



THE PRODIGAL RETURNS: UNDERSTANDING NARRATIVES OF RETURN IN ONDAATJE'S *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY* (1982)

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ABSTRACT



This paper engages with the 'politics of returning home' as represented in Sri-Lankan diasporic writing. In this paper, I analyse Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*. This chapter engages with the dialectics of the displaced diasporic writer and his nervous return to his homeland. This chapter brings into focus the conflict between the established binaries of outsider/insider that operate within the diasporic framework. It begins by outlining the key critical debates concerning Ondaatje's text, then moves on to show how the diasporic return destabilizes the sense of self for the returnee. It interrogates the concepts of 'foreigner', 'prodigal' and diasporic identity with regards to the returnee. In the first part of this chapter, I discuss Ondaatje's semi-autobiographical text, *Running in the Family*, focusing on the journey of Ondaatje's return to homeland and the discourse of the filial past and then go on to show how through this space of dialogue and interaction between distinct diasporic identities, Ondaatje manages to redefine the concepts of 'return' and 'alienation' within the homeland in ways that build up new ways of understanding the concept of return journey towards the homeland.

Key words: prodigal, diasporic return, homeland, foreigner, alienation, belonging

In *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie recounts the journey back to Bombay before his seminal novel *Midnight's Children* was conceptualized and published:

A few years ago I revisited Bombay, which is my lost city, after an absence of something like half my life. Shortly after arriving, acting on an impulse, I opened the telephone directory and looked for my father's name. And, amazingly, there it was; his name, our old address, the unchanged telephone number, as if we had never gone away to the unmentionable country across the border. It was an eerie discovery. I felt I was being claimed, or informed that the facts of my faraway life were illusions, and

that this continuity was a reality [...] (Rushdie 9)

Rushdie offers this insightful take on his visit to Bombay before *Midnight's Children* was published. His visit to his house evokes a certain disillusionment compelling him to think that maybe 'the facts of my faraway life are illusions and that this continuity was a reality' (9). Rushdie describes this revisit with a sense of overwhelming amazement at the loss of his 'home' and the immediate rush of memories that this return brings forth. This experience marks the inception of *Midnight's Children*; it was in the moment he 'realized how much [he] wanted to restore the past to [himself], not in the faded greys of the old family-album snapshots, but whole, in cinemascope and glorious technicolor' (ibid.:9-10). This experience

resonates with Ondaatje's own journey to Sri Lanka and his realization: 'I realised I would be travelling back to the family I had grown from-those relations from my parents' generation who stood in my memory like a frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words' (*Running in the Family*16). Although the modes of expression and circumstances of travel might be different in both the cases, the inherent sentiment behind rearticulating the experiences of their homeland in written form is emotionally similar, stemming from a visceral experience of travel. For a diasporic returnee, such as Rushdie, the desire to look for remnants of the past and the overwhelming feeling of being able to witness and then articulate these fragments is inevitably destabilizing: 'eerie'(to borrow Rushdie's phrase). In such cases, the dynamics of the relationship between the diasporic subject, diasporic return to one's homeland and the desire to capture this journey and 'touch them into words' (Ondaatje, *ibid.* 16) is complex and unsettling.

Clifford has rightly pointed out that within diasporic discourse, 'the immigrant experience' is primarily defined by 'loss and nostalgia... felt only "en route" to a new place, a new home' (*Diasporas* 250) and therefore the phenomenon of diasporic return has been conceptualized as an experience that 'provides the comfort of the familiar and a renewed fulfilment'(Maria & Oliver 92). In the book *Identity, Diaspora and Return in American Literature*, Maria and Oliver's analysis foregrounds the fact that a diasporic return is based on the politics of accepting the homeland as a familiar but distant native space and thereby understanding that the journey of return involves a complete rebirth of self. This concept of re-birth as postulated by them is a renewal of one's native identity when the journey of return occurs (*ibid.*). In this manner, they understand the journey of return as a process that renews and fulfils the returnee. In this sense, contemporary narratives of diasporic return invoke a dialogical relationship between attachment to and nostalgia towards the homeland, and the antithetical centripetal force of a forgotten past.

