

**Immigrants' Experience in Michael Ondaatje's Novels
In The Skin of a Lion and *The English Patient***

S. Poorna Mala Devi, M.A., M.Phil.

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Abstract

Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan Canadian writer. His novels are all about life and death, the agony of dying victims of war and terrorism. In his novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje narrates the forgotten stories of the immigrants who contributed to build the city of Toronto. Patrick as a trans-cultural immigrant struggles to understand and accepts his own patchwork identity and finds his place in a society through the characters in the novel. Thematically, the novel may be categorized as post-colonial with its focus on immigrants and their native cultures and languages. The migrant workers are forced to communicate in English. The voicelessness and powerlessness of migrants are portrayed in the novel. The novel is a clear example of migrant experience and their many struggles. Ondaatje writes about the happenings of the Second World War in his novel *The English Patient*. He questions the very notions of identity and shows how the dominant discourse of Western imperialism and civilisation have dispossessed the people of different races and cultural identities. *The English Patient* has the resonance of the myth of the Egyptian traveller in the form of the central character Almásy who is a reservoir of the fragmented accounts of expeditions through deserts. The characters are all exiles from their homeland who have gathered together at the Villa San Girolamo at the end of World War II. The novel focuses on the relationships among four characters that have all been deeply damaged by World War II. The characters in Ondaatje's novel have also travelled extensively and have ended up in a damaged villa in an unfamiliar country where they must reconstruct new identities. Ondaatje deals with some of the most sensitive problems of the contemporary epoch in the novel *The English Patient* and he skillfully portrays the immigrants experience in the novel *In the Skin of a Lion*.

Key words: Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, victims of war, terrorism, migrant workers, identities

Michael Ondaatje



Michael Ondaatje

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<http://www.bestofneworleans.com/blogofneworleans/archives/2010/10/25/michael-ondaatje-reads-at-tulane>

Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan Canadian writer. His novels are all about life and death, the agony of dying victims of war and terrorism. This paper entitled Immigrant Experiences in Michael Ondaatje's novels: *The English Patient* and *In the Skin of a Lion*.

In the Skin of a Lion and The English Patient

In his novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, he narrates the forgotten stories of the immigrants who contributed to build the city of Toronto. The voicelessness and powerlessness of migrants who are portrayed in the novel. The novel is a clear example of migrant experience

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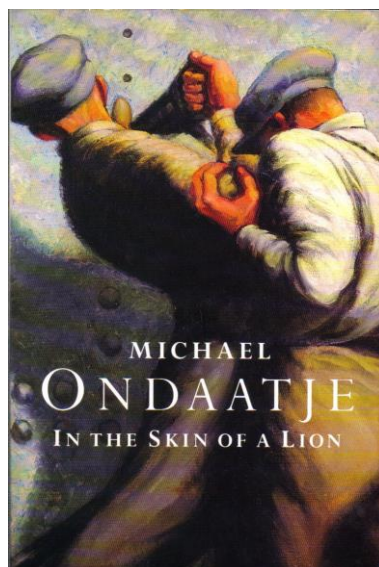
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and their struggles. He writes about the happenings of the Second World War in his novel *The English Patient*. He questions the very notions of identity and shows how the dominant discourse of Western imperialism and civilisation have dispossessed the people of different races and cultural identities.

Commonwealth Literature has assumed immense importance and significance. It widens our horizon about the world. Through novels, plays and poems and short stories, we come into contact with the experience of many other people across Commonwealth nations. One important aspect in Commonwealth Literature is that it is written in one place by people from another place. Many contemporary authors have chosen to live in Canada or the United States. Some internationally known writers in Canada who originate from elsewhere include Rohinton Mistry, Cyril Dabydeen, Philip Michael Ondaatje, Olive Senior, Neil Bissoondath etc.,

Ondaatje is the author of numerous novels, poems, plays and species of literary criticism. In most of his writings Michael Ondaatje revealed traces of his origins. As a poet, novelist, and filmmaker, Michael Ondaatje often combines and contrasts the factual and imaginary, poetry and prose real and the unreal. His longer narrative works, often based on the unorthodox lives of real people, may contain documentary as well as fictional accounts. Although he is a Canadian, his writing is not often set in Canada. Ondaatje has contributed greatly to his nation through his fictions and has become international famous.

