

## Chapter III

### **Search for Roots and Oral History in *Running in the Family*.**

Michael Ondaatje has established himself as an acclaimed Canadian writer through his postmodern modes of discourse. His second novel *Running in the Family* written in the year 1982 is semi autobiographical in tone. The novel gives a picture of the author's childhood reminiscence of his native country, Sri Lanka. The author is inquisitive to know about his father's past as well as his childhood days and therefore makes a visit to Sri Lanka previously known as Ceylon.

The novel can be termed as a travel narrative or a travelogue and a fictional memoir. Michael Ondaatje recaptures his parent's courtship, their life in Ceylon through oral narratives which he hears from his aunt. He recollects his childhood memory and recounts it thereby making the novel autobiographical. The novel is a semi autobiography and can also be termed as a fictional memoir in which he blends facts with fiction. The postmodern and postcolonial themes and techniques form the background upon which family history is reconstructed. Many themes and techniques like colonialism, memory, identity, multiculturalism, oral history, intertextuality, cartography and photography form the integral part of the narrative.

The novel has a lot of anecdotes narrated in the first person narrative, a collage of photographs from family albums and personal recounting of Ondaatje's relatives are amalgamated into the texture of the novel. Andrew Saikil comments:

There are direct first person narratives from friends and family who remember the events in question, told in their voices, sometimes vying for the reader's attention. There are poems and photos to flesh out the picture. But at its heart it is oral family history. (n.p).

Postmodernism is against modernism. It means a breakdown from the conventional art to explore new boundaries. Ayoti.V is of the opinion that *Running in the Family* incorporates a “constant play with all possible borders of art and life in an auto-bio-and historiographic metafiction by a self conscious biographer-historian novelist” (95).

Ondaatje, the narrator confesses that he is the part of the narrative in the beginning. “Half a page and the morning is already ancient” (RF 3). The author takes oral narratives to construct this semi autobiography without which it would have been a Herculean task to trace his family history. The novel is in Bakhtin’s term a dialogic postmodern text. According to Bakhtin, “a text is not an independent, a self contained organism and the language represented in the text is not an alien entity” (287). The polyphonic structure of the novel is highly impossible through a monologic voice; it is constructed through many voices of family members and friends.

Ondaatje belongs to Burgher-Sinhalese-Tamil origin. As a result of the conquest of Sri Lanka by the Dutch, cross cultural marriage of Dutch and Sinhalese became the norm and they were called the Burghers. The British considered them as their equals giving them all the honorary positions in the region. Ondaatjes’ were priests and lawyers who occupied the privileged place in the society. They belonged to upper class society. His father belonged to the Light Infantry and Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society.

The main focus of Ondaatje’s narrative is his father Mervyn Ondaatje who is portrayed as an eccentric character. Sri Lanka is Ondaatje’s mother land and his visit after twenty five years of exile at Toronto makes him feel as if he is an alien. Ondaatje explores his family history thereby the history of the nation is also revealed. Ondaatje gets information from friends, kith and kin and ledgers from the church regarding his history. He says that if anyone believes the novel to be purely autobiography he is going to be deluded for he writes at the end of the novel claiming “a literary text to be a communal act and in Sri Lanka a well

told lie is equal to thousand facts” (RF 232). The novel is based on facts and Ondaatje’s imagination fills in the gaps wherein historical facts are lacking. It is a fiction but “It is a portrait” (RF 232).

Ondaatje has visited Sri Lanka twice to learn about his ancestral past after twenty five years and constructs a sentimental family picture. He left to England with his mother after his parent’s divorce at the age of nine. Later he immigrated to Toronto and became a writer by profession. The immigrant writers like homing pigeons long to return to their mother land. They recreate their history and identity by travelling down the memory lane to recreate their past through oral narratives, evidences like photography, cartography and bits and pieces of family history from friends. The author is an omniscient narrator as well as the protagonist.

Twenty five long years’ leaves a big gap separating the author from the past. The memory is faint and accuracy of details cannot be expected and the book is an imaginative artistic construction of personal and national history. Ondaatje says that he is a foreigner who hates the colonizers for the atrocities they had caused on the colonized. He is the prodigal son of the island. Ondaatje is very clear “in fictionalizing biography and historicizing of fiction” (Zivkovic 103). He confesses that “during certain hours or certain years in our lives we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed” (RF 201). By searching for the individuals who form the part of his family history he establishes as a diasporic writer. The duality of national history and family history is given equal importance in the novel. The narrative moves through three generations of the family tree. The novel is a metafiction where it runs towards a larger historical context thereby making the novel a historiographic metafiction.

Ondaatje has nostalgic recollections while sitting in his room in Sri Lanka after twenty five long years. He contrasts both the countries. It was winter in Canada and the

author got up from “the bright bone of a dream,” for he “was already dreaming of Asia” (RF 1). He immediately spread maps on to the floor and started searching possible routes to Ceylon:

On my brother’s wall in Toronto are the false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations—by Ptolemy, Mercator, Francois Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt—growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy. Amoeba, then stout rectangle, and then the island as we know it now. (RF 59)

He is thrilled to find that he is making a great journey to his mother land and to his family where he had grown and that stood in his memory “like a frozen opera” (RF 59). This shows his fascination for the continent. Ayoti opines that in Ondaatje “We find the writer of Canada and the lover of Asia” (95). Ondaatje describes Asia thus:

The name was a gasp from the dying mouth. An ancient word that has to be whispered would never be used as a battle cry. The word sprawled. It had none of the clipped sound of Europe, America, and Canada. The vowels took over, slept on the map with the S. I was running to Asia and everything would change. (RF 6-7)

The tear shaped island in south of Asia floating in the Indian Ocean was originally known as by various nomenclatures and later became Sri Lanka. Ceylon is described as an Island which is ‘like a pendent off the ear of India’ (RF 59). Sri Lanka is situated only nineteen miles off the coast of India. It floats on the blue waters of the Indian Ocean. One of the themes delineated in the novel is colonialism. Sri Lanka was invaded by many foreigners and invaders. Thus Sri Lanka acquires many epithets during different invasions. Ceylon is “seduced by the colonizer and is the wife of many marriages courted by invaders” (RF 60).