I analyze Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1982) to show that return cannot be simplistically understood as a process that can replace the already

sedimented diasporic identity with a newly invigorated native sense of self. Instead, it interrogates both these conceptions of identity and highlights an awareness of self that is complex, contradictory and disoriented. I explore how Ondaatje's desire to seek reconnection with his father is articulated through a genealogical quest. I will further this analysis to show that, in representing return, Ondaatje manages to discursively rearticulate the diasporic identity of the returnee by interrogating the concepts of 'foreigner', 'prodigal' and the process of return itself. In so doing, the text is able foreground the politics of a shifting diasporic identity in the homeland, and therefore problematizes a unified understanding of the homeland for the diasporic returnee and his sense of belonging to it.

In the fictionalized memoir *Running in the Family* Ondaatje sets out on an exploration of his Sri Lankan past as well as a genealogical quest that opens up the discourse of diasporic return within the text, a theme that is revisited in his later text like *Anil's Ghost*. Michael Ondaatje left Sri Lanka (referred to as Ceylon by the author in the text) at the age of 11 to study in England and then finally settled in Canada. *Running in the Family* is based on the retrieval of memories of Ondaatje's extended family and friends. It is a rare example of a type of work that resists generic categorisation as it fits into many genres at the same time: fictionalized memoir, autobiography, travel fiction and many more. Sam Solecki has categorized *Running in the Family* as 'an experimental autobiography in prose' (141), Davis has called it a 'fictionalized memoir' (267); it has also been called a 'travel memoir' (Huggan,118), a 'non-fiction novel'(Russell 23), a 'biographical and autobiographical novel'(Snelling 22) and a 'biotext'(Saul 260). *Running in the Family* has been exposed to debates around genre and discourse so much so that almost all critics who study the text categorize it into different generic modes. By avoiding generic fixities Ondaatje manages to show how identity can be fluid, indeterminate and hyphenated. This lack of generic fixity is integral to Ondaatje's writing style as it reflects the author's attempt to highlight the fluidity of his homewards journey, a postmodern aversion to fixity of genre

and narrative and his approach towards scripting his return. Despite the ubiquity of generic and literary critical debates that surround *Running in the Family*, ranging from lack of cultural authenticity, over-exoticization, tourist voyeurism and postcolonial traumas of identity in Sri Lanka, there is a conspicuous gap, as the politics of diasporic return is scarcely studied within the larger context of the form and content of this text.

In an interview conducted in the late 1970s, Ondaatje described himself as being 'in a way... a very displaced person', further admitting that he 'really env[ied] roots' (13). In 1954, after the divorce of his parents, Ondaatje left Sri Lanka and moved to England for a few years and then finally settled in Canada. After 25 years, Ondaatje decided to explore his filial past and return to Sri Lanka. *Running in the Family* was in fact the product of two journeys to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980 by Ondaatje. 'Haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt' (Rushdie 10), like most other displaced diasporic writers, Ondaatje, too, paints a portrait of his homeland, through remembrance and recollection. It is only after these visits to Sri Lanka that Ondaatje manages to articulate his experiences through merging travel journal, photographs, family stories, archival information, and fragmentary childhood memories in the memoir.

Moreover, Ondaatje's novel is told from the first-person perspective of a character. As Peter Stitch observes that the slippage between the authorial voice and narratorial voice is often confusing. He states 'the author masks himself with the persona of a third-person narrator' (83). As a consequence, narrative fluctuates between the first-person narrative and the narrator referring to himself in the third person. In a way, Ondaatje constantly reminds the readers and himself, of this surreal process of writing his homeward journey through this technique of overlap of author/narrator character. Ondaatje also indulges in using names of places and people from his childhood and past memories, further problematizing the divide between author of the text and the narrator in the text.

