

Transgressing Narrative Borders in Michael Ondaatje's Memoir *Running in the Family*

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Abstract: *Recent theories of history have engendered large conceptual reviews at the level of historical representation, which have created gradual ruptures with the traditional perceptions of national history and its inherent assumptions of unity, linearity, and coherence, and have produced profound epistemological shifts in the modes of historical writings in national literature. Since the last quarter of the 20th century, essentialized and homogenized representations of the past underlying the foundational nationalist historical narratives have been increasingly superseded by less static orientations which unsettle archaic standards and interrogate hegemonic normative visions of the past established by the nationalist enterprise and*

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*unquestionably endorsed by the first generation of national writers. Influenced by the current representational upheavals in the arena of literature, the new wave of postcolonial diasporic life writings have significantly contributed to the process of expanding and reshaping the narrative of national history beyond the narrow rhetoric of postcolonial nationalism and its intrinsic totalizing and exclusionary paradigms. These emerging life writings gesture towards elaborating subversive counter-hegemonic representations of the past, which aim ultimately at achieving an epistemological rupture with the absolutist monolithic historical narratives sanctified by the dominant postcolonial nationalism. In this paper I seek to explore some subversive representational approaches adopted in contemporary postcolonial minority autobiographies/memoirs, and to shed light on their significant narrative interventions. My paper delves particularly into **the transgression of generic boundaries and the dissolution of narrative borders** characterizing the autobiographical representation of colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka in Michael Ondaatje's memoir *Running in the Family*, and highlights the subversive narrative strategies and the counter-hegemonic motives underlying this representation.*

Keywords: generic transgression, narrative borders, autobiographical narrative, nationalist historiography, national minorities, counter-history.

Since the emergence of nationalist movements in the colonial world at the beginning of the 20th century, the process of discursive homogenization and essentialization of the narratives of national historical narratives has played a crucial role in the articulation and the consolidation of anti colonial nationalism. In fact, national historians have fervently engaged in the task of unifying the historical consciousness of the national subjects and entrenching the authority and the hegemony of their carefully established monolithic historical representation over the existing alternative ones. The authorized version of the national history has been largely premised on the centrality of the foundational grand narratives of common national struggle, heroic sacrifices of national subject as well as the brutality and the injustices of the colonial enterprise over decades of political and economic subjugation. The obsessive emphasis on these foundational grand narratives stems from the fervent desire to create and to perpetuate a common sense of belonging

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among the culturally and ethnically diverse population and to preserve the continuity and the cohesiveness of the fragile newly fledged independent polities.

Notwithstanding that the process of imagining a common national history has played a key role in the consolidation of the political project of independence as well as in the task of framing a unifying national identity, the authority and the legitimacy of the hegemonic version of national history has constituted a hotly contested issue. Since the last quarter of the 20th century many historians have criticized national historical narratives for what they consider its homogenizing and totalizing character which has ultimately impaired national cohesion rather than bolstered it by transforming the bulk of national history schoolbooks into vapid texts of propaganda which perpetuate the hegemony of anti colonial nationalist narrative of the colonial and postcolonial past and its inherent exclusionary paradigms. They suggest that the systematic suppression of alternative contentious representations and the violent erasure of diversities of experiences by discrediting non-conformist dissenting voices and imposing miscellaneous forms of censorship over historical writings are among the most obvious aspects of the tyrannical nature of the mainstream anti-colonial nationalist ideology. Such totalizing representational practices which relentlessly sought to normalize and standardize past narrative contribute, according to them, not only to obliterate national communal and individual memories but also to quash any attempt to rethink and rectify the oversimplified and ideologically oriented assumptions of unity and coherence and to expand national historical narratives beyond the strict boundaries of nationalist historiography and its inherent exclusionary representational paradigms.

Since the 1970's, the blossoming of minority literatures have stimulated a productive criticism of nationalist historiography by offering an active domain of contestation whereby the dominant monolithic historical narratives have been interrogated and dismantled. Through a myriad of deconstructionist representational approaches, the rising generations of national minority writers issuing from the postcolonial world have led a revisionist process which aims ultimately at achieving an epistemological rupture with the narrative models underpinning official historical texts which produce and entrench exclusion and marginality. This process consists in disrupting the putative unity, coherence, and homogeneity of national past narratives endorsed and purveyed by the conventional national literary text. This revisionist process aims ultimately at questioning the timeless validity and the absolute authority of historical narratives by inventing new literary expressions which aims at opening up new undiscovered realms of the past and revisiting the systematically obscured ones.

The representation of history in the new autobiographical narratives largely converges with the postmodern approach which foregrounds the performative nature of any historical text and its inevitably shifting meanings. The latter "may thus be seen today as unstable, contextual, relational, and provisional, but postmodernism argues that, in fact, it has always been so" (Hutcheon 67). This postmodern technique aims, according to Linda Hutcheon, at demystifying history as an ideologically and culturally constructed text, and reconfiguring historical knowledge as a purely performative set of multilayered, overlapping, contradictory, and provisional meanings which "uses novelistic representations to underline the narrative nature of much of that knowledge" (67). National minorities' significant interventions in national past narratives have generated profound epistemological shifts which prompt national historian to relinquish archaic totalizing notions of unity and closure.

Redefining the borders of national historical narratives, shifting representational perspectives, and broadening narrative horizons have been the modus operandi of the revisionist task carried by national minority writers. By breaking with the strict conventions of literary historical representations and its intrinsic claims of objectivity and credibility, the new generation of national minority writers have problematized normative standards of historical writing and put into question essentializing assumptions about historical referential texts. Influenced by the flourishing subversive trends of postmodernism and post-structuralism, these non-conformist writers have suggested innovative writing styles which unsettle the presumed supremacy of official grand narratives over communal experiences, dissolve the boundaries between factual historical materials over family stories, transgress generic borders, and de-center authorial voice in favor of multiple interacting and even conflicting voices. These narrative interventions have, ipso facto, undermined potentially the discursive hegemony of nationalist historiography, and generated an overheated debate over its legacy on the disempowered and excluded national minorities over decades of systematic political and cultural repression.

Along with fiction, recent life-narratives articulated by national minority writers have become a productive site of contestation whereby alternative past narratives have been elaborated and official ones have been challenged. Contemporary memoirs and autobiographies have increasingly been paid critics attentions thanks to their valuable contribution to the process of re-writing national past narratives and revolutionizing the conventional representational approaches underlying traditional life-writings. Shifting away from the common perception of history as a linear, unified, and teleological narrative, and toppling down the archaic perception of history and its unquestioned representation in terms of, continuity, coherence, and homogeneity, the inventors of these burgeoning creative writings have deconstructed in various ways past narrative by shaking the tenets which underlie monolithic representations of the past . One of the most obvious approaches sustaining their deconstructionist strategies is the blending of diverse textual references and elements which inevitably led to transgressing generic boundaries. This careful process of reconstructing fragments of narratives is similar to a puzzle game. In this context, Susanna Egan observes that "[c]ontemporary autobiographers [...] who seem to stake no claim for a unified or coherent identity, seek no illusions of coherence from the reflections available to them. Their texts display fragmentation, incoherence, even dissolution"(11-12). The conception of the autobiographical text as an univocal text where the past unfolds sequentially, straightforwardly, and completely orchestrated by an omniscient all-knowing unified and coherent narrating self has been abandoned in favor of a highly complex self-reflexive narrative or meta-narrative where the past is constantly and endlessly constituted through the interaction of miscellaneous sources and conflicting discourses.

