PARENTHETICAL DESIRE: MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY*

Introduction

Michael Ondaatje's apparent lack of a sense of rootedness and racial grounding in *Running in the Family* has elicited many negative responses. A distanced and exilic writer clearly unconcerned with situating his extraordinary family in the context of a larger framework, Ondaatje has been viewed as problematic. The romantic escapades of the Ondaatjes and the Gratiaens, set against a tropicalized backdrop, have been interpreted as Ondaatje's blatant disregard for issues of history, politics, race and class, untouched by either a colonial or a neocolonial consciousness.[1] Hence *Running in the Family* has been viewed as abstracted and disembodied. It has been perceived as ignoring the need for historicity, trapped in "the inherently problematic, current vogue for self-reflexive identity positioning" (Rupperecht 50), disregarding that self-narratives are very much negotiated through culture.

It is indeed intriguing that while many other immigrant writers such as Yasmine Gooneratne, Meena Alexander and Suniti Namjoshi from the Indian subcontinent have fashioned self-narratives grounded in a sociocultural historical landscape, Ondaatje has shied away from such gestures, ignoring the contexts which largely influence the narratives of the former. Although Gooneratne in *Relative Merits: A Personal Memoir of the Bandaranaike Family of Sri Lanka* locates herself within an elitist family as does Ondaatje, she nevertheless places her family in Sri Lanka's colonial history. She is aware of the political and cultural context out of which her family emerges. *Fault Lines* by Meena Alexander is somewhat similar. It deals with her struggle to establish a sense of identity despite her multiple dislocations beginning with India, Sudan, Britain and the US. Namjoshi, in *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*, situates her lesbian identity firmly within India's caste based and class based society. Yet she also discusses her alien identity as the other in the US and Canada where racism and ethnocentricism are visible. Such rooted

[1]Critics such as Arun Mukherjee have pointedly accused him of omitting "any reference in his major work to his past or to his otherness in terms of his racial and cultural heritage" (32), merely highlighting "paradisical images of flower gardens, paddy fields, tea estates and forest reserves" (Mukherjee 39), a sign of his distance with the sociopolitical realities of Sri Lanka. Others like Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri have been equally critical, voicing concern about Ondaatje's apolitical stance, pointing out his complicity with a "bourgeoisie that fled the revolution"(60) as a way of explaining Ondaatje's refusal to ground his memoir in the cultural and political.

diasporic autobiographical writing is in implicit contrast with Ondaatje's own work where the absence of such a consciousness is patent.

What is contentious in analyses that focus exclusively on external sociopolitical contours is their failure to recognize an important ingredient: Ondaatje's attempt to 'touch into words" his ancestral past. This attempt is fraught not only with the anxiety of negotiating a divided subjectivity between his status as the native as well as the foreigner, but also his inability to confine Sri Lanka to the safe margins of the text. Several critics such as Chelva Kanaganayakam and Ernest MacIntyre have identified Ondaatje's precarious position in Sri Lanka as both an insider as well as an outsider, being of the Burgher community in a largely Sinhalese and Tamil dominated island. Kanaganayakam argues that Ondaatje's perception of Sri Lanka "entails returning to a past characterized by the duality of being both 'native' and 'foreign' to a tenuous, middle-of-road position that served as a constant reminder to the British of the unfortunate effects of miscegenation"(34). Macintyre has noted how Burghers "were to enjoy an entire mortality of heightened unreality, a surreality because they wouldn't be provided with even a humbug of 'a tryst with destiny'"(315) at independence from British domination. Kanaganayakam comments, "to be refused a role in history is to be denied the very basis of identity"(34). Yet in such analyses, Sri Lanka has been reduced to a mere backdrop, read as a benign space in which Ondaatje situates his Eurasian family.

I will argue in this paper that Ondaatje's supposedly unracialised body is in fact put into crisis in the space of Sri Lanka in *Running in the Family*. I will point out that although Ondaatje predominantly seeks to engage in a familial mythology, and push his most intimate attempts to reconnect with a postcolonial consciousness into the parenthetical spaces of the text, such spaces rupture and problematise, in this instance, his own subjectivity. They disrupt his attempts to detach himself bodily from Sri Lanka and challenge his narrative reclamation of a postcolonial patrilineage. In the end, Sri Lanka becomes a space Ondaatje must reckon with, which resists appropriation, leaving traces on his own body.