Erasure of Nations beyond Cultures in *In the Skin of a Lion*



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Immigration is the movement of people from one country to another country region to which they are not native in order to settle there. Immigration is a result of a number of factors, including economic and/or political reasons, family re-unification, natural disasters or the wish to change one's surroundings voluntarily. Causes to immigration come not only in legal form or political form; but also from natural calamities and economic reasons (improvement) to immigration can also be very powerful. Immigrants when leaving their country also leave everything familiar: their family, friends, support network, and culture. They also need to liquidate their assets often at a large loss and incur the expense of moving. When they arrive in a new country they face many uncertainties including finding work, dwelling place, adapting to a new style, new laws, new cultural norms, language or accent, possible racism and the harsh treatment of natives towards them and their family

Canada has been credited by the United Nations for being the most multicultural nation for over forty five years. People have been migrating from all over the world to “the New World” due to the economic struggles, wartime affairs or simply a chance for a new beginning. Various works of literature and media representations have been made to retell, relate and reflect upon the difficult journeys made by these immigrants.

Immigrants' Experience

Michael Ondaatje in his novel *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) portrays the immigrants experience in the City of Toronto. He focuses his attention on the making of the city, Toronto and gives the un-official story of the immigrants whose labour built the city and it also brings Ondaatje's immigrant perspective to bear upon the city. In the novel, Ondaatje deals directly with the home of his inheritance and that of his adoption. He negotiates the vastly different landscapes of Sri Lanka and Canada that converge and depart in subtle and violent ways in his psyche, sensibility and being. As Ondaatje explores these two spaces of his origin and of adoption, he brings into consideration history, memory, myth, culture and their claims upon individual identity.

Combining Fragmented Stories

The novel combines the fragmented stories of Patrick Lewis, his two mistresses Clara and Alice, that of Ambrose Small, a millionaire who unexpectedly vanished in 1919, Harris, the Commissioner of Public Works, with the presence of other characters ranging from an

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anonymous cyclist, a baker and a group of nuns to a group of anarchists, as so many facets of the kaleidoscope which composes the city. From Macedonia and Finland immigrants, Patrick, the protagonist learns their language several years later. Both Patrick and the immigrants are exiles in the city and look for a stable center in which to be anchored. Patrick's discovery and communication with the immigrant community of Toronto is part of a larger quest for identity, for the meaning of things, for contact with the others, illustrated by the metaphor of him as a job searcher.

Life of Patrick

Patrick as a trans-cultural immigrant struggles to understand his foreign milieu but later he accepts his own patchwork identity and finds his place in a society through the characters in the novel. For immigrants, the major problem is job security. Patrick searches for a job. Patrick gets a job in Toronto as a "Searcher" for the missing millionaire Ambrose Small.

Patrick falls in love with Clara Dickens who is the mistress of the millionaire, Ambrose Small. Clara narrates about her past to Patrick. While he listens to her, he learns the valuable and the importance of maintaining personal history. He begins to understand that his own history has significance. Ondaatje demonstrates Patrick's isolation and insularity for the emotional and psychological barriers within him. When Patrick narrates his own life, he is still incapable of speech:

There was a wall in him that no one reached. Not even Clara, though she assumed it had deformed him. A tiny stone swallowed years back that had grown with him and which he carried around because he could not shed it. His motive for hiding it had probably extinguished itself years earlier. . . Patrick and his small unimportant stone. It had entered him at the wrong time in his life. Then it had been a flint of terror. He could have easily turned aside at the age of seventy or twenty, and just spat it out and kept on walking, and forgotten it by the next street corner. (ITSOAL 71)

Clara's Impact

Clara's impact on Patrick is a necessary step in his subjective quest, but it does not, in itself, bring him fully into the realm of collective discourse. What Clara does is to provide

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him access to a coherent personal history. Patrick Lewis is a passive, kind and compassionate individual who is trying to find his place and his identity. He "absorbed everything from a distance..." (ITSOAL 19) Patrick without realizing it brings light to so many different issues and lives, such as the terrible conditions of the workers and their marginalization. He himself was nothing but a prism that refracted the immigrants lives.

Exploring Different Forms of Language

The novel explores different forms of language besides words. Language can be silenced, used to marginalise and maintain power or give voice to the local narratives. The hegemonic English language is used to control the migrant workers. Patrick lives in the Macedonian immigrant community in Toronto. Even though he is a native Canadian, he is isolated by language in his own country. The workers are given English names that mock and deny their culture and heritage, "Charles Johnson, Nick Parker... The names strange in their foreign language was remembered like a number, much like the numbering in prison." (ITSOAL 75) The migrant workers are forced to communicate in English. If they speak any language other than English, they will be jailed. The migrant workers must learn English in order to be heard.