Unlike nationalist autobiographers or memoirists who claim to detain a major historical truth which is unveiled and demonstrated throughout the narratives of their lives, their families experiences, and their nations' biographies throughout the turbulent colonial and postcolonial period which largely sustains and consolidates the hegemonic political agenda, the new wave of minority writers constantly emphasize, throughout their autobiographical narratives, the fact that they do not possess a prior truth about what happened in the past and acknowledge whether explicitly or implicitly that this truth is problematically articulated throughout the vicissitudes of time and endlessly re-inscribed through the irreconcilable political, historical, and cultural discourses.. Their tormenting sense of confusion and perplexity is often evidenced in their fragmented non-linear, non-sequential narrative. As a corollary, the autobiographer never

completely controls the narrative and never claims a full access to a given truth around which his autobiographical text is centered. His/her historical consciousness is continuously informed and reshaped by the intricate interactions of historical elements and the contingencies of the writing moments. Through suggesting highly-reflexive, fragmentary, multi-perspectival and polyvocal autobiographical texts, these writers seek to foreground the complexity of historical representation and to expand the national history beyond the rhetoric of nationalism and its embedded exclusionary dichotomies.

Obsessed with re-writing national past narratives and recovering their families and communal memory, the new generation of minority writers do not seek to chronicle their lives in a straightforward narrative style – meaning one singular linear narrative. They believe that reproducing the past according to the nationalist cluster of standards and references would be too conventional and does not best serve the stories they want to tell. Their writings are stimulated by the obsession of redefining past narratives in life-writings so as to encompass all the complexities, the ruptures, and the diversities of past experiences against the dominant reductionist monolithic narrative of official historiography. National history needs, in their views, to be told from many perspectives as well as through different texts and modes of expression to regain its representational value. They do not want to be the sole voice which imposes a particular version of the past over other the alternative competing ones. Through varying the historical references in their narrative and introducing obvious perspectival shifts, these writers seek to achieve a radical rupture with the classic representational paradigms. By subverting the authorial voice in traditional autobiographies and memoirs, they want to be honest with their ancestors, to use their own words, and to re-tell their stories instead of reiterating the coherent mainstream national stories of nationalist heroism.

Their autobiographical narratives blend the different voices together and expose the dialectic relation between the past and the present and the organic link between the national and the communal. These narratives, though are largely hovering over their chronicles of own lives in the past, include other people's stories and perspectives. Their ultimate aim was not to sanctify a unique and absolutist version of the past through a coherent teleological documentary-like narrative but rather to stress the complexity, provisionality, and multiplicity of representations through a tapestry of voices and perspectives, to unbury existing past experiences that were left behind, and to piece together something that was indicative of real experiences in the past which are still mostly unknown. They engage, through revisiting their past, in an act of resistance against cultural erasure.

The complicated representations of the past aim, eventually, at celebrating alternative un-official historical narratives, including the oral ones. Written in multiple narratives, navigating bloodlines, and tracing ancestral stories and folktales, the past they suggest unfolds in a multidimensional and multidirectional ways which transgresses the borders of official histories and dismantle the facile dichotomies of national versus ethnic/communal past. Instead of projecting their own personal ideologically-loaded assumptions about the past through a unified authorial voice, they choose to write themselves into their country's fragmented and conflicting narratives in ways that challenges the notion of the omniscient historian who offers all-encompassing historical accounts in the conventional autobiography or memoir. Their texts largely endorse the postmodern representational strategies through which the writer revises and redefines the strict textual and epistemological frames of conventional literary historical

narratives by dissolving generic boundaries, and hence complicating the whole approach of historical representation. Linda Hutcheon suggests that “[t]he borders between literary genres have become fluid: who can tell anymore what the limits are between the novel and the short-story collection [...] the novel and the long poem [...], the novel and autobiography[...], the novel and history[...], the novel and biography”(9). Indeed, under the influence of postmodernism and its pertaining revisionist representational praxis, autobiographical texts have become increasingly multi-generic. They lost, therefore, their narrative homogeneity. The distinctions between genres have become confusing due to the precariousness of narrative borders. Therefore, the frustration of narrative clarity in Ondaatje’s memoir is achieved through the internally contradictory and problematic structuring of historical meaning.

In his critically acclaimed memoir *Running in the family* which was published in 1982, the Sri Lankan Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje revisits and re-writes the colonial and postcolonial history of his homeland Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon) through a plethora of innovative representational techniques. Like other coeval postcolonial writers who are deeply influenced by postmodern interventions in redefining quintessential concepts organically associated to historical representation, Ondaatje does not claim to illustrate a comprehensive unified narrative of his native nation’s colonial and postcolonial history. Through an autobiographical narrative in which he chronicles his journey back home after 25 years of absence to come to terms with his lost past and to trace back the socio-ethnic roots and the political context of his father’s tragic suicide, Ondaatje is mindful that the past he is seeking to recover is disrupted by memory gaps and marred with confusing contradictions which hinder a full reconnection with its narrative and complicate full understanding of its significant inherent meanings.

As a result of his severance from his homeland at an early age, the author can only develop a fragmented and hazy image of his family and his Burghers’ experiences during the turbulent colonial and postcolonial period. In his fervent quest for his father’s paradoxically extravagant yet miserable life which led him to commit suicide after his divorce, Ondaatje realizes that fathoming the drives of his father’s eccentric attitudes, identifying the circumstances of his complex and unstable life, and understanding the real reasons of his financial ruin shortly after his divorce can only be achieved through the crucial task of exploring the peculiar history of the Burghers minority within a wider national historical context through carrying out a painstaking task of undertaking meticulous historical research and investigations. However the scarcity of information about the Burghers past experiences in official historical documents spurs the author to rethink the approaches of his historical inquiry. In fact, his awareness of the systematic obscuring and erasure of the Burghers’ past experiences with its rich and diverse cultural and political dimensions and the discursive perpetuation of nationalist Sinhalese anti colonial narratives largely shapes his autobiographical representation of Sri Lanka’s history. He realizes that the past can only be partly grasped through referring to a host of alternative historical sources, through recalling a complex network of multiple conflicting voices, and through evoking a large array of textual tributaries which can broaden the perspectives of his historical inquiry beyond the confines of nationalist historiography. In her book *Writing the Roaming Subject: The Biotext in Canadian literature*, Joanne Saul suggests that *Running in the Family* is “a text that challenges formal and generic definitions as a way of articulating the complexities of the subject in process”(33). She observes, in the same context, that:

