

Postmodern Ideologies in Select Novels of Michael Ondaatje

Thesis Submitted to The Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

for the award of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in English

By

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Under the Guidance of

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Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **Postmodern Ideologies in Select Novels of Michael Ondaatje** submitted to the Bharathiar University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature, is a record of original research work done by M. Angeline, during the period 2010-2014 of her research in the department of English at P.S.G. R Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore under my supervision and guidance and the thesis has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree / Diploma / Associateship / Fellowship or other similar title of any candidate of any University

Signature of the Guide.

Countersigned

Head of the Department.

Principal

Declaration

I, M. Angeline, hereby declare that the thesis, entitled **Postmodern Ideologies in Select Novels of Michael Ondaatje** submitted to the Bharathiar University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature, is a record of original research work done by M. Angeline, during the period 2010-2014 under the supervision and guidance of Dr.(Mrs).S. Lavanya M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., Department of English and it has not formed the basis for award of any Degree / / Diploma / Associateship or the title of any candidate of any University.

Signature of the Candidate

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Abstract

This dissertation entitled **Postmodern Ideologies in Select Novels of Michael Ondaatje** explores Philip Michael Ondaatje as a Sri Lankan born Canadian writer who has won many accolades and awards including the prestigious Booker Prize. The aim of this doctoral dissertation is to analyse postmodern ideologies, themes and various techniques in his select novels - *Coming through Slaughter* (1975), *Running in the Family* (1982), *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), *The English Patient* (1992), *Anil's Ghost* (2000) and *Divisadero* (2007).

Chapter I introduces Canada as a bicultural country which is transformed into multicultural nation after the Multicultural Act was passed in the year 1988 which encouraged immigration. It also explores Michael Ondaatje as a diasporic writer who immigrated to England at the age of nine and then to Canada at the age of nineteen. Postmodernism is an umbrella term which includes post colonialism, post structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, Russian formalism and feminism. It also introduces various themes and techniques of postmodern narrative aesthetics. Ondaatje has brought in his narratives various themes and techniques like diaspora, cartography, fictional biography, immigration, multiculturalism, photography, intertextuality, historiographic metafiction, memory, identity and binary oppositions such as: the self/ other, orient/ occident, past/ present, centre / margin are some of the themes and techniques that are incorporated in the novels written by Michael Ondaatje and are researched from the postmodern perspective.

Chapter II Entitled 'Historiography and Paranoia in *Coming through Slaughter*' focuses on the fictional biography of New Orleans Jazz cornetist Charles Buddy Bolden who is a legend and originator of Jazz music. Ondaatje has employed historiographic metafiction and paranoia as the major postmodern tools to form a parody of the historical legendary Jazz musician Charles Buddy Bolden. Ondaatje has resurrected the forgotten history of the Jazz

musician by mingling fact and fiction which makes the novel a historiographic metafiction. Ondaatje has attempted to expound themes like alienation and identity crisis of the protagonist that leads to self destruction and mental delirium known as paranoia, which is a type of schizophrenia. The trauma and the psychological problems that lead the protagonist to paranoia are brilliantly caricatured by Ondaatje. He has used many themes and techniques in the post modern context such as memory, identity, photography, intertextuality and non-linear narratives to substantiate the theme.

Chapter III Entitled 'Search for Roots and Oral History in *Running in the Family*' is a fictional memoir in which the author explores his ancestral roots through his unique postmodern art forms. Ondaatje mingles fact and fiction to reconstruct his family history and establishes the cultural roots of Sri Lanka through oral histories and interviews from friends. He approaches Sri Lanka through multiple perspectives to reconstruct his family history through a collage of poems, photographs, church records and anecdotes. The author traces his ancestry through some of the postmodern themes and techniques like colonialism, cartography, intertextuality, diaphora, memory and identity. Ondaatje explored and analysed the hybridity of the Burghers who always stood in the margins between self and the other and juxtaposed with his own identity as a native of Sri Lanka and an immigrant in Canada.

