

MAPPING HOMELANDS IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S FICTION

(Julie Banerjee Mehta and Harish C. Mehta (eds.): *Between Homelands in Michael Ondaatje's Fiction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2025, 212 pp.)

Michael Ondaatje's diasporic position, shaped by the overlapping cultural worlds of Sri Lanka, Canada, and England, establishes his distinctive literary voice that repeatedly returns to questions of belonging and displacement, treating homeland as a concept influenced by memory and loss. Engaging with this unsettled conception of homeland, *Between Homelands in Michael Ondaatje's Fiction*, edited by Julie Banerjee Mehta and Harish C. Mehta, offers a collection of twelve essays that bring fresh insights into Ondaatje's novels and his transcultural sensibility. This collection focuses on interpreting the notion of "homeland" in Ondaatje's prose works as a means of mapping "the unmapped parts of Ondaatje's work" (1).

The essays are thematically grouped into five sections, which explore how Ondaatje's fiction engages with identity, displacement, and cultural hybridity within postcolonial and transnational literary criticism. The collection opens with a thorough and informative introduction outlining the following sections: "The Lost Fatherland", "Myth, Race, and Subversion", "Songs from the 'Hood'", "Trauma in Sri Lankan Civil War History", and "War, Games, Poker, and Uncertainty". Using "the globe of fear" (3) as a guiding metaphor, the editors turn their attention to migration, family history, and violence as forces directly affecting the sense of belonging in Ondaatje's novels.

The first part, "The Lost Fatherland", opens with Marlene Goldman's essay, "Gothic Detection in *Anil's Ghost*", which explores the salient Gothic elements, postmodern detective fiction, and trauma narrative in *Anil's Ghost*, especially highlighting the concept of trauma as a destabilizing force that permeates logic, language, time, and the novel's structure. Goldman argues that Sri Lanka's civil war "wounded an entire nation" (30), and as such, *Anil's Ghost* bears witness to the war. The second essay, "Intimate Words: Intertextuality in *Running in the Family*", investigates intertextuality as a connection between memory and history. The author, Jeanne C. Ewert, devotes special attention to the emotional truth that may emerge when the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred.

The second part, "Myth, Race, and Subversion", explores two novels, *The English Patient* and *Divisadero*. Aparna Halpé's essay, "Idiosyncratic Histories: Revisionist Mythopoetics in *The English Patient*", observes how Ondaatje employs myth, particularly the Fisher King legend, to challenge dominant modes of historical representation. Halpé suggests that Ondaatje creates "a postnational myth of identity" (67), which is anchored not only in geography and politics but in the potential of storytelling. The second essay, "Subversive Art and History in *The English Patient* and *Divisadero*", interprets the intricate connection between

literature and art in a deeply fractured world. Mohini Maureen Pradhan analyzes the concept of “Mongrel Art” to emphasize that “art remains a formidable link unifying global histories and cultures” (80) in Ondaatje’s fiction. The third essay focuses on the postcolonial subject and an authentic Indian voice through the character of Kirpal Singh, a Sikh sapper, in *The English Patient*. Ayushi Ray’s essay, “The Colonized Sikh Warrior in *The English Patient*”, suggests that Kip’s character represents diversity and exposes the invisible barriers imposed by colonialism as a protest against “the racial superiority and technological savagery of the West” (92–93).

The third part, “Songs from the ‘Hood’”, offers new perspectives on *Coming Through Slaughter*, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and *The Cat’s Table*. “Jazzing Up the Facts in *Coming Through Slaughter*” by Raka Mukherjee explores how Ondaatje uses historiographic metafiction to reconstruct the life of the jazz musician Buddy Bolden. The author argues that Ondaatje uses archival material to create a powerful fictional record that delves into the silences of history. The second essay, “Predatory Violence and Abuse of State Power in *Billy the Kid*”, sheds light on Ondaatje’s overlooked work, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Roma Bhattacharjee’s essay argues that Ondaatje successfully created a literary form that blends verse, prose, and images to confront the distortions of history “embedded within this multi-genre camouflage” (121). The last essay in this section, “An Unprivileged Place: Journeying Selves in *The Cat’s Table*” by Chaitali Maitra, observes how Ondaatje incorporates his own past into the conventions of travel writing and fictional memoir. Through his protagonist, Michael Ondaatje explores formative stages of life in which identity is shown as unstable and split between external roles and inner life.

The fourth part, “Trauma in Sri Lankan Civil War History”, brings into focus *Anil’s Ghost*. Lakshmi A.K. focuses on the representation of history in Ondaatje’s novel to reveal the traumatic impact of the Sri Lankan war in “An Invented Past: Representation of History in *Anil’s Ghost*”. The author proposes different time schemes (“narrated past,” “narrating present,” and “authorial present” (144)) as a way of exploring how Ondaatje privileges human suffering over political allegiance to create a haunting tribute to the victims of the civil war. The second essay, “Small and Grandiose Gestures: Reading Care in *Anil’s Ghost*” by Isabel Alonso-Breto, underlines the importance of gestures and the ethics of care that shape the novel’s atmosphere. The author concludes that literature is an act of care that involves an ethical response in a world fractured by violence and injustice.

The fifth part of the collection, “War, Games, Poker, and Uncertainty,” explores *Divisadero* and *Warlight*. Harsh Kumar Singh’s article, “Teens, Trolls, and Toxic Games in *Divisadero*”, explores the gambling world in the novel to illuminate new interpretive possibilities in Ondaatje’s novels. The author focuses on addiction, the fragile line between chaos and control, drawing on the game theories of Johan Huizinga and Mark Griffiths. The last essay, “Triad of Chance, Risk, and Security: Postwar Uncertainty in *Warlight*” by Vinod Kumar Pillai,

explores uncertainty “as a central narrative strategy” (185). The author suggests that this strategy mirrors postwar disorientation reflected in fragmented memory, unreliable narration, and ambiguity.

This collection of essays is innovative in its diverse interpretations of Ondaatje’s fiction. However, it does not encompass all his novels; notably, *In the Skin of a Lion* has not been included in the study. Although Ondaatje does not identify himself solely as a North American writer, Canada undeniably plays an important role in his oeuvre, which makes the absence of *In the Skin of a Lion* unexpected. This particular novel could have significantly contributed to the first, the second, or the fifth section of the collection. Additionally, some novels, such as *Warlight*, Ondaatje’s most recent novel, receive limited attention, with only one essay dedicated to it (“Triad of Chance, Risk, and Security: Postwar Uncertainty in *Warlight*” by Vinod Kumar Pillai).

In contrast, *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost* have been extensively discussed. While these two novels undoubtedly established Ondaatje’s reputation as an international writer, it would have been valuable to include new perspectives on *The Cat’s Table*, *Divisadero*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, or *Warlight*. However, one of the collection’s key strengths lies in its international contributors, scholars whose work is grounded in South Asian diasporic contexts and whose perspectives offer valuable interpretations. Finally, while the collection is truly original and provides insightful analyses, a broader selection of essays could have offered a more comprehensive understanding of homeland in Ondaatje’s fiction.

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