Ceylon was under the hegemony of the colonial rule who exercised control over the colonised in aspects like language and religion. Marriage is a metaphor used in the novel to show the intermingling of various cultures and races in the ethnic region:

Moreover it is an island that seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name is changed, as well as its shape- Serendip. Ratanpidia (island of gems). Taprobane. Zeloan, Zeilans, Seyllan, Ceilon and Ceylon- the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or Bible or language. (RF 60)

Ceylon is a beautiful island with natural vegetation, flora and fauna with lot of sweet smelling and expensive rare spices that has attracted many European settlers. As soon as any ship lands in Sri Lankan shores cinnamon peels were strewn on the dock to give an invitation to the foreigners with the sweet aroma. The colonizers were attracted by the exotic spices like rubber, tea, pepper, cardamom and cinnamon. It was rich in natural wealth, rare spices and medicinal herbs. The search for roots and quest for identity is always in the blood and veins of emigrant writers. The emigrants try to maintain their native tradition, culture and food habits in the alien shore where they have settled down.

In the chapter 'Karapothas' the Sri Lankan word for a foreigner Ondaatje describes the island's rich resources: "captains would spill cinnamon on to the deck to invite passengers on board to smell Ceylon before the island even came into view" (RF 80). Ceylon had many foreigners who were called Karapothas. His sister explains Karapothas meant a beetle with black spots. The invaders became wealthy by spice trade. The colonizer came not to settle but to plunder and take all the riches back home to Europe:

Every conceivable thing was collected and shipped back to Europe.

Cardomoms, pepper, silk, ginger, sandalwood, mustard, oil, palmyrahroot,

tamarind, wild indigo, deer's antlers, elephant tusks, hog lard, calamander, coral, seven kinds of cinnamon, pearl and cochineal. *A perfumed sea.* (RF 81 Italics as per original).

The novel can be called an Odyssey where the author makes a long voyage to Ceylon and metaphorically into the past of 1970 and travels back to his childhood and to his parent's ancestry in the 1920's. His aunt Phyllis lives in a palatial house in Jaffna built by the Dutch along with Uncle Ned. Ondaatje hears the stories of his family's past through oral narratives of Aunt Phyllis. The Ondaatje's were one of the important and well known people of Ceylon during the colonizer's regime. As a result of Dutch invasion the Sinhalese and the Dutch intermarried and the Burgher class originated. The Ondaatje's belong to the Burghers who occupied all the privileged places in society. As they owned tea, rubber plantations they were very wealthy.

The story is constructed in a clear poetic prose in which oral narratives form one of the main features of the novel. The stories are told by many voices making the novel polyphonic. The author creates history through oral narratives. Since there is a great distance in time and space, part of the narrative is factual from the narrator's memories and part of the narrative is fictional making *Running in the Family* a historiographic metafiction.

The author first visits his aunt Phyllis after coming to Sri Lanka. Her house is in Jaffna and this forms the core of the narrative in the chapter 'Jaffna Afternoons'. The mammoth Dutch house is so spacious and tall and the walls are smooth which are supposed to have been polished with white of eggs. The oral stories are credible for they are supported by many photographs.

Ondaatje's parent's past is brought to life by the photo framed by his aunt Phyllis who is very fond of her eccentric, dipsomaniac brother. Ondaatje explores his own identity through his father. Searching for one's identity is one of the remarkable features of

postmodern literature. He believes that the invaders plundered the island's exotic wealth and claimed every good thing present in the island by force, religion or language:

This pendent, once its shape stood still, became a mirror. It pretended to reflect European power. New ships arrived and spilled their nationalities. His own ancestor arrived in 1600 a doctor who cured the governor's daughter was gifted with a land and new name Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling classes. (RF 60)

The author sits on the sofa of the ancient, spacious labyrinthine house to trace his ancestry and the "maze of family relationships" (RF 10). He gets oral information from his sister Susan and Aunt Phyllis. Oral narratives are reflected in the chapter 'Lunch conversations' and 'Aunts' (RF 113). He goes to the dining room where his aunt reminisces about her brother Mervyn's past. He considers his aunt as the minotaur of his tedious journey which he undertook through Africa and seven hours of train journey from Colombo to Jaffna. "Aunt Phyllis, the minotaur of this story telling, may pluck notorious incidents from her brain"- and use the room's architecture as "cue cards for stories" (RF 10). She is adored by the author for her closeness with his father. She is a good story teller and it's so realistic that he and his sister has not recovered from the "gleeful resume of one foul Ondaatje who was savaged to pieces by his own horse" (RF 11). The major events that form the frame work of the text are downloaded from her memory to create the history of the Ondaatje's.

The Sri Lankan culture is exposed by the author as he listens to the tall tales of his ancestry from his aunt. The courtesy of meals, tea and the best brandy, drinking ice cold palmyrah toddy from the village, the crab curry and eating with hand without fork and spoon portray south Asian culture. In this heart of two hundred and fifty years old fort he traces "anecdotes and faint memories, trying to swell them with all as if assembling the hull of a

ship. No story is just told ever once.... In this way history is organized” (RF 11-12). Uncle Ned who gets commission in horse race is given this big Dutch house and the aunt spends her time narrating the stories of the Ondaatje’s with enthusiasm. The porch is filled with mongrels, crows and cranes which are noisy in the sunny afternoons.

He visits all the important places and friends of his father in the country to create a family history. He is attracted by the rains and smell of spices which attracted many invaders. He travels to Colombo to visit St. Thomas Church along with his sister and aunt. The ancient church facing the sea gives the author some proof of his ancestors. The author was surprised to see the name of many prominent Ondaatje’s buried there. There was a slab that read, *“Sacred to the memory of Natalia Asarapa-wife of Philip Jurgen Ondaatje. Born 1797, married 1812, died 1822, age 25 years”*(RF 62). He takes many old ledgers whose leaves are eaten by the silver fish to reconstruct his family history. He learns about William Charles Ondaatje who is the director of Botanical gardens and Mathew Ondaatje who was a lawyer. Through such evidences the author is able to trace his familial past. This makes the novel a historiographic metafiction.