The puppet show at the Waterworks enacts the frustration of the immigrants. The puppet cannot speak and is buffeted around in the crowd, and then accused by the police. On Sunday evenings the immigrants meet at an illegal gathering of various nationalities. The people came in silence. In the puppet show, the immigrants are shown to be persecuted and frustrated. The immigrants lack the language and cultural attributes to give them a voice in society.

A Dazzling Virtuoso Treatment of Issues

Critics such as Katherine Acheson, Gordon Gamlin, Michael Greenstein, Fotios Sarris, and Susan Spearey consider the novel *In the Skin of a Lion* as a dazzling virtuoso treatment of issues of social class, ethnicity, and the immigrant experience that never rigidifies into a political treatise. Susan Spearey in her review of *In the Skin of a Lion*, points out that the tropes of migration and metamorphosis recur in Ondaatje's novels as he explores textual, ideological, geopolitical and spatial boundaries.

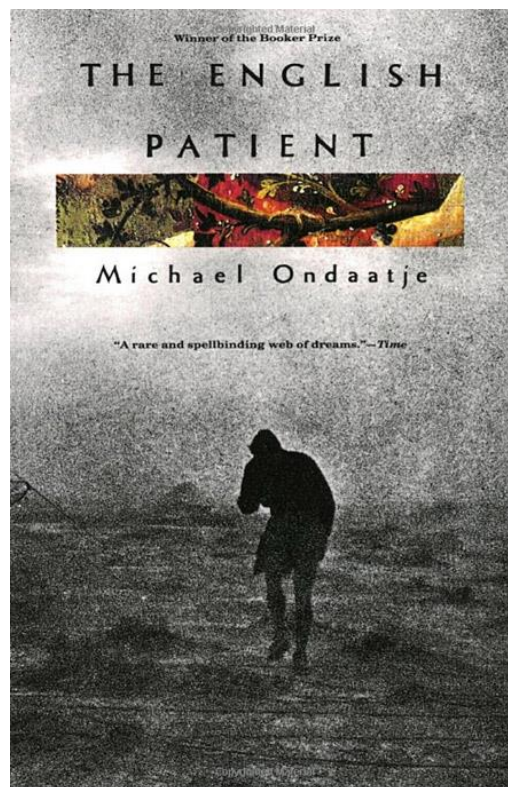
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Ondaatje's novel *In the Skin of a Lion* is a brilliantly imaginative blend of history, lore, passion and poetry. In his writings, Ondaatje employs a technique of blurring fact and fiction in an imaginative collage. His longer narrative works, often based on the unorthodox lives of real people, contain fact alongside fiction. Adele Wiseman states that Ondaatje has written in detail the lives of the immigrants fiction a part of the history of the building of Toronto as no official history would have conceived it and as no official history can now erase it. His method is to cast out in the dark. He begins with dreamlike images, slowly building his intricate story, but then subjects his work to a lengthy and vigorous editing process that can span years. Ondaatje's use of actual historical events, places and people gives credence to these voices and their stories, inviting empathy and understanding.

Elusive Identities beyond Boundaries in *The English Patient*



The English Patient is a novel that seeks to explore the problem of identity and displacement, experienced both by colonizer and colonized. In the novel, a number of themes have been outlined by Ondaatje such as race, ethnicity, identity, history, nationalism, Western colonialism, romance, war, and the human body. The problem of identity is one of the most important issues for the post-modern epoch.

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He questions the very notions of identity and shows how the dominant discourse of Western imperialism and civilisation have dispossessed the people of different races and cultural identities. In Ondaatje's novel identity becomes a textual construct, as its characters perceive themselves not so much through their gender, race or culture, but through their experience as immigrants.

Exiles from their Homeland

In the novel, the characters are all exiles from their homeland who have gathered together at the Villa San Girolamo at the end of World War II. The novel focuses on the relationships among four characters that have all been deeply damaged by World War II. The characters in Ondaatje's novel have also travelled extensively and have ended up in a damaged villa in an unfamiliar country where they must reconstruct new identities. Hana is a Canadian nurse, who volunteers for war service. She is on the verge of a nervous breakdown because of the news of her father's death by burns and her continuous dealing with the wounded and the dying. As the Canadian Infantry Division continues to advance in Italy, she stays behind at the villa to nurse a dying burnt man who is called the 'English patient'. The second member of the villa is Kip, a Sikh, who is a sapper in the British army and arrives in search for mines and stays in the Villa, continuing to work as a sapper in the neighbourhood towns. Caravaggio is a thief and an Italian-Canadian. He was a friend of Hana's father. His hands were amputated when he was caught during the war.