Outside-In

It is significant that during those moments when he moves away from his singular family and relates to Sri Lanka as a political and sociocultural space, his reflections are seemingly confined to both the marginal and the parenthetical spaces of the text. For instance, the inclusion of the map of Sri Lanka, the ponderings on Sri Lanka in the prologue and epigraphs, his own poetry about the native women, fragments of the politically charged poetry of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha and even the acknowledgements at the end are all attempts, however minimal, to enter into a

dialogue with the public space that is Sri Lanka.[2] Yet what is noteworthy is that while this dialogue becomes virtually incidental to the text when the memoir is more focused on the Ondaatje family itself, the parenthetical is still far from secondary. This dialogue with sociopolitical reality results not only in a digression, departing from the central narrative, but in a disruption of narrative continuity. It resists erasure and redefines the text, crystallizing Ondaatje's own troubled identity, which vacillates between the insider and the outsider.

Ondaatje clearly adopts a touristic gaze when he opts to begin *Running in the Family* with a map of Sri Lanka. He marks out the pivotal places that capture his interest throughout his journey back to Sri Lanka. What is intriguing in such mapping is his highlighting certain landmarks of his native land. He notes places of "exotic" interest such as Adam's Peak that he does not refer to or visit throughout the text. Inscribing the text with a map of Sri Lanka, perhaps with a western audience in mind, sets up a western gaze penetrating unfamiliar territory, leading the foreign into an unfathomable space. While the map resembles one in a tourist brochure, it also hints at mapping empire, which was an imperial strategy. It not only creates and defines spatial images of indigenous land but also legitimizes the act of colonization and domination of those spaces by the west. Anne McClintock argues that a map is a "technology of knowledge that professes to capture the truth about a place in pure, scientific form, operating under the guise of scientific exactitude and promising to retrieve and reproduce nature exactly as it is"(28).[3] Ondaatje will later refer to this in "Tabula Asiae" when he talks about the old portraits of Ceylon on his brother's wall, the "false maps" (63) with "cassowary and boar who leap without perspective across imagined 'desertum' and plain"(63) revealing "rumours of topography, the routes for invasion and trade, and the dark, mad mind of travellers' tales"(64).

Yet what sets this map apart from countless other maps is Ondaatje's move to pit the map against two epigraphs from the colonial and postcolonial period that figure in the following page. At first glance, one can assume that the sayings actually complement the imperialist desire to name the unknown and hence control it. Yet such a view is undermined upon close analysis of the quotes. The first epithet by Oderic, a Franciscan friar from the 14th century, speaks of Sri Lanka as an island with "fowls as big as our country geese having two heads...and other miraculous things that I will not here write of"(Ondaatje 9). While Oderic's statement fashions

[2] Wikkramasinha (1941-1978), who severely critiqued the colonial legacy, is considered one of Sri Lanka's best English language poets.

[3] She goes on to add that map making is "the servant of colonial plunder" where "knowledge constituted by the map both preceded and legitimized the conquest of territory"(27).

Sri Lanka as a prehistoric, irrational and exotic space. Douglas Amarasekera of the postcolonial era produces another neocolonial fiction. He states that "The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the earth was flat"(9). The East is projected as backward, trapped in a traditional past, lacking the tools of modernity. Hence the native becomes immersed in an exotic space, reeking of the primitive, subject to the rational, orientalist gaze.

To argue that Ondaatje's inclusion of the map and the epigraphs is a reflection of his own exoticisation of Sri Lanka is far too simplistic. Both the map and the epigraphs contest the notion of Sri Lanka as a place, which can be fathomed through fictionalizing, a space which can be controlled, measured and analyzed. The discourses themselves, when pitted against the map, are exposed as fictitious accounts, claims that have no true basis. Sri Lanka, for Ondaatje, fails to become just another indigenous space which can be dissected by such imaginative fiction. It ultimately becomes a space that eludes representation.