The author with affection but humorously narrates his father’s past through oral histories. Mervyn Ondaatje arrives by a ship to Southampton as per his parent’s wish to get university education. He joins Queen’s college. His parents send him funds to proceed his university education. But later it was known that he had not even passed his entrance examination. He got good friends and even got engaged to a French countess and went to Ireland to fight against the rebels. This was kept secret and was known only to an aunt who had a photograph of him in the uniform. The family hearing his reckless life came unannounced to England. Mervyn retreated to silence and there was no use of arguing with him. He announced that he was engaged to Kate Roselap who was his sister’s close friend. The family was pleased and went to the country with Aunt Phyllis to stay with the Roselaps.



In Dorset Mervyn behaved impeccably and the Ondaatje's went back to Ceylon after the engagement.

Mervyn Ondaatje is so fickle minded that he calls off the engagement with Kate Roselap. He falls in love with Dorris Gratiaen who is a drama actress and a dancer by profession. Dorris was twenty two when the author's father courted her. She used to dance along with Dorothy Clementi Smith whose performance was witnessed by Mervyn in the gardens of Deal place. Noel married Dorothy and Mervyn married Dorris, his mother. The author's father suddenly announced that he was engaged to Dorris Gratiaen. Heated argument erupts in the family and his father remained calm as usual and never bothered to write to the Roselaps. His sister Stephy had to write to them about the break off of his brother's engagement and the family had to face the consequences. Mervyn Ondaatje created problems after problems and was an outright eccentric. At last the family consented to his marriage with Dorris Gratiaen. He presented her an emerald engagement ring which he claimed from his parents. When his parents refused in the beginning he threatened to shoot himself down and his father paid from his account.

His reputation of returning from London gets him a position in Ceylon Light Infantry. One of the weaknesses which the narrator's father had was addiction to alcohol. When Dorris Gratiaen was about to call off the engagement he travelled all the way with his uncle and had to stop every one hour to drink. He again threatened to shoot himself up and his uncle Aelian had hard time in saving his nephew by hiding the guns in the Light Infantry. He used to disrupt train services by hijacking the passengers pointing his gun at them. Mervyn's friend Arthur narrates how his father behaved in drunken frenzy tried to derail the trains. One of the victims of this hijack was a minister. Mervyn used to strangle stray dogs with an intention of saving the future generation from rabies. Doris Gratiaen used to run with clothes to the tunnel and was fed up with her husband's behaviour after his drinking bouts and was ashamed of his

train derailing episodes. Later she legally divorced him and became independent. She worked in hotels and acted in one act plays. She then left to London with her children leaving her dipsomaniac husband in Sri Lanka.

Mervyn's friend Foneska who was the manager of a rubber estate called Gasanawa. Foneska was such a happy go lucky person who wasted his youth. He was also an eccentric like Mervyn. The author narrates how Foneska had lost all his teeth and would remove his false teeth during fighting episodes. Foneska and the narrator's father used to ransack the ship for drinks by pretending to visit the sleeping passengers as their friends. There is a humorous incident of rivalry between Ondaatje's and the Bandarayanaiks. Sammy Dias and Mervyn Ondaatje's literary duel in writing visitors book is humorously narrated. There is a provision to write suggestions after any stay or meals in the hotels. Both of them used to quarrel with words. They were not allowed to write suggestions in visitor's book due to their verbal duel.

The life of his paternal grandfather is who adopts English ways is similar to Kirpal Singh in *The English Patient*. Mervyn's father who is known as Bampa tries to emulate the English taste and spirit but he is also fond of wearing native sarong and vest. Homi Bhabha calls this imitation of western culture as 'Mimicry' (125). He vacillates between English ways but at the same time is attached to native customs. He is brown and his wife is white. He has built his family house in a place called 'Rock Hill'. He is a real patriarch of his house with a big estate in the heart of Kegalle. He is able to bring all the workers to his estate just like the imperialists. He occupies a high social standing in Kegalle. He never socialized with the native people. The charismatic traits of his grandfather and father are rendered with emotional fervour by the author. Bampa's funeral was so grand that it was spoken with awe and envy. He was buried under the Mangosteen tree in his estate. His paternal uncle Aelian died in the year April, 1942 due to liver disorder.

Unlike his grandfather, his father Mervyn was an unstable character. Bampa gave the estates to Mervyn Ondaatje who sold the Rock Hill estate part by part whenever he needed money. So outsiders occupied the perimeter of the estate house. The author remembers his father donating a piece of land for children's playground. Mervyn then went to Kegalle and took up farming. He married for the second time and had two daughters through the second marriage, Susan and Jennifer. Narratives related to family history are given a temporal shift making the novel one with the post modern ideologies in convergence with temporal distortion.

He was involved in farming and was doing well but he suffered from dipsomania every two months. He used to bury brandy bottles professing to give up his alcoholism for two or three days and then started drinking. His second wife Maureen's attempt to change him by hiding the bottles was of no avail. He would threaten to shoot her down. The author visits the Kadugannawa Pass with his half sister Susan and witnessed the bridge where only his father could drive in his drunken state. The richness of the grandfather's fort remains only in reminiscence. Their father died due to excessive drinking. He would say to anyone who came with him in the car that "God loves a drunk" (RF 54). The author visits his grandfather's house and finds only the mangosteen tree that remains where and polecats devour the yellow berries. Gillian gives a faint retrospection of the bottles being hidden here and there.

Sociological and psychological perspectives are evident where the author attempts in creating the dual perspectives of Sri Lankan nationality a comingling of Asian and European identities. The narrator also refers to the 1971 insurgency, which is a political event that caused lot of communal violence in the country. This event turns "the Vidyalkara campus of the University of Ceylon into a prison camp" (RF 84). When the university reopened for the return of the students, hundreds of poems were found on the walls, ceilings, hidden in the corners

of the campus portrayed the violence, the struggle, and the stories of torture and of lost friends. This one aspect of the old Ceylonese history is mentioned in the novel. During the time of insurgency people collected money and weapons and they came to Rock hill which is Mervyn's house to collect money. The people were impressed by the porch and started playing cricket. At present Rock hill is owned by a Sinhalese family. The author recalls his father's and grandfather's life with emotion.