Burnt Beyond Recognition

The novel's central figure is the English patient whose identity is already erased as he is burnt beyond recognition. *The English Patient* has the resonance of the myth of the Egyptian traveller in the form of the central character Almasy who is a reservoir of the fragmented accounts of expeditions through deserts. His own past is shrouded in dark, he is more 'the English Patient' than Almasy. The other characters' identity too is bound more to the roles they play. In fact, his name is Ladislaus de Almasy, a Hungarian desert explorer who works as a desert explorer and helped the Germans to navigate the deserts. Although his duty is to delineate name and in a sense possess the unmapped desert, which is a vast territory. In the end his own identity, which is the map of his own features, has been erased and he is known only as the 'English patient'.

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In fact, the inhabitants of the Villa are all displaced because they are exiles who have found new identities in a place other than their homeland. In a sense, they form a new community in the Villa. The novel questions colonial and anti-colonial nationalism, which shape their identities. It frequently breaks down colonial hierarchies, particularly the imperial conception of space/place through the mapping of the desert. The mapping of the desert is an instrument of colonial domination, and the desert's elusiveness because of its vastness and uncontrollable sand storms. In fact, mapping a space means to name it and possess it as it becomes a place as seized territory, which will help invaders, explorers and traders to realize their plans and aspirations.

Personal Recounts

In the personal recounts of the four occupants of the villa, Ondaatje ingeniously asserts the notion that all people are creatures of the past and try to define future events in the villa. By incorporating a variety of nationalities into the novel like Hana and Caravaggio who are Canadians, Kip an Indian, and the English patient, Hungarian, and by depicting the last stages of the war, Ondaatje investigates the perception of identity through the transient movement of the characters.

In the Process of Self-evaluation

In the novel *The English Patient*, all the four main characters are in the process of self-reevaluation, the process of discovering their new identity after the war. However, the novel revolves around the mystery of the English patient. He seems not to remember his name, and the main narrative of the novel is continuously interrupted by the memories that he is telling to Hana and other inhabitants of the villa. It is obvious that the identity of the English patient is the central concern of the novel, and the identities of other characters are often revealed through their relation to the burned pilot, the English patient.

Focus on the Processes of the Erasure of National Identities

The novel *The English Patient* focuses on the erasure of the national identities of a group of European explorers, scientists and spies, including the colonized Kip, an Indian, serving as a bomb diffuser in the British Army. Even though these scientists mission is to map the desert, they can hardly achieve it. The desert is uncontrollable and unreliable because

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of sand storms. Its surface changes rapidly and one can be lost forever. In other words, the desert is the metaphor of their unreliable national identities that are fragmented and varied because of their traumatic personal experiences in this alien landscape and culture. The novel emphasizes the fragility of identities and selves even for those who represent European civilization and Imperial Rule as hegemonic powers together with the colonized Kip who is shaped by these powers as a hybrid identity.

The Villa San Girolamo

The Villa San Girolamo has a crucial role in this novel. The Villa has its own identity in which Hana and Almasy lived. The building was originally used as a convent. It protects the habitants from the evils of the devil. But now, ironically, whole pieces of the Villa are blown away, leaving all the inhabitants inside largely unprotected. Nevertheless, the villa remains a type of holy place. War has destroyed the villa, leaving huge holes in walls and ceilings. After sometimes, nature has filled these holes, replacing absence with life. It reflects the spiritual death and rebirth of the villa's inhabitants, the way they learn to live again after the emotional destruction of war.

Kip the Sapper and His Disappointment with English Culture

Kip, the sapper, is another character with an elusive identity in the novel. He is a young Sikh, a bomb diffuser who seems assimilated into English culture. As a colonized, he has a double perspective because of his hybrid, in-between identity which disturbs the binary oppositions of racist and colonial discourses. Kip, who admires his commanding officer Lord Suffolk, seems assimilated into English culture as he is re-named Kip although his real name is Kirpal Singh. His singing of the song: "They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace/ Christopher Robin went down with Alice" (EP 223) is a song his friend Hardy used to sing while he is defusing a bomb, which indicates his mimicry of English culture. However, Kip is a hybrid, an in-between identity even though he seems assimilated into English culture.