While the map is able to measure and delineate the land, and Oderic and Amarasekera are able to decipher and reduce the island to a set of interpretations in turn, Ondaatje begins *Running in the Family* with only an impression of Sri Lanka. He exposes various forms of Western knowledge which seek to fashion the East as the other. It is ironic that the kind of European "knowledge" embodied in the map and the epigraphs cannot help Ondaatje effectively negotiate an actual morning in Sri Lanka. Ondaatje finds himself describing daybreak in a time of drought, pondering on his own room, the garden and the city across. But as he soon realizes, dawn cannot be subject to analysis when it refuses to be contained within the lines of the text. "Half a page-and the morning is already ancient"(17) situates Ondaatje in an elusive space, a space that disallows scrutiny. The morning only leaves a series of impressions on the narrator as he feebly attempts to make sense of a land that is perhaps not completely within his reach. This is in implicit contrast to the attitudes of the likes of Oderic, standing outside looking in, reducing Sri Lanka to a set of supposedly objective but extremely biased observations.

Bodily Insertions and Returns

Ondaatje's portrayal of Sri Lanka is less debilitating and voyeuristic when he focuses on the physicality of his encounter with the country. Then Sri Lanka becomes a sensuous and bodily experience, impacting on his body at every turn. E.M.Collingham argues, in relation to imperialism in India, how "the body was central to the colonial experience"(2). He claims that Imperial bodies shifted from an open to a closed and regimented body, early modern Europe conceiving the body as "open and in flux with its environment"(3), whereas the nineteenth century saw the body as "a closed entity which needed to be preserved intact, separate from the

environment"(3).[4] The removal of the body from the environment, and self restraint of the body resulted in "the construction of an 'affective wall' between oneself and the bodies of others, as well as distancing of oneself from one's own body. This manifested in the refinement of many forms of behavior, such as table manners (Collingham 5). Such distancing is obvious in many colonial travelers that Ondaatje refers to, who observe the land instead of immersing themselves in the space of Ceylon. This is a move which Ondaatje clearly does not resort to.

In a land to which he has returned after 25 years, Ondaatje, in his room, attempts to grasp the reality of an unfamiliar "tropical" dawn. Light seeps through his window, giving form to the leaves, fruit and king coconut in the garden, where men "roll carts with ice clothed in dust"(17). In a drought, in which "floors of red cement polished smooth [feel], cool against bare feet" (17), in a garden that "will lie in a blaze of heat" (17), Ondaatje's nightmare becomes very much encased in the body. He sees how thorn trees in the garden "send their hard roots underground towards the house climbing through windows so they can drink sweat off his body, steal the last of the saliva off his tongue"(17). Ondaatje's experiences cannot be impersonalized and hence rationalized as they linger in his body, constructing Sri Lanka as a threatening site that rejects subjugation by violently imprinting its effects on one's body.

The body comes to the fore when Ondaatje traces the origin of his return journey to one significant moment in Canada when he dreams of his father surrounded by dogs, "barking into the tropical landscape"(21). The dream wakes him up, making him sit up on the sofa, "hot, sweating"(21). He finds himself weeping, exhausted and "tense, not wanting to move as the heat gradually left [him], as the sweat evaporated"(21) off his body. It is at this point that he finds himself "already dreaming of Asia" (21) and discovers a need to return to his native land. Sri Lanka indeed becomes an assault on his body when Ondaatje, upon his return, first visits his Aunt Phyllis, the "minotaur of this long journey back"(25) who "plucked notorious incidents from her brain"(25) in order to retrieve Ondaatje's past that is clogged in his memory. Even the fan above him in the living room in the old

[4] Collingham goes on to point out how such "sealing off of the body"(79) constructed racial boundaries, racism "generated on the site of the body"(198) itself where Britishness "was defined within India by the markedly rigid, less flexible set of bodily norms which now governed Anglo-Indian behaviour"(79). Medical discourses came to complement such narrative when they opposed "any Indianization of the European body and maintaining as much of the British essence as was possible in the hostile conditions of India"(Collingham 81).

governor's home in Jaffna is not soothing in the midst of the heat. The air "reaches [him] unevenly with its gusts against [his] arms, face, and this paper"(24). The ice cold palmyrah toddy which he is served, a drink which "smells of raw rubber" (26) continues to "ferment in the stomach" (26) and he eats with his hands, "shoveling in the rice with [his] thumb, crunching the shell in [his] teeth"(26). Much later, Ondaatje once again finds himself invaded by one recurrent image in his dreams where his own "straining body" is a part of other bodies which all form to become a human pyramid, walking with "cumbersome slowness...from one end of the huge living room to the other"(27).