Ondaatje uses a range of strategies to highlight the textual nature of the past. He undermines a referential narrative by incorporating a range of destabilizing techniques, including the representation of history as narrative, multi-voicedness, and intertextuality. All serve to complicate any direct access to his family history and emphasize the complex processes involved in his identification with his past. (49)

Against conventional autobiographical narratives articulated by nationalist leaders which promote historical amnesia through entrenching absolutist and reductionist historical truths and eliminating competing accounts, Ondaatje seeks to foreground and celebrate the multiplicity of perspectives, and to foreground the self-reflexive nature of any historical representation, which implies the constructedness and the contingency, and hence, the provisionality of historical truths. Thus, it interrogates claims of objectivity and consistency on which the putative supremacy of referential autobiographical writings is premised.

Ondaatje's propensity towards blurring generic boundaries is grounded on his belief that private, communal, and national past narratives are borderless. They cannot be unified and concentrated in a single text, but rather constantly disseminated in different texts/non texts and historical truth cannot be grasped from a single perspective but endlessly articulated and mediated through multiple voices and standpoints. In his essay entitled "Gender and Life Stories", Annie Vilkkko et al. posit that the new pattern of autobiography is grounded on the assumption that perception that narratives of past experiences are inevitably fragmented and irretrievable (61). They conclude, accordingly that, the new model of autobiographical truth "is characterized by disconnected, scattered, and fragmentary textual conventions of performance. Thus the late-modern autobiography is zigzagging between the old and the new register to narrate a life, searching for possibilities to recite it in another way, that guarantees the openness of the text" (61-62). Ondaatje's problematic representational approach is grounded on his assumption that history cannot be known and represented as it actually happened because its meaning is context—based, and hence it is always provisional.

Against the backdrop of the mainstream nationalist narrative which aims at entrenching a fixed, stabilized, and essentialized national historical narratives through imposing a unified historical consciousness, Ondaatje's interventions in the narrative of Sri Lanka's past problematize the possibility of unifying national historical texts and framing its narratives within well-defined ideological paradigms. As a matter of fact, the univocality of the traditional autobiographical text flattens national history and occludes the diversity and richness of ethnic and communal histories in favor of an homogenized foundational nationalist one, which contributes to impairing the representational value of national narrative and transforms it into vapid texts of propaganda where an absolute historical truth is sanctified and alternative contesting ones are discarded. According to Ondaatje, writing about the past is an experience and not accounting for an experience. This implies that the production of the narrative consists in a constant interaction of voices and its meanings are the outgrowth of a continuous synthesis of diverse texts and elements, and never emanate from a single original source.

In one of his interviews with Mark Witten, Michael Ondaatje affirms that "[he] love[s] that sense of history is not one opinion" (qtd.in Leon 113). He affirms his disinterest in methodological constraints of unity and coherence. He confesses that he rather "prefer[s] a complicated history where an event is seen through many eyes or emotions". He adds in the same context that he believes that "history is not a dead thing it's always alive"(qtd. in Leon 113). In his

autobiographical narrative, Ondaatje offers to the reader new perspectives of historical representation whereby he discovers new stories and new aspects of the national past which were darkened in the time of nationalist hysteria in the wake of independence and discarded in favor of grand narratives of decolonization. These stories (which are compiled from popular memory in forms of poems, folktales, diaries etc., and recalled and re-imagined by the author) are mostly hovering around the daily lives of the marginalized Burgher community in the colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka and mostly irrelevant with anti colonial historiography's central concerns such as national liberation struggles and nation-building challenges which figured at the top of the classical nationalist life-writings priorities. Tracie Guzzio stresses, in this context, the counter-hegemonic motives underlying the multi-voicedness of the text which are evidenced in the new autobiographical narratives as he suggests that “[i]n postmodern autobiographies, authors often take on double or multiple voices or selves to challenge dominant hegemonic ideologies” (31). Through varying sources and perspectives, Ondaatje democratizes historical writing and expands historical knowledge beyond the rigid ideological boundaries and its inherent exclusionary paradigms.

The author's obvious interest in revisiting his father's past and exploring darkened realms of his burghers' multidimensional past narrative is fuelled by a stronger desire to counter the hegemony of nationalist historiography and to subvert its exclusionary rhetoric which produces marginality and perpetuates a sense of alienation among Sri Lankan minorities through utilizing deconstructive narrative techniques. Otherwise, he seeks to highlight the totalizing impulses underpinning nationalistic historical writing by confronting it to the Burghers' history. “To challenge the impulse to totalize is” ,according to Linda Hutcheon, “to contest the entire notion of continuity in history” (66). Generic transgression which potentially disrupts the continuity of historical narratives is one of the most obvious features characterizing Ondaatje's autobiographical narrative. Indeed, the author of *Running in the Family* subverts the generic unity of traditional autobiographical texts by blending different literary genres such as poetry, travelogue, and biography in his autobiographical narrative and illustrating a complex network of textual and non-textual materials such as juxtaposing epigraphs and photographs in the same chapter.

While Ondaatje does not discard classical historical documents, he puts them in front of alternative and competing historical sources which may contradict its narrative, and hence, confuse the reader. The complex network of interweaving diverse elements constantly constitutes past narratives and unsettles the authority of official historical documents. Ondaatje's memoir, as any other postmodern text, “consistently use[s] and abuse[s] documents and documentation in such a way as to stress both the discursive nature of those representations of the past and the narrativized form in which we read them” (Hutcheon 87) . This postmodern technique of historical representation replicates the process whereby history is represented and constructed with its intricacies and paradoxes, and underlines, subsequently, its purely narrative nature by foregrounding the existing gaps and fissures inherent in any totalizing narratives despite its claims of consistency. Thus, it chucks out dominant assumptions of unity and closure anchored to conventional historical writing, and interrogates the essentializing definitions embedded in the foundational nationalist historical narrative whereby the Burghers' minority history was systematically erased.

Michael Ondaatje is aware of the latent inconsistencies and evident gaps inherent in official historical documents as well as any other alternative sources. Fraught with flaws, no source can offer a clear image of the past and can allow for a full access to reliable facts and a consistent truth. While writing about personal, communal, and national past experiences was simplified as it unfolds as a linear, seamless, and straightforward factual narrative where events progress smoothly within a clear chronology from past to present and through a unified univocal and uni-perspectival narrative, postmodern life-writings seek rather to demolish the myth of an unproblematic historical writing by performing the intrinsic intricacies underlying any representation including that of the past. According to Ansgaar Nünning, postmodern texts “cross traditional genre boundaries and shift the emphasis from the mere writing, or re-writing, of an historical individual’s life to the epistemological and methodological problems involved in any attempt at life-writing itself”(199). Through the relentless emphasis on the instabilities of life-narratives, Ondaatje puts into question the very possibility of writing a coherent past narrative. .