The author humorously portrays his maternal grandmother Lalla Gratiaen. His grandmother Lalla did not appreciate her daughter marrying a Tamilian and laughed hysterically telling her friends about her daughter's bad choice. Lalla and Mervyn never agreed with each other on whatever it might be and Lalla showed her animosity wherever possible. Lalla is of Dutch origin and Mervyn belongs to a hybrid culture of Burgher-Sinhalese- Tamil origin. Lalla is a bold and courageous lady who often gets drunk. She has an aversion towards her black skinned son-in-law. The racial discrimination is very obvious through Lalla's aversion towards Mervyn Ondaatje. But Mervyn and Graetian's love for each other was not less and they lived happily.

Usually during heavy rainy seasons the streets of Sri Lanka is flooded and people literally floated in the market places. One day due to heavy rains the streets were flooded and Lalla was carried away by the floods when she was standing on the porch and she was floating in the streets where she was very familiar and died under Jacaranda trees. This is an example magic realism. The narrator very whimsically says that , "It was her perfect last journey not even watching their magic ride the alcohol still in her – serene and relaxed' (RF 136-137). She fell in the deepest blue waters of the ocean and she was dead. Magic contours are added to death which is an aspect of magic realism. In this episode Michael Ondaatje equates his style with that of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The narrator turns Lalla into a myth, though in a very ironic way. In fact, the narrator tells everyone that she died of natural causes.

Considering the way the narrator describes her death it may sound natural. Crashing against a tree during a storm would mean dying of natural causes.

Lalla belonged to the Dickman family who have Dutch roots. He begins describing her as, “My grandmother died in the arms of jacaranda tree and she could read the thunder” (RF 117). The Dickmen were supposed to be eccentric people. Lalla gets married to Willy Gratiaen who owns a diary farm. She became free and prominent after her husband’s death. She was an eccentric but a humorous character with magnanimous heart. She had a friend and neighbour Reni Saram who also owned a diary farm. Lalla is a comic character described by Ondaatje and while reading about her brings hilarious laughter. She had false breasts and she was so careless that dogs would take them away. She cooked all the eggs that her husband had imported from Australia for hatching in the poultry owned by him. Reni Saram’s husband did not like the noise made by the chickens grown by his wife. One day he ties the beaks of the chicken. Ultimately they were not able to breathe and they danced to death. Lalla found those chickens and stole few of them, hid them in her clothes and finally cooked them. On one occasion she helps her diary man who was guilty of murdering his diary maid from punishment. She used to chat with simple folks in the market place. She was addicted to alcohol. Lalla and her friend stopped the diary farm when the cattle died of rinderpest.

Lalla is one of the key characters in the book, as she is the epitome of the eccentric vein running in the family. She seems to be proud that “she was the first woman in Ceylon to have a mastectomy” (RF 130). As the story progresses, Lalla is presented as a generous hearted person. The narrator explains that she would give parties and hand out gifts to all the poor children in the neighborhood. When she became poor, she continued to organize parties; however, she would steal toys and goods from the market to distribute them, as she thought that “property was there to be taken or given away” (RF 129). She was a kleptomaniac who used to steal bunches of flowers from other people’s garden.

Despite her drives of genuine generosity, her controversial behaviour was also an important trait. When she runs short of money, she would play cards for the sake of money and even among friends she would cheat; when defeated she would “proclaim the rest are mine” (RF 129). She had donated her body to six different hospitals which is viewed ironically by the narrator as an excess of generosity. Lalla “loved the thunder; it spoke to her” (RF 125) and she believed that it had a premonition that told that someone was going to die. Lalla dies during a storm: she is carried off by the flood and crashes into a blue jacaranda tree. Therefore, the portrayal of Lalla’s traits shows her ambivalent behaviour ranging from generosity to thriftiness.

The theme of multiculturalism is highlighted since the author gives a photographic representation of people from many countries. They were the Dutch, Portugese, British and other Europeans who were enamoured by the charm of the lush green atmosphere of coconut trees surrounded with the crystal clear waters of the blue ocean. The novel is a confluence of many cultures making its theme multicultural. The author himself is of multicultural origin hailing from Tamil-Burgher Sinhalese origin and by tracing his ancestry the author frames his own identity. This novel is an expedition to discern the author’s ancestral roots.

Though Sri Lanka was considered a paradise, the heat was too much for the invaders. Along with the spices the poisonous plants too were there. So, though the island was a paradise the invaders came to plunder and Ceylon was not a permanent haven or an everlasting abode. The multiculturalist postcolonial society of Ceylon portrayed by the author in the chapter ‘Historical Relations’ is about the kind of living they had in the nineteen twenties. It describes the life of the wealthy people in Ceylon those days. People used to go to Nuwara Elia, a mountainous place which is cool and 6000 miles above sea level. “Cars would leave Colombo and perform five hours journey, the radiators steaming as they wound their way up in the mountains. Books and sweaters, and golf clubs and rifles were packed into

trunks, children were out of school, dogs were bathed and made ready for their drive”( RF 29). The chapter ‘War between men and women’ shows how various cultures clash in the upper class society of Sri Lanka those days. It also shows the uncaring nature of people and how they strived just to survive.