For instance, throughout *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje refers to the country he is visiting as Ceylon (the former colonial name of Sri Lanka), thus signalling the psychological and emotional difficulties encompassed by his return journey. Ondaatje describes Ceylon as an island 'that seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name is changed, as well as its shape – Serendip. Ratnadipa (island of gems). Taprobane. Zeloan, Zeilans, 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' (Ondaatje 60).

Ondaatje refers to invaders 'who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language' (ibid. 64). He highlights the fact that the colonial history of Sri Lanka problematizes an easy understanding of national history. Ondaatje, states that his homeland is 'the wife of many marriages' (ibid.), and with each marriage and conquering, its identity has changed.

Ondaatje realizes that his own temporary and potentially distanced position as an observer of his former native land is precariously similar to those 'foreigners' who stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the 'inquisitive natives' and 'left' (ibid. 60). By foregrounding this cartographical re-mapping of the island, as aligned with the history of invasions, Ondaatje problematizes his sense of belonging within his homeland. He therefore proclaims, 'we own the country we grow up in or we are exiles and invaders' (ibid. 81). Ondaatje's 'schizophrenic sense of simultaneously belonging and not belonging to th[e] magical place' (Barbour 81), calls upon him to reassess his relationship with his homeland. As a result, in the chapter titled 'Karapothas' Ondaatje exclaims 'I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner' (Ondaatje 79)¹.

Ondaatje's use of the term prodigal is particularly interesting and instructive. It is a term

¹ Karapothas': the term refers to a kind of beetle and is used as a derogatory term for foreigners in the text. Ondaatje's aunt uses the term for foreigners 'who stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the "inquisitive natives" and left' (*Running in the Family* 80).

that has pertinent religious undertones derived as it is from the New Testament: the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 of the New Testament (11-32). In this parable, the younger son asks for his share of his inheritance before all others and after having been granted it leaves his father and squanders his wealth. He comes to regret his actions and asks for his father's forgiveness and is taken back by the father into the family. In this reference, prodigality has also come to represent someone who is a wasteful, extravagant and who has in some sense rejected filial bonds. Interestingly, the reference to the prodigal status of the returnee invites readers to look at the returnee as the one undeserving of being taken back into the family (as in the case of the biblical parable) but who is nevertheless accepted generously by his father and family. However, critics like Gillian Roberts contend that:

Though the biblical associations of wastefulness and lavishness do not apply to Ondaatje here, the return of this younger son to his family (and his ancestral home at Rock Hill) after a long absence makes the label of the prodigal appropriate [...] (328)

Ondaatje's reference to prodigality is appropriate in the sense that it refers to the diasporic returnee who is attempting to re-connect filial bonds by capturing stories of his past; nonetheless, he is left imaginatively searching for his father, Mervyn, who even before his death was divorced from his family, both legally and geographically. In Christopher Ondaatje's account of his own first return journey to Sri Lanka, he describes his brother's novel *Running in the Family* as 'in many ways... a love letter to the father [Michael] never knew, a large and glamorous man away in the distance' (cited in Jewinski 14).

In this context, Ondaatje's usage of the term deconstructs the fixed conception of his prodigal identity within the narrative. Ondaatje shows that for the diasporic returnee the ability to re-establish the strained father-son relationship is sometimes not possible because his father is no longer alive to provide a sense of closure to the prodigal narrative. Roberts links this explicitly to prodigality: 'His (Ondaatje's) foreignness in Sri Lanka, to the country and his family, and distance from his father in

particular are central to Ondaatje's prodigality; migration has produced his absence, cut short his relationship with his father, and removed a straightforward sense of 'at hominess' in Sri Lanka' (ibid.).