Shifting away from the archaic standards of strict methodological considerations (such as teleology and narrative cohesiveness) in traditional historical writing, Ondaatje transgresses generic boundaries and transforms his life-narrative into a hybrid text that confusingly incorporates all genres. Each genre complements and/or contradicts the other and never tells the whole story of his family and childhood. The reader who expects a conventional autobiographical representation of the author’s past realizes that the generic unity of the memoir is not fulfilled since the text moves fluidly from one genre to another. In the article entitled *The Alphabet of the Self: Generic and other slippages in Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family*, Smaro Kamboureli stresses the problematic generic categorization of Ondaatje's memoir, and observes, in this context, that "the generic referentiality of *Running in the Family* as *autobiography* remains unstable because the text runs from one generic ground to another, proving itself to be without a genre and therefore not an autobiography" (qtd.in Sitch 81). The text resists being categorized as a closed and unified system of representations and to be labeled as either of these genres. It keeps floating and evading, hence, boundaries and restrictions.

Ondaatje suggests, in his memoir, a new generic possibility. Indeed, he asserts in his "Acknowledgements" section that "the book is not a history but a portrait or gesture"(189) which is so much different from the traditional western idea of life writing. His use of the term "gesture" is quite ambiguous. According to Douglas Barbour, Ondaatje's reference to the word gesture may point to mystery. He defines gesture as an "act of gesturing, of pointing towards that which cannot be named"(24). Barbour adds "In a book full of naming, full of stories, full of both the writer's family and his own life as a writer, great mysteries remain, and all the text can do is point them out" (124). Ondaatje creates, in his multi-voiced fragmented autobiographical narrative, a puzzling image of his family and past rather than presenting a clear one through a linear and sequential narrative. He points out many layers of multiple possible truths instead of a single absolute one. His definition of his autobiographical text as a gesture further confirms its elusive nature, and hence, evidently mirrors his complex sense of the past.

The reader observes, throughout the autobiographical narrative, that Ondaatje's writing about his past is situated in the borderlines of texts. As a matter of fact, the author is not following a clear narrative line. Rather, he is wandering, throughout his journey, across different versions of the past as reported from different texts that can inform him about his family and origins. In this

context, Linda Hutcheon considers that Ondaatje disavows any interest in offering a classical historical document with absolute historical facts since he is self-aware acknowledging of the textual nature of the past he is writing about (82). Constituted through the complex network of textual references and family connections, the text becomes an active domain of self-exploration and a complex site of historical recovery beyond archaic concerns of methodological strictness and factual veracity. Written in a postmodern style, Ondaatje's text relies on the shift away from standards conventions which is evidenced in the constant fluctuation between textual genres.

Through recalling multiple historical sources, Ondaatje portrays the diverse and shifting perspectives of national minorities' historical inquiry. In the maze of interweaving textual and non-textual historical sources as well as factual and non-factual texts, Ondaatje seems to be far from being able to articulate a coherent narrative. He seems rather to be lost in his dim personal memories that do not correspond to the stories he compiles which deepens his sense of alienation from his past. His disorienting sense of alienation pushes him to recognize the inaccessibility of a concrete and consistent historical evidence as the only certain truth he can get from his journey. For Annie Vilkkko "postmodern autobiographies break with conventions" as they "create a sense of discontinuity by using narrative modes such as anecdotal, non-linear writing, incoherence in discourse and meta-narration concerning the legacy of autobiographical truth" (61). Vilkkko adds that "[t]his pattern of autobiography rests on the perception that the experiences are intrinsically disconnected and irretrievable. Thus the attempt to create a coherent and meaningful life course through autobiographical reflection is futile. The truth retreats from the reflecting subject "(61). The generic hybridity characterizing postmodern autobiographies and memoirs "challenges" according to Linda Hutcheon, "the borders we accept as existing between literature and extra-literary narrative discourses which surround it: history, biography, and autobiography" (Hutcheon 224). The straddling of the boundaries between biographical and autobiographical narratives is probably among the most striking aspects which ascertain Ondaatje's tendency towards generic transgression in his memoir.

Throughout the text, Michael Ondaatje confusingly unsettles the boundaries between autobiography and biography to an extent where the reader cannot identify, in some sections, the narrative of the author and that of his father Mervyn. Ondaatje's proclivity towards blurring the rigid boundaries between the narrative of the self and that of the other stems from his unconventional perception of history. The latter is replicated in his deconstructive approach of history writing where the narrating self is no longer unified, autonomous, and self-contained, but rather fragmented, contingent, and de-centered. Thus, the resultant narrative of the past introduced to the reader by the narrating self is constituted through multiple overlapping narratives of others' narratives. To put it differently, Ondaatje believes that he cannot understand his past separately from his family's one. Accordingly, his writing is both concerned with and focusing on his private childhood experience in his native island Sri Lanka as well as his on family's collective past experiences there.

Running in the Family manifests and celebrates the necessary and the empowering journey of the narrating self towards that of the other as an ultimate (but never attainable) destination. Indeed, the narrative of Ondaatje's self gradually moves to become eventually the narrative of Mervyn Ondaatje's self. In the last sections of the memoir, the reader realizes that the narrative of the author's past revolves around the figure of the absent father. He writes:

The bottle was empty half beside him. He arose and lit the kerosene lamp. He wanted to look at his face.[...] He sat down forgetting the mirror he had been moving towards. Scared of the company of mirror. He sat down with his back against the wall and waited. The white rectangle moved with the busy arduous ants. Duty, he thought. But that was just a fragment gazed at the bottom of his eye. He drank. There. Here he saw the midnight rat. (171)

This passage reflects the split of the autobiographical self in the memoir, and offers an evident example where Michael Ondaatje's life narrative meets with Mervyn Ondaatje's one. The narrator deviates from autobiographical writing as the text progresses towards biography. In this context, Smaro Kamboueli considers that Michael Ondaatje "betrays his autobiographical project: he does not discover himself; instead, he finds his father" (85). The end of the book reveals a moment of the self "I" in the mirror image of the other "he" which suggests that the narrative is the beginning of the discovery of the father through the self. Ondaatje demonstrates, through his experience, that any search of one's past will inevitably lead to exploring and grappling with others' ones.