The Ondaatje’s along with many people of varied cultures had constant parties, horse racing, and all Ceylon Tennis Tournament and serious Golf:

Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations. There was a large social group between this circle and the Europeans and English who were never part of Ceylonese community. The English were seen as transients, snobs and racists, and were quite separate from those who had cross-cultural marriage and who lived here permanently. My father always claimed himself to be Ceylon Tamil. (RF 31-32)

The chapter ‘Babylon Stakes’ relates the episode where Babylon is described in the Bible in a negative context. The act of gambling which was a popular entertainment of the Burghers in Ceylon is compared to Babylon. People gambled for money and pleasure. Horse racing was a kind of gambling that was in vogue. There were race tracks all over the island. Just like harlots in Babylon the immoral women those days committed adultery with jockeys to get secret out of them. After the races, they would go to a place called Ambalangoda. They relished on oysters which they swallowed with wine if they lost or had champagne if they won. Couples then paired off and danced in a half-hearted manner to the portable gramophone beside the cars. Ambalangoda was the centre for devil dances and waltz, but this happy go lucky group was part of another lost world. The men leaned against the women, danced and ate oysters along with their partners. This shows the extravagant life of the upper class people and the Ondaatje’s.

The epigraph in the chapter 'Babylonian Stakes' narrated by an anonymous person says "The Wall Street had a terrible effect on us. Many of the horses had to be taken over by the military" (RF 48). This refers to the Wall Street crack down which was a blow to the Burghers in Sri Lanka. They witnessed their own fall after gambling, horse races and had to lose their good living. The word 'terrible effect' shows the serious blow that fell on the Burgher class due to their infidel and epicurean ways.

Language is an important tool while discussing multiculturalism and colonial domination. "The self and the reality of the Ondaatje's are fictionally recreated through language and it becomes an autobiographical fiction" (Ayoti 94). The author admires the beautiful alphabets is Sinhala. The shape of the alphabet was like sickle, spoon and eyelid. Sanskrit governed the alphabet and the curling alphabet is derived from the Indian cousin. The author remembers how he used to sit in the tropical classrooms and learned the letters repeating them page by page. He recalls how he learned from Kumarodaya's reader. He recalls how he wrote impositions as a punishment in St. Thomas college school. "As a small boy he mistook literature to be a punishment and showed his anger by scribbling on the walls and urinating on Father's Barnabus' car tyres" (RF 84).

The author recalls his mother's handwriting. He feels sad to find the disciplined handwriting which changed compared to her youthful days. "It looks wild, drunk; the letters are much larger and billow over the pages, almost as if she changed hands. Reading her letters we thought that the blue aerogramme was written in ten seconds flat" (RF 163). His sister found his mother's handwriting to be a disciplined process which she developed. It is as if she had been blasted and worn out losing her habitual style of writing. Now she has to cope with the new alphabet which appears to be dark in the new land.

Food expresses one's culture and habits. The author explicates the delicacies prepared in Sri Lanka in the chapter, 'How I was bathed.' String hoppers, meat curry, egg ruling,



pappadams, potato curry, date chutney, seeni sambol, mullung and brinjals and iced water.

The author relishes buffalo curd with jaggery sauce and sweet honey made from coconut. He narrates the crab curry and tea offered at Aunt Phyllis in 'Jaffna Afternoons'. Food, with varied delicacies is an important aspect which reflects one's culture and habits.

The novel is narrated by the author who remains an omniscient narrator. Many voices contribute to the structure of the novel through oral narrations and interviews and the narrative can be termed as heteroglossic. The novel is typically postmodern in its construction where there is lack of coherent narration. The non-linear narrative beginning with two epigraphs make the text postmodern. The novel has many chapters where the story line is discontinuous. Ondaatje is the protagonist of the novel. His preface with italics and without page number is called an intentional prologue or exergue. The novel can be called Ondaatje's travelogue. The journey back home after twenty four long years is definitely results in search for his self. By recreating his own past Ondaatje has automatically reconstructed the history of his native country.

The author has a dual role of a traveller who voyages to explore images, language and tradition as well as that of a historian. He uses the colonizer's language to expose his native culture and tradition. The novel begins with two epigraphs in the beginning. One is by a Franciscan Friar Oderic of the 14<sup>th</sup> century which goes like this: "I saw in this Island fowls as big as the country geese having two heads... and other miraculous things which I will not here write of" (RF 1). The epigraph shows how the island was perceived by the European settlers who transformed the reality of exotic eastern country into a paradise. The other epigraph says, Douglas Amrasekara an editor of *Ceylon Sunday Times* in the year 1978 says "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"(RF 1). This shows that the native Ceylonese were so ignorant due to the effect of

colonization. There is an epigraph about the fall of Burgher class in the lesson 'Babylonian Stakes'. The poem "*Sweet Like a Crow*" which is dedicated to "*8 years old Hetty Corea*" opens with an epigraph by Paul Bowles stating that "the Sri Lankans were the least musical people in the world"(RF 41).(italics as per original)

The novel has ambivalent narrative mood which shifts from the past reminiscence to current experience. The memories of his childhood are recreated with artistic representation. He relocates his self and native country Sri Lanka through memories. "The narrative is heterogeneous" (Spinks 111). The text has various components like memoirs, travelogue, autobiography, cultural history, confessional tone and experimental research of his family tree. The novel is a non-fiction. The author wakes up from a dream of Sri Lanka while actually he is residing in Ontario. His memories travel back through his childhood days whenever a sense of rootlessness keeps haunting him and so he runs into research the geneology of the blood that runs through his family history.

Memory plays an important part of the narration. Ondaatje presents memories of the lives and times of the Ondaatje's in music, magazines, poems, the fictional writings of D.H. Lawrence and Leonard Woolf, church records, barely legible names inscribed in church stones floors, Research Journals, graffiti poems, photographs, tape records, visitor's books with pages ripped out and oral narratives by his friends, kith and kin. Such record of specific and authentic detail of facts lends the novel to be termed as memoir, autobiography or histortographic metafiction.

The nightmare of his father's memory stored in the author's mind is revealed in the prologue of the novel. The nightmare is imaginary though it propels towards the real facts. The whole novel is constructed through memories of the author's childhood memories, his aunt's and his sister's reminiscences. The author remembers how he was bathed by an Ayah named Martina in his elementary school days in Kutapitiya and recalls in the chapter

'Wilpatu' how his Pears soap was taken by an ugly looking wild boar called 'Val Oora'. He imagines the black ugly looking boar's mouth with foam of lather from the pears soap that it took. The chapter, 'The Bright Bone of a Dream' tells about his father whose story he wishes to learn. "Story about my father I cannot come to terms with" (RF 181).