However, in the first chapter itself titled "Asian Rumours", Ondaatje plunges into family history. In concentrating on hilarious accounts of his parents' marriage, his father Mervyn's Cambridge days and his grandmother, Lalla's eccentrities, alongside both his grandfathers' adventures, he submerges the socio political space of Sri Lanka. Yet in the second chapter "Don't Talk To Me About Matisse", Ondaatje is rudely interrupted when he must divert his attention away from his family and focus on the larger historical landscape. He attempts to focus on his family by elucidating the search for his ancestor who arrived in 1600 in Ceylon in all the old maps and then the other Ondaatjes who must be rescued from oblivion through the church ledgers. But the task is disrupted. He must first record the sensory experiences around him, a task he cannot postpone amidst sweat falling "in the path of this ballpoint"(69). Once again, Sri Lanka becomes an experience he must contend with when it disturbs his private musings. He is forced to note down in his "Monsoon Notebook" how he must largely negotiate Sri Lanka through his body. Besides old girl friends bathing children, men "vomiting out of a window, the pig just dead having his hairs burnt off on the canal road" (70). Ondaatje's travels result in "both [his] feet blistering in [his] first week from the fifteen-cent sandals and the obsessional sarong buying" (70). The toddy drink gets "subtly smashed on by noon"(70) putting him into a deep sleep. With naked feet, made completely wet by the monsoon rains, warmed by the heat inside the vehicle, confronting the steam off the tarmac roads and the black bus exhaust which clouds the air, Ondaatje is compelled to be receptive to the environment which fully envelopes him.

In the midst of all the insect bodies that surround him, Ondaatje's description of the "Kabaragoyas" and "Thalagoyas"(73) is intriguing.[5] Seemingly anthropological in flavor, the folklorist information that the thalagoya tongue is a necessity if one is to become articulate and vocal, becomes an exotic account for the outsider. Yet Ondaatje's immediate juxtaposition of the mythical account against the poem titled "Sweet like a Crow" destabilizes such exotic thinking, especially in the context of yet another vital epigraph given in the poem. While the poem seems

[5] "Kabaragoya" is the Sinhalese term for a water monitor and a "Thalagoya" is an iguana.

supplementary, having no central bearing on the text, it actually becomes crucial. The parenthetical once again becomes critical in articulating Ondaatje's concerns in relation to Sri Lanka. The epigraph Ondaatje responds to in this instance seeks to encompass the essence of Sri Lanka, when Paul Bowles audaciously remarks that, "The Sinhalese are beyond a doubt one of the least musical people in the world. It would be quite impossible to have less sense of pitch, line or rhythm"(76).

Sam Solecki views the epigraphs as a common phenomenon in the work of Ondaatje, where they "generally mediate, almost like brief prefaces or forewords, between the title of the poem or novel and the body of the text"(114). The epigraphs, especially in Ondaatje's poetry, become "an integral part of the composition"(114) leaving the reader "wondering at every point whether it is important by itself or whether it brings its source with it in the way that many allusions do"(Solecki 114). Solecki argues, citing Gerard Genette, that through the careful selection of a particular epigraph, the author "gives himself 'the consecration of an(other) prestigious filiation' in which 'he chooses his peers and thus his place in the pantheon'"(116). The "poet's choice of epigraph, like his allusions and echoes, indicates, among several other things, the tradition within which he wants his work to be read"(Solecki 116).