The autobiographical self in *Running in the Family* seems eventually to be lost within the biographical narrative of the other and more particularly the narrative of the father's past. It obviously abandons its centrality and authority, leaves its limited domain, and carries out a particular journey over time towards the vast and borderless domain of the unknown or the little known other. In this context, Carole E Leon considers that Ondaatje's auto(biographical) practice moves from a "fixed point of definition and reference" by denying "its usual position at the center of authority" (103). As a postmodern text, Ondaatje's memoir "problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge" by challenging the internal systems of unity imbricated in the narrative including the unity of the self/subject". (Hutcheon 89). Along with illustrating his father's biography, Ondaatje's autobiographical narrative recalls his grandmother's one. Through conflating factual and fictional elements, he depicts in a chapter entitled "The Passions of Lalla", the eccentric life of his grandmother Lalla. The illustration of Lalla's biography lies at the heart of his quest for the past since the story of her life still occupies an important position in Ondaatje and the burghers' cultural memory due to the originality of her character and the cultural significance of her experience which may tell him much about the particularities of the Burghers' past experiences. Ondaatje imagines, in one of his emotional recollections of his family's past, a fantastic story of his grandmother being swept away during a storm. He writes:

It was her last perfect journey. The new river in the street moved her right across the race course and park towards the bus station. As the light came up slowly she was being swirled fast 'floating' (as ever confident of surviving this too) alongside branches and leaves, the dawn starting to hit flamboyant trees as he slipped past them like a dark log, shoes lost false breast lost. She was free as a fish, travelling faster than she had in years.(110)

The insertion and the reconstruction out of fragmented memories of Lalla and Mervyn's biographies in the autobiographical narrative of the past conveys, on one side, the potential significance of these characters and their deep influence on the author's cultural memory and his understanding of the past. On the other side, portraying the image of the other requires self reflexivity which implies that the full understanding of Lalla and his father Mervyn past is continuously informed by the knowledge of the self. Therefore it is never final and absolute.

Michael Ondaatje highlights the complex, circular, and endless interaction between the self and the other where each one of them is simultaneously developed and problematized through this mutually dependent interaction. In this sense, the constant straddling of biography/autobiography borders mirrors the dissolution of boundaries between the author's and his family's past narratives.

The illustration of Mervyn and Lalla's biographies which involves their fictionalized representation as fantastic legendary characters (where mythical stories coalesce with historical evidences) highlights another aspect of generic transgression in Ondaatje's obfuscated past narrative. Indeed, in addition to blurring the boundaries between biography and autobiography, Ondaatje's narrative constantly straddles the borders between fact and fiction. He systematically undermines narrative coherence and flouts normative standards of veracity and scientificity traditionally associated with conventional historical representation. This postmodern approach in re-writing past narratives which consists in mingling factual and fictional elements carries obvious deconstructionist traces as it demystifies the historical writing as a system of representation and unveils its purely narrative nature beyond claims of closure and absolutism. In this context, Linda Anderson observes, in her referential book *Autobiography* the increasing permeability of the borders between fact and fiction in postmodern autobiographical narratives under the influence of the emerging post-structuralist theories, and the gradual penchant towards relinquishing the obsessive concern with narrative unity and factual accuracy. Unlike traditional autobiography whose narratives mostly gravitate around a central truth, the postmodern one evades any concern with demonstrating a particular truth through illustrating and juxtaposing a range of facts. Paul John Ekin notices a "shift in perspective from fact to fiction regarding autobiography" which "illustrates", according to him, "a change of attitude on the part of the critics regarding the definition of autobiography" (qtd.in Lupicic 42). Vesna Lopicic maintains, in this context, that:

[t]ill the he last quarter of the 20th century critics stressed the proximity of autobiography to history in that it was supposed to reflect the reality as it was and not its fictional representation which would then lead it towards the novel. This also indicates the concept of the self, the author's self which he represents looking back on his past life.(42)

It was assumed that the narrative of life is fixed, and the author only needs to describe it in the context of past events. Vesna Lupicic argues, in the same context, that:

[t]he advance of post-structuralism brought about significant changes in literary theory about autobiography because the self was now seen not as static but as evolving. [The autobiographical truth] cannot be simply revealed as a hidden secret. It should rather be constructed and created through re-membling, re-discovering and re-shaping the self. (42-43)

Veering away from the unilateral and ideologically oriented accounts of the past, Ondaatje revisits and celebrates, in his autobiographical narrative, unexplored experiences, hidden aspects of Sri Lankan Burghers' daily lives, and popular cultural performances in the past which constitute a substantial element in national collective memory. Through his counter-narrative, Ondaatje aims at redefining the borders of the past in the traditional memoir. He opts for offering new tributaries for reading the national colonial and postcolonial past, which gestures towards revitalizing national history and liberating its foundational narratives from the manacles of the

ideological discourse by transgressing its narrow representational paradigms and their pertaining spiritless shallow representations by envisioning new possibilities for a democratized historical writing.

In addition to his affiliation to a minority group, Ondaatje's diasporic lenses allow him to develop deeper insights into the question of national representation and to reconsider the legitimacy of narrative uniformity purveyed by the hegemonic nationalist elite in postcolonial Sri Lanka. While the latter almost absolutely refers to official factual reporting and often relies on centralized perspectives to mediate against undesired forgotten stories, Ondaatje largely evokes, in his quest for the past, unwelcomed non-official and non-factual elements. Azade Seyhan posits that diasporic autobiographies "problematize the issue of representation at many levels and highlight its relational character through the use of multiple narrators –parents, ancestors[...] and narrative genres such as myths, legends,, criticism, literary fictions,, intertexts, or anecdotes. These narrative conventions contest and relativize representational authority" (95). Unlike the official nationalist historiography which reduces national experiences and imprisons its narrative within the narrow anti-colonial frame, *Running in the Family* celebrates the multiplicity of representations and foregrounds the national subjects' daily lives and experiences with its tiniest details.

Ondaatje's position as a Sri Lankan migrant having European origins and issuing from an upper class family as well as his fervent desire to reconnect with his lost past intervene and shape his narrative. Throughout the memoir, he glosses over some details that may have an extreme importance to most Sri Lankan and focuses on some others that may seem unimportant for most Sri Lankan but very significant to him. Rather than exploring common political and social issues, he exhibits a particular concern with evoking national popular culture and more specifically with celebrating the Burghers' cultural heritage to which his parents were emotionally attached. Thus, the narrative celebration of his community's cultural memory through recalling family legends and folktales provides "a counterforce to manufactured and monolithic memory" (Hartman, qtd. in Seyhan 39). In the same context, Deidre Lynch et al suggest that:

[t]he blurring of history, story, and genealogy is another form of resistance to the official story embedded in each of these narratives. Colonized groups often find that getting their story straight and protecting their heritage against attempts to erase it takes the form of genealogy of family history, which then stands in opposition to the official story.(150-151)

While popular culture was often hailed as the warehouse of inherited significant myths and legends (which record past glories and celebrate moral values of colonized indigenous people) played a pivotal role in thwarting the controlling incentives and their pertaining obliterating impetuses enmeshed in the intricate system of colonial discursive hegemony, this popular culture was recalled in Ondaatje's narrative for its same challenging potential but also for different objectives which lie beyond the limits of classical ant-colonial concerns.