The search for the author's roots in Sri Lanka is made complete only through memories. All the pieces and fragments are brought together to evolve a story line. The author recalls how his father used to be good except when he consumed alcohol. In the chapter 'Dialogue' the whole novel is written through collective memory. Ondaatje uses many sources of memories and records them to create history. Sometimes when he is at a loss for details he has invented imaginary episodes thereby making it a semi-autobiography. Quest for ancestral origins is the major theme of the novel.

Cartography is one of the techniques employed by the postmodern writers. This is one of the postmodern devices which help in narrating the story. This also helps in understanding one's individual identity and national identity. Maps in postmodern literature stimulate one's imagination helping the reader to understand better. In most of the postmodern literatures, especially in texts that examine the effect of colonial history on personal identity leads to such kind of root search. The map is not the map that is seen in the Atlas but a metaphoric map the one the author has in the mind. This false map which hangs on his brother's wall inspires the narrator to undertake his great journey. The topography or the landscape is supposed to be highly imaginary. It is the intervention of maps that recreate identity of Sri Lanka in the novel. Maps help in storing memories of past, present and future.

The chapter 'Tabula Asia' is completely devoted to maps. The author spreads maps on the floor and searched out possible roots to Ceylon. The map he gives here is 18<sup>th</sup> century map and the shape of the map has changed due to repeated conquests by the invaders who plundered the island of its varied riches. Maps showed the way for the invaders to reach the

island. The maps have mythical shapes and are not real portraits. At the edge of the maps he would scroll pictures of “ferocious- slipper footed elephants, a white queen offering a necklace to natives who carry tusks and conch, a Moorish King who stands amidst the power of books and armour” (RF 59).

Through the maps that lie on his brother’s floor he discloses the location of Sri Lanka of the past and not the Sri Lanka of today. The map he has given in the text was in vogue in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Just as the island's name keeps changing with each colonial succession so does its shape. Though the map has changed its space and shape yet it helps the author to undertake his journey. “The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations by Ptolemy, Mercator, François Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt - growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy” (RF 59). The constant movement of invaders could be seen in the maps. The maps give route for the invaders to locate the topography of Ceylon:

The maps reveal rumours of topography, the routes for invasion and trade and the dark mad mind of travellers tales appears throughout Arab, Chinese and medieval records. This pendent (the map of Ceylon) once its shape stood still, became a mirror. It pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities, some of whom stayed and intermarried. (RIF 60)(Parenthesis as per original)

Photography is an important proof that forms an integral part of the postmodern narrative. This technique is employed by Ondaatje in all his novels. Many photographs are added to make the narrative rich and authentic. He has inserted six photographs in the text. In the chapter ‘Asian Rumours’ he shows the photograph of old Ceylon where the cart used to be the main source of transportation. The picture is somewhere near the sea and a quiet village. The lesson ‘Don’t talk to me About Matisse’ has some family photographs. There was a picture of his mother and father, together with funny faces. It was the only picture

where they are together. “My aunt pulls out the album and there is the photograph I have been waiting for all Life. My father and mother together. May, 1932” (RF 177). The photograph with funny faces were sent to all friends where his father wrote, “What we think of married life” (RF 17). The author unravelled his past through photographs in the chapters ‘A Fine Romance’, ‘Eclipse Plumage’, and ‘What We Think of Married Life’.

The photograph of the author’s family in Ceylon is devoured by silver fish which symbolizes the declining years narrated in the novel. The chapter ‘Don’t talk to me about Mattise’ shows photograph of the Ceylon in Nuwara Elia where the streets are flooded during a monsoon and people camouflaged under umbrellas literally floating in the deluge. In the chapter ‘The prodigal’ the photograph shows a train crossing a mountainous landscape.

The fragment of domestic tragedy is portrayed in a theatrical manner. There is cultural dislocation due to colonization in Ceylon. Ondaatje confesses his dual affinity on his visit to his native Sri Lanka that he is a foreigner who hates foreigners. “I am the foreigner. I am prodigal who hates foreigners” (RF 79). The sense of belonging to two places one, Sri Lanka and the other Canada is reflected in the novel.

The author whimsically narrates the national myth and legend that is prominent in Sri Lanka. About six months before the author was born his mother witnessed a pair of Kabrogoyas in cupola at Pelmadulla. The author describes the reptiles which are similar to a crocodile. The body has yellow spots and rings in it. It is called sub-aquatic monitor. The kabrogoyas and thalagoyas are common in Ceylon. The Kabrogoyas are large like crocodiles and Thalagoyas are smaller. The Thalagoya is like an Iguana and a giant lizard. The Kabrogoya is a useful scavenger while the Thalagoya is a tall climber which can leap to forty feet. The myth in Sri Lanka narrates the magical and miraculous properties possessed by the rasping tongue of Thalagoya.

If a child is given the tongue by placing it between slit plantains and swallowed without chewing he will articulate brilliantly and would be gifted with eloquent speech. The tongue should be eaten raw as soon as the animal dies and there is a way to kill it. The island is filled not only with rich and exotic spices but also rare animals like Thalagoyas and Kabrogayas. His uncle Noel almost died swallowing it but became a brilliant lawyer and story teller. The narrator's father suggests them to eat Thalagoya's tongue when they were in Ambalangonda guest house. The flesh of Thalagoya has the medicinal property to cure morning sickness. The author's description of the forest life at Kuttapitiya during his childhood where he witnesses a deer hunted down by a tiger at night. The ecology of the island is recorded with great concern in the novel.