But what is interesting is that Ondaatje's choice of epigraph in this instance becomes subversive when it reflects more a tradition against which he wants his work to be viewed. In the same manner in which he distanced himself from the observations of Oderic and Amarasekera, hardly identifying with any tradition espoused by them, Ondaatje cuts himself off from these allusions and quotations as well. He reconnects with a native consciousness by critiquing the view Bowles adopts by mockingly backing his sentiments at first of the native tongue as coarse. He opens his poem listing out a series of sounds that are cacophonous and harsh such as a "crow swimming in milk", a "hundred pappadans [a crispy South Asian food item made of lentils] being crunched", and a "frog singing at Carnegie Hall"(76). Yet what is important is that Ondaatje overturns Bowles' comment when he transforms those very sounds into images of grandeur, creating poetry that is intensely riveting, clearly working against the quotation. Ondaatje responds with a poem about voice itself transforming the supposed dissonance of native tongue into beauty through his use of poetic language:

> Your voice sounds like a scorpion being pushed
> Through a glass tube
> Like someone has just trod on a peacock
> Like wind howling in a coconut
> Like a rusty bible, someone pulling barbed wire
> Across a stone courtyard, like a pig drowning. (76)

Ending the poem with the sound of a woman walking through his "room in ankle bracelets" (77) while he is sound asleep, evokes allure, generating poetry that is deeply absorbing. The use of images familiar in Sri Lanka such as a crowd at the Royal Thomian match, the crows, the pappadans being fried, the vattacka, the brinjals, the betel juice and the pineapples being sliced in the Pettah market all make Sri Lanka visible and heard.[6] They counter the view of the likes of Bowles who opt to deny voice to the Other. By putting such images into words, although in an alien tongue—English—Ondaatje constructs himself as a writer who relates to a somewhat postcolonial consciousness, at least fleetingly, in terms of a Sri Lankan identity. It is a stance that questions his hitherto unracialised body.

The section titled "The Karapothas"[7] becomes a fitting follow up to Ondaatje's poem "Sweet Like a Crow", where he once again includes several epigraphs from Edward Lear, D.H. Lawrence and Leonard Woolf, Britishers who traveled to colonial Ceylon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[8] Lear finds Ceylon extremely loud and harsh, with the "noisy sea, and noisier soda-bottle-popping planters, and the early dawn with crows and cocks"(78). He sees the natives as "odiously inquisitive and bothery-idiotic"(78) and complains that, "[a]ll the while the savages go on grinning and chattering to each other"(78). Similarly Lawrence finds Ceylon as a "negation of what [they themselves] stand for and are: and [they're] rather like Jonahs running away from the place [they] belong"(78). To him, Ceylon is "only an experience-but heavens, not a permanence"(78). Woolf too comments that "all jungles are evil" perhaps referring to the jungle that is Ceylon, to which the westerner cannot relate, the jungle that becomes the central theme in his novel, *A Village in the Jungle* which he wrote based on his experiences as a colonial administrator in Sri Lanka.

The epigraphs have a clear purpose when Ondaatje follows them with a narrative of his own, strangely enough about the heat in Colombo. The "sweat runs with its own tangible life down a body as if a giant egg has been broken onto our shoulders"(79). It is the same heat, according to Ondaatje, that drove the foreigner wild, especially those like D.H. Lawrence whose "cantankerous nature rose to the

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[6] The Royal versus St. Thomas' cricket match is the annual cricket match between Royal College, Colombo, a government run school and St. Thomas' College, Mt. Lavinia, a private Anglican school. This event is filled with pageantry and celebration. The Pettah market is a major open market in Colombo where one finds vendors selling various items. Vattacka and brinjals are vegetables while betel is an Asian pepper plant whose dried leaves are chewed with betel nut.

[7] "Karapotha" is a Sinhalese term for a cockroach. "Karapotha" is also used to refer to the Burghers.

surface like sweat"(79) when confronted with the weather. Ondaatje's own children are unable to tackle the blazing heat, a mark of their foreignness, while Ondaatje calls it "delicious"(79), although it is one which "walks the house like an animal hugging everybody"(79). Admitting that he is both "the foreigner" and "the prodigal who hates the foreigner"(79), Ondaatje seems to embrace the very heat the foreigner rejects. He aligns himself with the native although he once again distances himself by avoiding a direct critique of the stance adopted by the colonizer. He eases out his own precarious condition by hastily changing the topic. He discusses the darker side of paradise that is Ceylon, a land full of poisonous concoctions, over which the karapothas crawled, "the beetles with white spots who never grew ancient here, who stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the 'inquisitive natives' and left"(80).