Michael Ondaatje does never play the role of the engaged historian who offer a realistic account of the past, but instead he complicates historical writing and suggests an imaginative emotional understanding of it. Rather than sticking to factual assumptions encapsulated in the official history of Sri Lanka, his gathered accounts of the past largely refer to popular imaginaries. Marc Colavincenzo notices that:

[t]he book repeatedly returns to the notion of exaggeration, tall tales, legend, and myth, but rather than discount these elements as unreliable or untrustworthy, the writer both

places them alongside 'reliable' history as a valid mode of knowledge and also develops them further, inserting both private and cultural myths in its private and public depiction of his parents' Ceylon. (155)

The reader is exposed, throughout the text, to a plethora of fragmented and mythical narratives that transcend the reality of facts and takes him to a subjective world of imagination and fantasy that is beyond the reach of official recording. The interplay of facts and myths in Ondaatje's narratives of the past gives more consistency to national historical narratives as it imbues it with powerful imaginative elements which vividly express popular consciousness. In this context, Wilhelm Wundt posits that "[t]he historical interpretations of myths and the commingling of mythical elements with real history are of the greatest significance for their preservation in the popular consciousness" (92). The mythical folktales carry an extreme representative significance as they constitute the repository of national popular memory. The latter plays a key role in toppling down claims of authority traditionally associated with the narrative of official memory. The mythical performance of historical past events in *Running in the Family* conveys the author's interest in exploring popular consciousness of the past and the cultural performances of its events which official recordings often display. Despite their surreal nature, Ondaatje insists on the fact that the inherited mythical stories are more sincere and more expressive of the past. Indeed, beyond the literal understanding of their narrative, these stories imply a profound meanings and a greater representational value since they embody the popular consciousness of its narrators. Denman Collins argues that popular interpretations of historical events are often much more significant than events themselves. In other words, later mythical elucidations have more impact than on what actually happened (qtd. in Dittmer 20). While Ondaatje sought, initially, to uncover the past through documental materials, the extremely appealing expressiveness of mythical stories diverts his attention away from facts. Confronting the danger of presenting inaccurate memories as facts and idealized recollections as evidences and determined to see beyond what may be merely the appearance of truth, Ondaatje resolves to take part in the popular mystification of the past by creating mythical assumptions about it that may even record the more intense realities of the time and of his people.

The truth value of Ondaatje's narrative is premised in oral history, perceptions and imaginary experience – the last of these suggesting a kind of magical realism. Although Ondaatje starts his quest for the Burghers' past by adopting conventional scientific approaches of historical research such as factual investigations as any other traditional historians, the reader notices, as the narratives proceeds, a gradual deviation from the forensic methodology and a surprising immersion into the realm of imagination. In fact, the author's principal narrative technique in re-writing his personal and communal history was first the gathering of data from both official and communal memory, and when facts fail to speak turning to myth to give consistent explanations and fill in the gaps.

Being a substantial element constituting daily life in the Burghers' past, mythical family stories in *Running in the Family* highlight the power of the story to be sincere, comprehensive, and evocative. It can be formidably powerful with the very elements of its inauthenticity. Even if myths lack historical validity, they have a kind of a sincere expressiveness since they are produced in the minds of ordinary people unlike facts which are transcendent and mostly inexpressive of the popular consciousness of history. In recreating the past, Ondaatje seeks to push his family's history towards myth, to evade the superficiality and the monotonous

mechanical rhythm of historical narration, and to load his representation with a deep and powerful meaning where the real negotiates with the magic. In this context, George Eliott Clarke identifies myth as “a story based on tradition or legend, which has a deep symbolic meaning”. He explains that “[a] myth ‘conveys a truth’ to those who tell it and hear it, rather than necessarily recording a true event”(par 9- 10). Clarke carries on stressing the contradictory nature of the myth. He adds, in the same context, that:

[m]yth achieves its greatness when its most incredible elements seem authentic and believable [...] Yet myth is also characterized by ambiguity and amorality. It resists definition even as it defines. It exists in a tension of utterance and silence, motion and stillness, reality and dream, never quite being the one without being the other, Its clarity is obfuscation and its obfuscation clarity (Clarke).

Unlike factual stories, mythical ones derive their representational value from the rich symbols and mages it potentially carries, Their formidable ability to disclose new levels of meanings embedded in the past lies in their highly evocative images which allow for vivid and spiritual reconnections with events and people in the past.

The signifying potential inherent in these stories, and its influence on the culture in which they developed are the principal reasons of their survival for hundred and sometimes for thousands of years. Their importance lies, also, in their eligibility to embrace and to fuse diverse dimensions of the past and their amenability to absorb at once individual and communal past experiences. Clark adds that: “[b]eing individual and communal, myth incorporates all things” < *journals.hil.unb.ca*. In the face of totalizing visions of the past which span nationalist reading of Sri Lankan past and which underpin official historical narratives, Ondaatje tends to mythologize popular imagery of the national history as a way of revamping and reinvigorating national past narrative after years of stagnation and even degeneration. Ondaatje who asserts that “[i]n Sri Lanka a well told lie is worth a thousand facts” strongly believes in the formidable subversive energy inherent in popular stories. (189) John Thorn underscores the great importance of myth as he asserts that “[h]istorians have an obligation to embrace myth as the people’s history”(qtd. in Klein 4). Ondaatje’s disengagement with conventional standards and his belief in the importance of non-official popular interpretations and reconfigurations of the past through the evocation of myths is clearly conveyed in his odd and unexpected representational orientations which flout ideological constraints.

The author’s frequent reliance on fantastical elements in reproducing the past is enhanced by his fervent desire to reconnect with his cultural roots, but also to have access to alternative unvisited realms of the national past to which he can genuinely identify. More precisely, he wants to situate himself within the rich and highly evocative mythical dimension of the Burghers’ cultural memory in particular and the national one in general. Dominique Tooher asserts, in this context, that Ondaatje’s obvious straddling between fiction and autobiography can be considered as “[a]n attempt to come to terms with a past that is both personal and cultural” (14). Indeed, Ondaatje seeks to bring back not only family events in the past, but also the lost elements of colonial and postcolonial Sri Lankan culture This cultural reconnection through journeying and writing is the milestone of the process that helps him to recover his personal and communal past’s significant meanings This process is central in his quest for a lost identity. Nevertheless, the author’s

concern with the cultural aspect of the Burghers' past does not imply a total exclusion of colonial political events.