Chapter IV Entitled 'Immigrant voice and Multiculturalism in *In the Skin of a Lion*' focuses on the major postmodern themes of immigration such as multiculturalism and Marxism. Ondaatje has received critical acclaim for voicing the unofficial histories of the immigrant workers who from various nationalities, languages and cultures migrated to Canada in the first half of the twentieth century. They were forgotten in history as they were employed as labourers in making of the city Toronto. He has enriched the novel by employing techniques like photography and magic realism. Patrick migrates to Toronto for better prospects; as an immigrant he translates himself into a new culture and is transformed

by it. He perceives the similarities in the other immigrants who faced the contrasting worlds of self/other. The immigrant labourers were marginalised politically and economically by the elite Canadians. The novel has Marxist ideologies of capitalists and labour which focus on the binary oppositions of self/other, past/present capitalists/labour, native and alien, memory and identity.

Chapter V Entitled 'Intertextuality and Identity in *The English Patient*' explores the quest for identity as major postmodern themes and intertextuality as major postmodern technique. Ondaatje has set the novel in Italy during the Second World War and has many intertextual references, especially from Kipling's *Kim* and the book of Herodotus *Histories* which is carried by the protagonist who fell from a burning plane and identifies himself as the English patient. As a postmodern writer he has used intertextuality as a technique to shape the meanings of a text by borrowing quotations from another text. The identities of the four characters The English Patient, Hana, the Nurse, Caravaggio - a spy, Kip - the Indian sapper who have travelled through countries, histories and boundaries form a confluence of varied cultures in a villa. Ondaatje has highlighted the imperialism of the west through the nuclear holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and has highlighted the opposition that exists between coloniser / colonised, orient / occident, marginality / centre. The novel abounds in themes like cartography, memory, identity, multiculturalism, historiographic metafiction, pastiche and parody.

Chapter VI Entitled 'Socio-political Scenario and Alienation in *Anil's Ghost*' is a postmodern novel in the form of a detective fiction. Ondaatje focuses on the socio-political situation in the war torn Sri Lanka where the civil war has ravaged its beauty. Ondaatje has used many postmodern themes and techniques like cartography, intertextuality, memory, Buddhist ideologies, pioumena and identity to portray the tensions of ethnic wars that existed between the Sinhala Government on the one hand and Tamil guerrillas on the northern part.

Ondaatje has highlighted the tension that existed in the novel through the theme of alienation where there was absolutely lack of trust and fear of death everywhere. Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan born pathologist who works for the UNO is joined by Gamini and Sarath who function as a detective to unravel the nation's violation of human rights. As a typical postmodern writer Ondaatje doesn't conclude the novel rather leaves it open ended and ambiguous.

Chapter VII Entitled 'Trauma of Dislocations and Parody in *Divisadero*' has an artistic achievement of its own kind. Ondaatje brings together postmodern ideologies such as: diaspora, history, memory, disruptive narrative, intertextuality, ambivalence between the past and present, memory, photography, identity, search for self and parody. Ondaatje has brilliantly dealt with the trauma of dislocation. The characters from a farm in California migrate and disperse to different geographical locations and each character desires to escape from the past by creating a new identity. Through memory and flash backs Ondaatje creates ambivalence between past and present in the novel. Ondaatje has used multiple narrative voices to form polyphonic text and there is non-linear circular motion in the narrative mode. Ondaatje has employed parody as a postmodern tool where Anna becomes a biographer for a French poet Lucien Segura whose infatuation for his childhood friend and neighbour parallels Anna's past life.

Chapter VIII sums up the findings of the study and analyses Ondaatje as a Sri Lankan born Canadian diasporic writer and the various postmodern themes and techniques he has used in his select novels taken for study. Ondaatje's novels are based on his extensive research on the topic; thus his novels are a fusion of fact and fiction. Ondaatje has attempted to re-write the history of the minority, the colonized, and the immigrants ever on the margins, to transform them to bring the marginalised at the centre of focus in the globalised world.