Apolitical Embodiments

However, the tension surrounding Ondaatje's supposedly fraught identity becomes apparent when he avoids the political in his description of the insurgency of 1971.[9] He includes it as an extraneous account immediately after his discussion of the Sigiriya poems. Beginning with a childhood incident at school where punishment entailed writing out lines, in which "the only freedom writing brought was as the author of rude expressions on walls and desks" (84), Ondaatje discusses the Sigiriya graffiti of the fifth century, etched by anonymous poets, the first folk poems of the land. Then he shifts his thoughts to other similar etchings, this time by a mass of people rebelling against the government. He shows how the insurgents were imprisoned within the Vidyalankara Campus, and how afterwards, returning students found poetry written on the walls and other surfaces. "Quatrains and free verse about the struggle, tortures, the unbroken spirit, love of friends who had died for the cause"(84). Of course Ondaatje compares these poems to the Sigiriya poetry, suggesting that the verse of the insurgency deserves to be eternal just like the graffiti. But he refuses to engage in further discussion of the insurgency itself, pushing away the political about which he seems apprehensive. He admits that he cannot relate to the poets inspired by the rebellion, "whose passionate conscience should have been cut into rock"(85). Those voices become the voices Ondaatje doesn't know, and cannot know, "the visions which are anonymous. And secret"(85).

It is not only the revolutionary cry of the insurgents that Ondaatje cannot truly relate to. He is unable to strongly identify with the voices of poets such as Lakdasa Wikkramasinha either, who cry out against colonial and neocolonial subjugation. He cites Wikkramasinha, whose poem "Don't Talk To Me about

[9] The 1971 insurgency was a Sinhalese youth uprising of the "Janatha Vimukti Peramuna" ("People's Liberation Front" – JVP).

Matisse" denounces the European cultural colonization of Sri Lanka. Wikkramasinha lashes out against the pretensions of the westernized elite of Sri Lanka who embrace a European perspective and whose cultural milieu is cut off from that of the native.

> Don't talk to me about Matisse...
> The European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio
> Where the nude woman reclines forever
> On a sheet of blood.

Painters such as Matisse, Van Gogh and Gaughin are forecefully rejected. Instead, Wikkramasinha insists on an awareness of one's own indigenous culture. He insists that one must sever such superficial ties with Europe, and instead focus on how European subject matter is in fact informed by the violence of colonization.

> Talk to me instead of the culture generally--
> how the murderers were sustained
> by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote
> villages the painters came, and our white washed
> mud-huts were splattered with gunfire. (86)

Though Ondaatje does not explicitly comment on the passionate rage of the Sri Lankan poet, and is unable to situate colonization as a significant part of the historical process of Sri Lanka, the insertion of the poem is an attempt to relate to the enraged poet. Ondaatje himself identifies Wikkramasinha as a "powerful and angry poet"(85). Ondaatje's decision to include this poem becomes an example of his commentary on the cultural colonization Wikkramasinha speaks of. Bleeding bodies and blood stained walls visualized by Wikkramasinha enact a gruesome sight, drawing in Ondaatje to glimpse a history of blood and gore. Ondaatje is made aware of such spectacle through the wounded body, which renders his own susceptible to Wikkramasinha's project.

A Gendered Consciousness

Ondaatje incorporates his own poetry as a response perhaps to Wikkaramasinha's poem, although his verse is hardly incensed in that same sense. Ondaatje's subject matter does not deal with the violence of conquest. Yet he attempts to relate to the ordinary working class Sri Lankan who was impacted by both the colonial and neo colonial process. In both "High Flowers" and "To Colombo", Ondaatje tries to connect with the subaltern, especially the subaltern woman who cuts coconut, shuffles and cleans rice. She is "the woman [his] ancestors ignored"(87), a woman

who is not a part of the leisured class he belongs to. By dedicating poetry to the marginalized, making the invisible visible, Ondaatje makes amends to both the insurgents who strived to voice the concerns of the exploited and Wikkaramasinha who unmasks the hidden violence behind European cultural colonization. Even if Ondaatje cannot voice these socio economic and political concerns in the parenthetical spaces of the text, the poetry reveals an uneasy self awareness of his own privileged identity. It is an identity that is far removed from the consciousness of the men and women depicted in his poetry.