In *Running in the Family*, many historical events taking place in the colonial and postcolonial period such as the Easter Sunday Raid were introduced to the reader but through the means of anecdotes and mythical tales produced and inherited among the Burgher minority over generations. The mythicized rendition of this historical event has an extreme significance for the author as well as for all Sri Lankan Burghers who are searching for genuine reconnection with their cultural memory in the face of the institutionalized cultural erasure. In contrast with the nationalist strictly ideological reading of the Japanese raid on Sri Lanka (including the incident of the train bombing) which persistently tends to recall the dichotomy of colonizer/colonized by establishing facile division between collaborators and victims, Ondaatje's family evocations of the story complicate this simplified nationalist reading. In this incident, the role of Mervyn, (Ondaatje's father who definitely epitomizes the colonizer Burgher in the dominant official nationalist story, and accordingly, he is considered in a way or another one of the collaborators of the bombing) is quite enigmatic and confusing. Exposed to a set of contradictory details, the reader cannot draw definite conclusions about the reality of Mervyn's implication in the incident.

In addition, the anecdotal and mythical-like aspect of the story works to stultify the absolutism and seriousness of nationalist treatment of colonial and postcolonial events as it invites the reader to get rid of the closures intrinsic in the official history and to get exposed to alternative perspectives, and accordingly, draw multiple conclusions. I believe that the father's enigmatic relation with the bombing incident can function as a metaphor for the Burghers' conscious ambivalence translated into an undecided mysterious relation with colonialism. Such ambivalence stresses the hybrid political and cultural background which counters absolute identifications linked to the Burghers and embedded in nationalist historical representations.

By illustrating a story which is fraught with contradictions, the author wants to say that the meaning is not in the event itself, but as Hutcheon suggests "in the systems which makes those past events into present historical facts" (89). Ondaatje's postmodern strategy of blending the mythical and the factual is not "a dishonest refuge from truth but an acknowledgement of the meaningmaking function of human constructs", which subverts claims of objectivity and absolutism anchored to the foundational historical narratives (89). Through imbuing historical events with familial sagas, Ondaatje explores and underscores the tenuous boundaries between national past experience on the one side and family's past experience on the other side in ways that complicate national historical representation and "disorients," in Bhabha's words, any simple division between the national and the domestic life often embodied in nationalist historiography (14). This disorientation allows for shaking commonly espoused visions of national history and allowing the memoir to represent access to counter-histories through non-classical representational models such as cultural memory, dreams, oral traditions, and other means outside the domain of official historiography. By and large, the new contemporary writings in general and memoirs in particular are looking for new narrative streams which gesture towards recasting alternative and contingent histories away from the narrow confines of official frames.

Influenced by the Burghers' cultural background which valorizes and celebrates surreal fantastic elements in their own past narrative, Ondaatje carries out an imaginative act of journeying and writing, undermining any possibility of credibility and authenticity. He tends to mythologize facts of his private story and to re-construct his family's history around myths, rumors, and gossips; triggering imagination, giving a mythical dimension of the past by imbuing it with a sense of magic, and making the narrative not only inaccurate but also reinvented and reshaped. Throughout the text, Ondaatje fantasizes his family's life but also deaths (such as his the fantastic story of grandmother mysterious murder which was mentioned earlier). He seeks through the mythicized yet meaningful evocation to fill the missing gaps of official history. However, this filling is never limited. It implies, instead, an ongoing process of interpretations and re-interpretations. Through the very act of retelling tales about his family or his country, the narrator is reconciling with the past of his Burghers' community. More importantly, he is taking part in the unearthing of substantial elements of the unauthorized national past narratives.

The author's inclination towards revisiting mythical popular tales is evidenced since the beginning of the memoir. When he attempts to recreate his father's image, he wanted to begin with factual truth. However, as he starts writing he moves outwardly to mythologize him. In the opening passage of the memoir when his imaginative inclinations were exhibited as he imagines his father in a fantastic situation where he seems "chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them were screaming and barking into the tropical landscape" (3). This surreal representation of the father stems from his mythological unconscious and translates his inner passion for a wild mythical life that he misses. This mythical-like life constitutes a substantial part of the cultural memory that he wishes to recover. What Ondaatje actually writes, therefore, is not an objective history as he uncovers it. It is the awakening of his consciousness to the implications of the fascinating realities that he discovers, and of the connections that he perceives as he contemplates the evidence before him. And it is this awakening that his historical consciousness, and hence, affirms and enriches his cultural identity. Accordingly, Ondaatje seems not concerned with giving a purely realistic identical portrayal of the characters, but instead he is interested in offering a surreal representation that arises from his emotional imagination whereby characters exist between reality and myth and between history and fiction. The mythologization of characters touches the domain of the imaginary and goes beyond the so-called scientific historical writing, which allows Ondaatje to experience a deeper self-realization and to transcend the realistic dimension of his subjectivity.

The mythical dimension of his representation is problematic for it paradoxically adds a kind of authenticity to the narratives. This authenticity springs from a genuine realism of his imagination. The deeper senses embedded in the mythical stories whether gathered from relatives or articulated in the writers' imagination functions as symbolic references through which the writer explains his own perception of the past and the nation and whereby he underpins his cultural identity. Moreover, this surreal representation allows him also to add his voice to the versions of others about the past. Indeed, through the very act of retelling tales about his family, the narrator becomes the protagonist who participates in the cultural memory of the community and achieves, in some ways, a sense of belonging. Through the trope of magic and myth, Ondaatje throws himself into the realm of imagination and opens wider doors to re-experience exotic aspects of his family's past which historical documents could not offer.

Ondaatje imagines, in one of his emotional recollections of his family's past, a fantastic story of his grandmother being swept away during a storm.

This fabulous story of Lalla's death is quite problematic and confusing since it contradicts with the "natural causes" of her death mentioned earlier in the book (23). This contradiction further proves that Ondaatje deliberately conflates elements of incredibility and inauthenticity in his narratives in contrast with normative standards of historical inquiry. While classical biographies in nationalist narratives are characterized by their evident factual elements and endowed with a high level of 'credibility', Lalla's one carries irreconcilable elements of credibility and incredibility. In this sense, mythical stories become more potent and alluring than historical facts because they can narrate human experiences with its contradictions and strangeness and even with its irrationality. Through the story of Lalla, Ondaatje seems to justify the postmodern interpretations of his textual practices. Multiple narrative voices provide the reader with different perspectives some are factual and some are imaginary, none of which can claim to be the superior truth. In his problematized portrayal of his characters, Ondaatje shapes a narrative in-between with elusive borders that fluctuate between the real and the fictional.

