporic states they have to live with what Brah calls 'mythic desire for home'. While as an agent of development the poet takes the task of recording and reorganizing his homeland cultural practices, he is also producing a sort of 'memorial reconstruction' since half of the poems were written in the host land Canada. With the *rasa* theory applied in the central section, the anthology upholds Ondaatje's deep sense of culture. On the whole, the poet's positive diasporic consciousness has inspired him to explore the diverse aspects of 'home' in this anthology that depicts his unstinted sense of cultural rootedness.

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