The novel has many intertextual readings. Ondaatje's parents were good readers and his mother had histrionic talents. His father's knowledge is narrated by the author where he says, "My father swallowed the heart of books and kept that knowledge to himself. My mother read her favourite poems aloud, would make us read plays together and acted herself" (RF 185). The intentional prologue or exergue written in italics in the beginning serves as an intertext. The prologue beginning with relation to ice, dream and narration has a reference to the novel of Robert Knox. Robert Knox has written a biography called 'A Historical Relation'. He was a prisoner who was held in captivity for twenty years. This is a major source of history of the nation. This has served as an intertext to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

If you peer into the features of Crusoe you will see something of the man who was not the lonely inhabitant of a desert island but who lived in an alien island among strangers, cut away from his own countrymen... and striving hard not only to return but also to employ profitably the single talent that had been given him. (RF 82)

Leonard Woolf's novel *A Village in the Jungle* says that all the jungles presented in Ceylon are evil. Ondaatje interviews with his relatives and friends which serve as an intertext. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude* serves as an intertextual reading for magic realism used in the novel. Lalla Gratiæn's magic ride in the deluge of monsoons and her final hit against the jacaranda tree before drowning in the blue ocean and other mythological legend of a paradise lurking in Sri Lanka and the noise of waterfall in paradise are instances of magic realism. Ondaatje has selected few intertexts that speak about the scorching heat of Ceylon. One example is:

D.H Lawrence who was a visitor to the island. After all Taromina, Ceylon, Africa and America-and as far as we go, they are a negation of what we ourselves stand for and are. We are like Jonah's running away from the place where we belong. "Ceylon is an experience –but heavens not permanence".  
(RF 78)

One excerpt from journal of Edward Lear serves as an intertext:

This Ceylon part of the journey goes wearily, wearily. Tired out by constantly disturbed all night-noisy sea, noisy soda –bottle-popping planters, and earthly dawn with crows and cranes. The brown people seem to me most inquisitive and brotherly idiotic. All the while the savages go on grinning and chattering to each other. (RF 77)

So the invaders enjoyed the wealth, massacred the people but did not stay permanently. The scorching heat drove them crazy.

In the chapter 'Aunts' he compares his tall aunt Dolly to Miss. Havisham in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. When she welcomed him to the huge mansion saying "I never thought I'd see you again" (RF 114) the author realized the worth of his journey. In the chapter 'Blind Faith' he quotes from *King Lear* where Edgar waits for a moment to see his

blind father Gloucester. But it never comes true in Ondaatje's life and his desire is never fulfilled. He only longs to meet his father but of no avail. Only fragrant memories remain to be cherished. In *Thanikamma* he recalls how his father read a book and had left a page down near the commode and ants had taken it. He was scared of the mirror and kept himself aloof in his drunken frenzy. The mirror image is repeated in Ondaatje's novels. The mirror imagery symbolises his father's ruin.

Ondaatje quotes five poems to portray the life in Sri Lanka. Two poems are by native poets and others are written by him. Lakdasa Wikramasinha, a Sinhalese poet's song, 'Don't talk to me about Matisse' is quoted in the chapter 'The Karpathos'. "Don't talk to me about Matisse / On a sheet of blood /... Mud huts were splattered with gunfire" (RF 86). He expresses the racial discrimination and colonial domination as elements of destruction visualised as women bleeding in a sheet of blood. The beauty is robbed by blood thirsty people who sabotaged their country. The poem was banned and was published outside Sri Lanka. Ondaatje supports insurgency and voices his antagonism towards the dominant power mongers.

He quotes from a fifth century poet Sigiri Graffiti's poem 'Women Like You' from a collection of hundred small poems composed by different writers. The poem shows the spirit of his countrymen despite many invasions, trials and tribulations. The poem portrays the eastern Sri Lankan women as somebody who is very brave and would be proud of her son fighting in the battle field. Ondaatje is reminded of his own women who had the potential to build up business enterprises after their husband's death. One such powerful woman is Lalla his grandmother who sprang to popularity after her husband's death. His aunts and his own mother were able to fight against various odds without any support from their husbands. Thus Ondaatje shows how "women poured out their hearts" (RF 92).



The poem by Ondaatje himself 'Sweet Like a Crow' begins with an epigraph by Paul Bowles. The epigraph describes the Sinhala people as the least musical people in the world. The epigraph is written for Hetti Corea who is eight years old and the epigraph reads thus: *The Sinhalese are the least musical people in the world. It would be quite impossible to have less sense of pitch, line or rhythm*" (RF 75). The poem has an ironical tone where he describes with the imagery of a scorpion pushed through a glass tube, crow flying through coconut tree. These imageries refer to the various noises that prevailed in the natural surroundings of the island. The author here does not feel as if he is the native of Sri Lanka but a 'karapotha' a foreigner in hearing the chaotic sounds and felt like "frogs singing in the Carnegie hall" (RF 76).

The poem 'High Flowers' is in the form of a dialogue where he answers Lakdasa Wikramasinha. The dialogue of the poet moves from past to present. It is in the form of an answer to the question. It is a cultural and political message. Women are portrayed as traditional, laborious and inferior to men. The vulnerability is supported by hard foot of men and she is like "a shadow behind walking between the trees without ropes" (RF 88). The picture of Srilankan village where they drink toddy is picturised. A typical South Asian woman using a cane mat to separate husk from rice is caricatured. Drinking mouthful from the cut flowers symbolizes male chauvinism. The poet also portrays country life with that of town life. The poem symbolizes typical Sri Lankan culture.

In the poem 'To Colombo' Ondaatje describes his travel by a jeep to various places in Sri Lanka and on his way back from Sigriya hills. He describes the beauty of the place he visualizes in sunlight. They drink cool tender coconut called as *Kurumba* in Sri Lanka and remove the tarpaulin coverings of the jeep to take some rest from heat. The author seeing the coconut, the woman and the knife realizes the truth and the imminent danger that lurks in this

place. The author might have hinted at the ethnic wars and destruction that was happening in the beautiful country.

The poem 'Cinnamon Peeler' which appears in Ondaatje's collection of poems called 'Secular love' is presented in the text. The poem speaks of erotic love affair. The love the husband has for his wife is narrated through the image of bed and cinnamon. The love is associated with the fragrance of cinnamon peels which is grown in large quantities in Sri Lanka. The poem talks of the love affair before marriage when the lover eluded the girl's parent's gaze. "I could hardly glance at you/never touch you/ I am the cinnamon Peeler's wife/ Smell me" (RF 98-99).