Furthermore, the mystification of Lalla in the author's narrative of the past can be understood as an indirect celebration of the Burgher woman which was doubly marginalized in the mainstream historical narratives as being a female and a colonizer. According to Joanne Saul, the captivating and controversial story of Lalla in Ondaatje's memoir works as a counter-hegemonic strategy to contest patriarchal historical representation as it challenges the predominant andro-centric nationalist historical narratives which relentlessly amplify male heroism and systematically reduce female presence in the narratives of national stories (43). Further, the mystification of the character of Lalla carries other obvious subversive impetuses. Indeed, the life and the death of Ondaatje's grandmother are too mysterious to the extent that they captivate the Burghers' attention and become cemented in their collective memory (Saul 49). Though she never took part in anti colonial activism and consequently never had been recorded in official memory among national heroes, the biography of Lalla continues to mark the national popular memory. Marc Colavincenzo suggests that:

Ondaatje is working with historical figures who, embedded in their own histories and the history of their social class, have achieved legendary status and notoriety. This is seen particularly in the way Ondaatje deals with his father and grandmother. In incorporating the tales and rumours surrounding these figures, Ondaatje uses the possibilities of fiction to enrich the texture. (155)

Through the fantastic story of Lalla, the reader can easily notice the author's deconstructionist tendencies which are premised on the textual subversion of the national story's absolute supremacy and authority over the communal ones. Indeed, national events, in anti colonial nationalist historical narratives usurp the private, personal experience, such as occurs within the realm of the family. Often defined as secondary and trivial stories which are definitely subordinate to public, large-scale events, these family stories can never exist in tandem with them whatever is the significance of its intrinsic representational value. Indeed, nationalist historians always seek to establish a rigid division between the private and the public sphere by keeping the family's influence absolutely separate from and subordinate to the national, thereby creating a situation where the family and nation exist both in opposition to one another and

where any valuable narratives of national history should necessarily get rid of family stories' influence..

Conversely, the narrative, in Ondaatje's memoir, constantly blurs the boundaries between the public and private life and dismantles the supposed supremacy of the national over the familial. By and large, The re-illustration of of his grandmother's story as part of his family and community's stories falls within his deconstructive project which offer new insights for the past narrative, and challenges nationalist cultural exclusions. Erin Haddad-Null posits that:

[t]he family histories offer a means for representing access to counter-histories. Those historical experiences often occluded or excised from official accounts of history. These counter-histories typically emerge from a need to understand the way particular forms of nationalism suppress or elide certain experiences. (24)

Moreover, the regenerative potential of the mythical stories about Lalla liberates the national past from definite ends and absolute closures. Unlike facts, myth 'prefers to work with poor, incomplete images' (Tallack 39). The gaps left by myths enhance interpretations and imaginations, and hence give more immediacy and more life to past narratives. In addition to Lalla and Mervyn, many characters in *Running in the Family* are transformed into myths. They transgress their real natural aspect to be cloaked in ambiguity and get immersed in their magical realm which complicates the reader's identification with them. In this context, Will Verhoeven points out that "[a]gain and again persons (or their identities) get lost in Ondaatje's stories—lost in legend, lost in the bush, lost in the past, lost in history, lost in memory, lost in myth—and in each case people go after them in order to recover them, to remember them, or to recreate them"(181). Marc Colavincenzo adds in the same context: "In *Running in the Family*, the inclusion and expansion of the well told lies of tall tales, legend, and myth which already surround his family history push that history towards myth" (156). The endemic complexity of characters and stories in *Running in the Family* adds more mystery to Ondaatje's version of Sri Lankan colonial and postcolonial past. In fact, the reader never feels the sense of stability experienced in classical historical narratives. Lost in the maze of oddity and contradictions, he has no alternative but to take part in the process of reconstructing the past out of fragmented but also mythical images. The mythicization of familial and communal past in *Running in the Family* is subsumed under the author's persistent effort to reconnect with his roots and to position himself within his Sri Lankan Burghers' history. Further, in contrast with nationalist critique which mostly discredits this autobiographical narrative for what is considered to be a trifling and almost loquacious depiction of the Burghers' past experience, this narrative proves to be expressive and consistent, thanks to the added mythical dimension. Despite its hybrid and fragmented nature, the illustrated accounts originating from the obvious generic transgression, its narrative is replete with luring yet significant stories that convey the cultural diversity in colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka as well as vivid images of grandiose glory and heroic adventure which are worth to be enshrined and celebrated in collective memory as a source of national pride.

Furthermore, the generic transgression in the memoir carries critical stances towards the exclusionary impulses of nationalist Sinhala-dominated historiography which aims ultimately at dissolving ethnic boundaries and opening up new active spaces of productive intercultural contacts and dialogues among the different Sri Lankan ethnic groups. Through the revisionist task of straddling generic borders and blending multiple textual and non-textual references in his

autobiographical narrative of Sri Lankan colonial and postcolonial past, Ondaatje seeks to dismantle the existing discursively entrenched divisions between the Sinhalese dominant historical discourse and ethnic minorities' alternative ones. Ondaatje's approach of blurring narrative borders aims eventually, at emulating the ambitious project of dissolving rigid ethnic barriers and consolidates post-ethnic activists' efforts of demystifying the precariousness of the established ethnic hierarchy in colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka. Minoli Salgado observes that:

Running in the Family is perhaps Michael Ondaatje's most problematic and paradoxical text to date, both formally and ideologically. A generic mix of journal, travelogue, memoir, biography, oral narration and poetry, it also contains photographs from family collections and public archives and a map, foregrounding a kind of textual hybridity that replicates – as Neluka Silva points out – the provisionality of ethnic boundaries. (130)

By letting the Burghers' past experience speak for itself rather than coercing insights from it that must speak on its behalf, Ondaatje contributes to the celebration of multi-perspectival contingent historical representations which are highlighted and celebrated as an alternative to the dominant nationalist ethno-centric historical narratives.

Through the disruption of generic boundaries in his autobiographical text, Ondaatje seeks to foreground the inescapable polyvocality of historical writing. He emphasizes the fact that writing about the past is a complex and collective task which implies that nobody can claim to detain a full historical truth and to offer a unified and comprehensive narrative of the past even when it comes to his own past. Grasping one's own past is essentially conditioned by understanding others' one, and reading historical document cannot be fruitful unless it is accompanied with revisiting and valorizing alternative oral and non-textual historical sources which were discursively vilified and marginalized. Moreover, Ondaatje invites for throwing into doubt the plausibility of writing a coherent and exhaustive narrative of national history through a single source or a unique perspective while multiple other sources and standpoints are discarded. Against the backdrop of colonialism and anti colonial nationalism thrived, to a large extent, on deliberately obfuscating and obscuring significant narrative of the country's rich past, the author's of *Running in the Family* celebrates representational diversity. In redefining the borders of past narratives in his memoir, Ondaatje engages in the postmodern project of toppling down totalizing representations, challenging authorial voices, and eroding historical dogmas which underpinned anti colonial nationalist historiographies. The process of re-writing national past narrative implies a political process of re-righting which aims ultimately at empowering the disempowered national minorities in postcolonial multiethnic societies.

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