Kip experiences disappointments with English culture and finally reverts to his rational culture as an anti-western Sikh nationalist like his brother. Unlike his brother, however, Kip joins the British army willingly. Yet, he is treated with reservations by his white colleagues. The only place in England where he is unreservedly accepted is Lord

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Suffolk's household. Lord Suffolk, who becomes Kip's mentor, trainer and surrogate father, is also a bomb diffuser. When he and his team are killed while dismantling a new type of bomb, Kip is utterly disappointed with Western civilization and he becomes emotionally withdrawn. He leaves England and goes to Italy to work as a sapper, where he meets Hana, the nurse, and the two become lovers. The Villa is a place, once again, where Kip is unreservedly accepted.

In the most sections of the novel, Kip seems to be keeping his relationship with Hana outside the realm of nationalities. Being with Hana, he does indeed notice, with the high degree of irony, the workings of colonialism in life of his people. These ironic instances allow him to insert his version of the story of colonization. At one point, he tells Hana the story of the guns that were made of Indian metal and later used to kill the Indians:

He says the gun- the Zam-Zammah cannon- is still there outside the museum in Lahore. There were two guns, made of metal cups and bowl taken from every Hindu household in the city- as jizya, or tax. These were melted down and made into guns. They were used in the many battles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against the Sikhs. The other gun was lost during a battle crossing in the Chenab River (EP 125).

With the snip of the wire, Kip challenges the authority of the West to legitimate his actions and define his identity. The decentralization of political and cultural power means for Kip the opportunity for a new understanding of identity, organized around difference and disunity, responsive to his own particular experiences of cultural diversity. Thus Ondaatje returns to World War II to introduce contemporary questions about cultural identity.

Pattern of the Story

In the novel, the English patient's story has been developing in the following pattern: he is presumably the famous geographer and explorer of Africa, the Hungarian Count Ladislaus de Almásy. It is in Africa where he meets the woman of his life, Katharine, who is accompanying her husband to a desert expedition. Almásy and Katharine fall in love. As her husband found out about the relationship, Katharine breaks up her relationship with her lover. But she cannot break up with the emotional bond. The three people remain suffering. The husband decides to finish the story attempting to kill all the three of them in a plane-crash in

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the middle of the desert. His success is partial, as he is the only one who dies. Almásy is not killed, Katharine is mortally wounded.

Almásy leaves her in a cave and goes to look for help. He can come back only after three years, during which he works as a German spy-leader in the desert. He comes back in a plane he found hidden in the desert. But on the trip back the plane explodes; Almásy, burned, falls down from the sky. A tribe of Bedouins finds him and carries him to the British base from where he is taken to Florence, Italy. There, in the nunnery hospital, he meets Hana. Both of them stay in Villa San Girolamo after the hospital retreats to Pisa. When Caravaggio and Kip arrive, the English patient's audience grows, and the text-creation process intensifies as now four characters are presenting their lives in the form of disrupted, fragmentary narratives.

Almasy criticizes the Western nationalism or rather colonial nationalism which imposes artificial borders through mapping and wars simply for money and political power. Therefore, he wants to erase all national identities, constructed by Western nationalism as stable and fixed collective identities, limited to a single, domineering nationality that is responsible for creating artificial borders that divide people. For Almasy, his close friend Madox died because of nations. In fact, Madox commits suicide after his return to England during the congregation when the priest gives a sermon in honour of war. Being a member of the Geographic Society, Madox obviously believes in Western nationalism with its patriotism to save the world for civilization and human progress.

However, like Almasy, whose national identity has been erased during the desert explorations, he kills himself because he feels betrayed by Western nationalism and national identity which honour war instead of civilization. Like Madox, Almasy also hates his own social identity on which Western nationalism is founded. He is already made up of diverse cultural influences which resist any final definition as he says:

“Kip and I are both international bastards-born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our home lands all our lives. Though Kip doesn't recognize that yet. That's why we get on so well together.”(EP 188-189).

Nation and Nationalism

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The concept of nation or nationalism and national identity stimulated the colonized people to develop their own sense of nationalism and national identity against the colonial, national identity of the West. The novel questions nationalism and nations as colonial components and concepts both in the form of colonial and anti-colonial nationalism, which are imaginary, essentialist and racism, causing the destruction of civilizations and suffering to both westerners and colonized subjects such as Almasy, Caravaggio, Hana and Kip. In *The English Patient*, all these four characters discover relationships and belonging beyond the borders of nationalistic claims over identity.

Picturising Immigrants' Search for Identity

Ondaatje attempts to picturise how immigrants search for their identity and how the immigrants get experienced in an adopted land through these two novels: *The English Patient* and *In the Skin of a Lion*. These fictions of Michael Ondaatje explore fragmentation, alienation, bewilderment, loss of self - in short the problematic nature of human identity, through a conscious use of narrative structure and imagery.

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