Just like the seductive power of the cinnamon the island has the power to attract many foreigners who were enticed by its aroma and seduced the island making the culture hybrid through their imperialism. The novel recaptures the memory of Mervyn Ondaatje who picks up the peels of cinnamon on his journey home. The fragrance filled the car and this incident is reflected in the poem.

D.H Lawrence makes an allusion to the Biblical Jonah who ran away to Darshis instead of Nineveh. The invaders choice of this hot place Ceylon is ironically narrated by him. The author in his mid thirties regrets over his childhood past. He is reminded of the lines in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. "She had been forced into prudence in her youth" (RF 6). The author's mother Dorris Gratiaen and Dorothy Clement Smith's performance at a garden party where the Governor attended is recorded in Rex Daniels' journals:

A garden party at the residency Grounds... Bertha and I sat next to the governor and Lady Thompson... The act was followed by Doris Graetiaen and Dorothy Clementi-Smith who did an item called 'Dancing Brass Figures'. They wore swimming suites and had covered themselves with gold metallic

paint. It was a very beautiful dance but the gold paint had an allergic effect on the girls and the next day they were covered in a terrible red rash. (RF 21)

In the chapter 'Honeymoon' various incidents from the newspapers serve as intertextual element. Songs sung by Dorris such as 'A Fine romance' and 'Moonlight 'Bay' and his father's favorite song, 'My Bonnie lies over the ocean' serve as intertextual readings. 'The Searchlight' a magazine which pictured horse race and jockeys was very famous and everyone read it. Most of them were afraid of appearing in it. Sir Maundeville and Sir Robert Knox wrote articles on sub-aquatic monitors 'Thalagoyas', and 'Kabragoyas' in their works. "These are recorded in *A coloured Atlas of some vertebrates in Ceylon, Vol,2, A national Museums publication*" (RF 81). Pablo Neruda's Memoirs during his stay in Kandy is another book quoted by the narrator. The foreigners only came to plunder and ship to Europe every conceivable thing. The author says that only Desdemona can understand the Moor's military exploits more than anybody else. So the author feels, "we own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens and invaders" (RF 80). The author quotes lines from Goethe, "Oh! Who will heal the sufferings/of the man whose balm turned poison" (RF 224). He understood that his father's eccentric behaviour was due to addiction to alcohol and was an expression of paranoia. "His fantasies were awful. Paranoia took over during his downward swings"(RF 225).

Many people migrate from Ceylone for better living or due to compulsion. The author leaves to Canada for personal reasons. He leaves the place with his mother due to a rift that takes place between his parents. He wants to reunite with his cultural past. The result is the production of this incomplete fictional autobiography. The final pages end with the wish of the author to reclaim a place for him with the narrative's tragic history. Unravelling his father's past helped him to construct his own history. The chapter 'Thanikamma' shows the

reconciliation that comes between him and his father. He also recalls his mother's compulsion to learn, to read and write Sinhala.

His brother Christopher Ondaatje encourages him to write a memoir saying, "You must get this book right. You can write it once" (RF 228). The author contradicts his brother's view at the end of this incomplete manuscript:

While all these names are given authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or gesture! And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well told lie is worth a thousand facts. (RF 232)

His half sister Jennifer told the author that their father Mervyn Ondaatje minted a lot of money through chickens. But he still kept on drinking. Mervyn tried to patch up with Doris Graetian but she did not respond. So he became a chronic addict to alcohol and became paranoiac during his last days. He died but before that he had terrible fantasies due to paranoia. His friend De Silva and Jayewardene were his friends who narrated his father's last days to the author.

The author controls his overwhelming emotions. He learns that his father was cheerful till the end. He feels the book is not a complete one and the history continues. The author leaves Ceylon forgetting nothing and these memories and oral histories of the Ondaatje's will cherish his memories forever. The book is a collage of several types of texts, photos, maps, travelogues, poems, and historical facts; however, fiction remains constant in all of the texts mentioned.

The narrator feels he has an important duty, duty as a writer and a good son to realize the importance of recording personal and national history. The novel can be called a collage which is an assortment of novel, poetry, history, oral narratives, myths, maps and photographs. This novel is also called a montage as it creates a theme out of the atmosphere

presented. Though the text is fragmented, the author brings unity in the text. Through writing he wishes to patch up his relationship with his father, which was lost through distance and time:

During certain hours, at certain hours in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. So our job becomes to keep peace with the enemy camps, eliminate chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies... and with the mercy of distance writes histories ... words such as *love, passion, duty* are so continually used they grow to have no meaning- except as coins or weapons. Hard language softens. I never knew what my father felt of these things. (RF 201) (Italics as per original).

Ondaatje reconciles and comes to terms with his father. He wishes to remember everything of Sri Lanka when he goes to Canada. The memories of the Ondaatje's and the experience he had in Sri Lanka after twenty five years will be imprinted in his memory. The novel has helped him to explore his identity. The fragmented narratives are formed through oral history. Ondaatje has discovered his family history through rumours. Dream and nightmare form an important part in framing the story. The novel begins with a nightmare experienced by the narrator. The novel can be called a bildungsroman where author's life is traced in bits and pieces from childhood to maturity.

The fiction is a fragment of various genres and is a collection of photos, maps, oral histories, books and poems. Ondaatje as a creator has constructed his family history through memory and oral history. Different boundaries of genres intersect with each other. The narrative is elliptical and discontinuous. But all the fragments get unity through artistic creation of the author. The fragmented narrative is a typical postmodern discourse. The novel moves from fact to fantasy, therefore it is a fiction. Ondaatje has ripped out the boundaries of nations. The novel is semi autobiographical and the various photographs make it appear like a

family album. Many postmodern and postcolonial themes are incorporated in the text. Though the text is in fragments there is a feeling of reading a unified story. Many incidents are invented by the author's imagination thus making it a postmodern fiction with post modern discourses. Thus *Running in the Family* is a proof of his merit as a postmodern author.