For instance, "High Flowers" dwells on a day in the life of a toddy tapper and his wife. [10] Ondaatje attempts to catch the intricate actions of the tapper moving amongst the coconut palms while the woman toils in the darkness of the mud walled hut:

> The slow moving of her cotton
> *in the heat.*
> *Hard shell of foot.*
> She chops the yellow coconut
> the color of Anuradhapura stone. (my emphasis: 87)

He pays attention to her body, a body on which the harsh climate and demanding labor have left imprints, evident from her calloused feet. It speaks of the hard lives ordinary people lead, who live in perpetual poverty, the individuals who are absent in the main body of the text. Such a conspicuous absence fashions Ondaatje as an individual who partakes in the collective erasure of the subaltern of Sri Lanka by the colonial classes. Yet Ondaatje atones when such labor in turn imprints in his own memory a people who are alien to his consciousness.

Ondaatje is clearly mesmerized by the actions of the toddy tapper:

> he grasps a path of rope above his head
> and another below him with his naked foot.
> He drinks the first sweet mouthful
> from the cut flower, then drains it
> and steps out to the next tree. (88)

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[10] A toddy tapper is one who collects the sap of the coconut flower ("sweet toddy"), from which toddy is made.

The intensity with which he charts the graceful movement of the toddy tapper as the tapper battles the hardships imposed by the arduous labor and the heat, betrays Ondaatje's yearning to relate to the man as well as the woman. Labor becomes discernible on the tapper's body, when he must quench his thirst with a sip of "sweet toddy," bearing on his body the wounds of hard work. As such, the dedication in the form of poetry to the laborer, although in the parenthetical spaces, undercuts Ondaatje's comprador stance, locating his own unhampered subjectivity in crisis.

A similar redeeming effort is made in "Women Like You" when the poet wants to caress the women on the walls of Sigiriya.[11] He expresses the desire of many who carved verse stating their love for the damsels engraved in stone. Abandoning the position he adopts in "High Flowers" where he relates to Sri Lanka through awareness and an admiration of the labor of the body, still maintaining a distance from those very bodies which he describes, Ondaatje lingers on the woman's body in this instance. Sigiriya and its women become an assault on his body when he must negotiate his desire for the woman through his need to caress her body, even amidst the "waves of heat"(93). Just as he negotiates Sri Lanka through his own body, he reconnects with a Sri Lankan consciousness with desire written upon his own body. Just as poetry is scratched onto the surface of the rock, the need to imprint desire on his body as well as hers is apparent: "Holding the new flowers/a circle of/first finger and thumb/which is a window/to your breast/pleasure of the skin/earring earring/curl/of the belly/".

Yet it is in "The Cinnamon Peeler" that Ondaatje demonstrates his most passionate attempt to reconnect with a postcolonial consciousness. He wishes to identify with the cinnamon peeler through whom he may be able to access the subaltern woman. His need to wound the woman's body with his touch is once again the desire to relate to a Sri Lankan identity. It is an identity which is very much sexualized, one that he has severed in the central narrative of the text.

Ondaatje is at his most vulnerable when he sexualizes and eroticises the woman and traces her body with an intensity that is lacking in the other poems:

> Here on the upper thigh
> at this smooth pasture
> neighbour to your hair
> or the crease
> that cuts your back. (96)

[11] Sigiriya is an archaeological site in Sri Lanka. It contains the rock fortress built by King Kassapa (473-491 AD) which features the well renowned frescoes painted on the rock face.