Ondaatje attempts to remedy this fraught relationship by gathering photographs and stories about his father through relatives and distant friends, only to realize that gossipy conversations and exaggerated stories impede this re-connection:

There is so much to know and we can only guess. Guess around him. To know him from these stray actions I am told about by those who loved him. And yet, he is still one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut. We are still unwise. It is not that he became too complicated but that he had reduced himself to a few things around him and he gave them immense meaning and significance. (Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* 200)

Even in the introduction of the chapter 'The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society', there is a photograph of Ondaatje's family in Ceylon, where he, his mother, his brother and sister stand against a waterfall. This is the narrator's only childhood photograph in the text. The picture shows the four of them looking at the camera and smiling. The absence of his father from this family picture not only anticipates Mervyn's absence from the family, it also circumscribes Ondaatje's attempt to reconnect with him.

This desire to seek a connection with his deceased father is interlinked with Ondaatje's desire to re-connect with his homeland through this journey. In the opening pages of the novel, Ondaatje claims that, for him, the incentive to return formed 'the bright bone of a dream...I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs...It was a new winter and I was dreaming of Asia...I was running to Asia and everything would change' (Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* 22). The notion of running has many undertones within the text. Ondaatje names the action of his journey back to Asia, his family and his childhood, 'running' (Ondaatje, ibid.22). His action of running towards the family invokes a dialogical space where 'running from', 'running to', 'running

away' and 'running in the family' are all possible preposition combinations applicable to his narrative. When he runs in his family, he is running both toward it and away from it. The 'running' creates the effect of a complex search in which identity needs to be discovered in all its various forms. Aware of this complexity, Ondaatje alerts the readers and himself by stating 'everything would change' (1) once the journey is undertaken. Although this scene begins by presenting an already dishevelled, tired and disoriented figure of the narrator who is fast asleep on a friend's couch, his realization of a far deeper impending transformation evokes a rather disconcerting picture of this journey. The narrator confesses that, back in Canada during a party, drunk and relaxed, he 'knew' he was 'already running' (ibid. 22), and 'during quiet afternoons' he 'spread maps onto the floor and searched out possible routes to Ceylon' (ibid. 22).

This journey towards re-discovering the homeland 'and the maze of relationships in [his] ancestry' (ibid.25), begins with a partly-filled map of Sri Lanka. Ondaatje admits: 'The maps reveal rumours of topography, the routes for invasion and trade, and the dark mad mind of travellers' tales appears throughout Arab and Chinese and medieval records' (ibid. 64). Therefore, in using a half-filled map, Ondaatje tells us that his intention was to 'establish a kind of map... to make clear that this was just a part of a long tradition of invasions and so forth. So the map and the history and the poetry made a more social voice, became the balance to the family story, the other end of the see-saw' (qtd in Hutcheon 201). In the context of this text, Huggan argues that the half-filled map represents 'the novel's central theme of hidden truth' (24), signifying the narrator's attempt to identify himself spatially and culturally with his homeland. Moreover, this map acts as a significant form of shaping the land about to be visited, and is therefore used as a figurative device in the text to (re)shape the journey to the narrator's father. In other words, by writing through verbal description or any other sign system – like maps or photographs – the narrator intertwines the tales told about his family and homeland, and turns them into the emotional (re)mapping of his past so as to rebuild

his father's identity and to be able to connect to him.

Huggan also points out that maps also act as 'symbols of imposed political authority or as metaphors for territorial dispossession' ("Decolonizing the Map" 32), signifying a colonial cartographic impulse. Therefore, Ondaatje once again realizes that he is oscillating between his identity as the prodigal, attempting to re-connect with his deceased father and his homeland, and the 'foreigner', who is exploiting colonial names and cartography to rediscover his native land. Further in the text, we see Ondaatje constantly oscillating between these contradictory positions, sometimes embracing the realities of the homeland and other times resisting it with equal fervour. He begins by stating his pleasure with Sri Lankan weather: 'We are back in Colombo, in the hottest month of the year. It is delicious heat' (Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* 79), and then complains about the same: 'heat disgraces foreigners... my kids, as we drove towards lowland heat, growing belligerent and yelling at each other to shut up, shut up, shut up' (ibid. 80). This parallel passage foregrounds Ondaatje's ambivalent positioning, implicating him in both the scenarios, highlighting Ondaatje's awareness of an unresolved contradiction and dismantling unified conceptions of his prodigal status in his homeland.