His imagined possession of the woman becomes almost violent when he wishes to claim, mark, bruise and stain her body, betraying the need to be violently inscribed by the act of love. Desire must be "cut" into his body as well as his lover's. He exclaims:

> what good is it
> to be the lime burner's daughter
> left with no trace
> as if not spoken to in the act of love
> as if wounded without the pleasure of the scar. (96)

Ondaatje's hunger for a native consciousness through his body is apparent when he welcomes being scarred by that very possession of the cinnamon peeler's wife. The violent objectification of the native woman is complicated when Ondaatje grants her agency. It is she who initiates the love making through touch: "you touched/your belly to my hands/in the dry air and said/ I am the cinnamon/ peeler's wife. Smell me"(97). His need not only to be marked by desire but to mark the woman's body in turn disputes the claim of a lack of a postcolonial desire on the part of Ondaatje.

But what is significant is that his desire is thwarted from the very beginning when he begins the poem with the lines that, "If I *were* a cinnamon peeler/ I *would* ride your bed/ And leave the yellow bark dust/ On your pillow"(my emphasis; 95). Such frustrated longing and fantasy, reflected in the conditional phrase, becomes testimony to his struggle to channel such a consciousness. He is only able to do so through an imaginative identification predicated on a condition. Yet, as Douglas Barbour adds, the four poems in the text "map a distance the writer had traveled in empathetic identification with the people"(147) . And "if such identification remains possible only in the private terms of sexual desire, it at least argues the possibility of seeing beyond the glittery confines of family history to other social worlds"(Barbour 148). Thus the attempt to identify with the "brown men" (90) and women who "rise knee deep like the earth/out of the earth" ("To Colombo" 90) surfaces through the parenthetical spaces of the text. It is an attempt that is deeply personal as it involves his body. It threatens to challenge his supposedly unhyphenated identity and unsettle the importance of the family history of the Ondaatjes in the text.

It is fitting then that Ondaatje's return to the central plot of the text is gestured through a frivolous account of the insurgents engaging in a game of cricket at their family estate. He departs from the sociopolitical concerns that he has anxiously yet skillfully discussed in the parentheses till now, in order to submerge himself in the tales of his father. But what is significant is that towards the end, while recording the accounts of his father's as well as his own loneliness, Sri Lanka refuses to become just a backdrop. Ondaatje again becomes aware of his own body,

a body swathed in sweat, although the fan above his writing table is reluctantly still in motion: "Sweat down my back. The fan pauses then begins again"(190). He must venture out into the garden to embrace the sudden rain, where the dust which has settled for months disappears: "I get up, walk to the night, and breathe it in-the dust, the tactile smell of wetness, oxygen now being pounded into the ground so it is difficult to breathe"(191). Although in Canada, he can peacefully note down his thoughts in a "silent room" (136), where the only sounds are the noises of peacocks and insect activity, Ondaatje must struggle against his own body in his native land, a body which can only lamely resist the environment around him.

Conclusion

Thus *Running in the Family* ends with the last morning Ondaatje spends in Sri Lanka, a morning he insists he must remember with his body: "My body must remember everything, this brief insect bite, smell of wet fruit, the slow snail light rain, rain"(202). While the list of things he must commit to memory becomes infinite, Ondaatje's reluctance to turn on the light in his room, and instead dwell on the atmosphere which evokes his most treasured memories, become indicative of his relationship with Sri Lanka. It is a relationship which renders him vulnerable and deeply aware of himself. As a last move, no longer able to restrict it to the fringes of the text, Ondaatje incorporates the potency of his native land into the main body of the text through the last chapter, with anxiety and passion, a passion he cannot deny. As Sri Lanka becomes a place "where some ants as small as microdots bite and feel themselves being lifted by the swelling five times as large as their bodies. Rising on their own poison"(203), Ondaatje dispels the myth of Sri Lanka as a benign space, a space that is redundant except as a the convenient backdrop against which one can base one's family history. Ondaatje's final return to that affective space in the acknowledgments when he declares that, "in Sri Lanka a well told lie is worth a thousand truths"(206), becomes one last peripheral gesture to relate to Sri Lanka by providing a fiction of his own. It is a fiction that resists the myth of an individual who has violently severed himself of a Sri Lankan subjectivity, a severance that cannot encroach upon his non racialised body.

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