Amidst this chaos and contrasts of identities, Ondaatje discovers a confusing and contrasting oddity in his ethnic lineage. Ondaatje comes to learn that his 'father always claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, though that was probably more valid about three centuries earlier' (ibid. 41). He further dwells in 'the maze of relationships in [his] ancestry' (ibid. 25) in order to learn about the confluence of many cultures in Ondaatje's forebears and their complex relationship. He states: 'Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations' (ibid. 41). The narrator mentions the origin of the family name, crediting it to an intermarriage of the Dutch governor's daughter with a doctor, a foreigner, who after curing the young girl received her as wife, thus being 'rewarded with land and a new name' Ondaatje (ibid.64). After his wife's

death, his ancestor married a Sinhalese and remained there. Kanaganayakam sheds light on Ondaatje's Burgher identity and argues that 'as the country moved closer to Independence, the tenuousness of a community whose strength and its weakness lay in its cultural syncretism become increasingly apparent' (132-34). Ondaatje also highlights how the Burgher Community had distanced itself from the native population in terms of ethnicity and culture and was closer to the ruling power, and hence, for Ondaatje, the issue of belonging and acceptance becomes all the more complex.

Ondaatje is deeply aware of the conflicted position he occupies in terms of his Burgher lineage and the family's colonial history and outsider status in Sri Lanka. Ondaatje's awareness of his fraught and complicated status is deeply reflected through the narratorial voice, which frequently acknowledges his constructed ethnicity and an already fraught sense of diasporic identity: that of the 'prodigal' and 'the foreigner'. In so doing, the narrative foregrounds plural notions of prodigality and deconstructs the already established fixed conceptions of it. Moreover, one can observe that the constant tension between the narrator's prodigal status and his position as the 'foreigner' nuances his narrative in such a way that it disturbs the stability of his diasporic or native identity and the fixed conceptions of the returnee's relationship to his homeland.

This stiff juxtaposition between his status as the 'prodigal' and the 'foreigner' provides for constant tension within the text, primarily foregrounding an unresolved complexity that Ondaatje struggles with; a complex positionality that resonates with Rushdie's evocation of diasporic positioning: 'Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools' (15). Due to this complex identity negotiation of 'the prodigal- foreigner' status, the text presents Ondaatje's return as inherently paradoxical, undercutting the idea of a comforting return to homeland and also complicating our understanding of 'homeland' and 'belonging' for the diasporic returnee. In so doing, one can recognize that the self-consciousness of the text unravels how

this tension between marginality and integration within the homeland severely problematizes notions of belonging and locatedness for the returnee.

Conclusion

In my analysis the text, I hope to have shown that Ondaatje's representation of diasporic return is deeply complex and provokes a rigorous engagement with the politics of narrating home and the past. In the memoir, *Running in the Family*, it is the author who takes a personal journey back to homeland. In exploring the narrator's journey towards homeland in *Running in the Family*, I have shown that the overwhelming stress on genealogical recovery enables Ondaatje to negotiate this sense of a conflicting positionality within his homeland. As a result, the antithetical pulls of 'prodigal' and 'foreigner' statuses build up a productive tension that rearticulates the polemics of diasporic return and foreground a fragile sense of belonging for the returnee. Through this space of dialogue and interaction between these distinct diasporic identities, Ondaatje manages to redefine concepts of 'return' and 'alienation' within the homeland and to build up new ways to understand homeland and the tenuous relationship for the diasporic returnee.

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