



# Exploration Of Identity And Self-Image In Micheal Ondaatje's Coming Through Slaughter

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## Introduction

Literature as the vehicle of thoughts and feelings of the common man and the working class gains popularity when free of class limitations. The readers try to understand the forces behind social changes by reading literature. The value of literature depends on the extent to which it has been able to express the changing circumstances of social life. Literature draws the attention of the people to the emerging truths of life and leads the people forward to an elevated level of life and thought. If human beings are able to identify themselves with the characters in a piece of work then it becomes great literature. Literature therefore must release the mind from its limitations; and arouse it to the consciousness of the dynamic urge of life. It is a well-known fact that literature reflects society and it portrays the good values and the ills of that particular society. Literature plays an important part in correcting society by mirroring its bad values. At the same time, it also acts as a harbinger of good values through which the readers can learn and follow. Literature is an imitation of human action, and it often presents a picture of what people think, say and do in society. Literature cannot leave out the attitudes, morals and values of the society, as the writers are aware of the happenings of the world around them. Literature portrays human life and action through certain characters and their words and actions communicate messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment.

From what the author has written as each person interprets experiences differently. It depends on the reader's liking and personal opinion. Literature reflects human experiences and allows people to look back on their memories and allows them to relive their memories or experiences through words. By reading the literature of various societies, human beings learn lessons from the lives of other people as they see through their thoughts and memories. English

literature is not only the literature of England alone. It encompasses all literature that is written in the English language. Each human being belongs to a race and age and the spirit of their race and age find expression through writings. English Literature has in store a number of genres and works of great literary legends.

Canadian Literature is the literature that originates from Canada. Canada is a bilingual country with English and French as official languages. In the hierarchy of the Empire and its colonies, Canada enjoyed the superior status of settler colony as opposed to the countries of South Asia- India, Ceylon, and Burma which were conquered colonies. Canada is a colour-conscious Empire. History reveals that it became vulnerable to the domineering American culture as it had absorbed a large number of immigrants. Canadian Literature has shown a vitality of its own. Canadian Writing is stimulated by a renaissance of interest in literature and culture. Canadian Literature is mainly divided into two parts. It is like a tree with two great roots. One is deeply rooted in the culture of France. The other is rooted in the traditions of England. Canadian Literature is written in French or in English. The criticism of Canadian Literature focuses on nationalistic and regional themes, although this is only a small portion of Canadian Literary criticism. Critics of anti-thematic criticism in Canadian Literature have argued that a focus on theme diminishes the appreciation of the complexity of the literature produced in the country, and creates the impression that Canadian literature is sociologically-oriented. Canadian Literature, like the literature of any nation, is influenced by its socio-Political contexts and in addition to this, Canadian writers have also produced a variety of genres. Influences on Canadian writers are broad, both geographically and historically.

Canadian literature is the background of multiple lingual cultures Canadian English, Canadian French, Canadian Gaelic. The famous Indigenous literature started to begin in Canada itself. However, Canadians gave less importance to languages acknowledged such as Canadian Gaelic, in recent decades Canada has been highly immigrants from other countries. Since 1980 Canada's ethnic and cultural diversity has been openly reflected in this literature. Many prominent writers give much importance to minorities, identity, and cultural

differences. Canadian literature and its history were beyond our imagination. The first editor of the University of Columbia is George Wood Cock. It was in the Autumn of 1959 first issues of Canadian Literature were published while people predicted that the existence of a national literature and journal would succeed only after several issues. Nevertheless, Wood Cock most personal style and his previous experience assert the success of the journal. The birth of innumerable and skilful writers emerged in the 1960s of 1960s and 1970s including Margaret Atwood, Margaret Lawrence, Mordecai Richer, Salma Rushdie, Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje, Jhumpa Lahiri, David Mitchell, Emily Carr and Aleksandar Hemon.

Rejection, disparagement, effacement, actual violence and all the subtler as well as grosser forms of injustice experienced by Canadian women also find their representation in literature. Their personal injustices are simply accepted as part of life. They are inevitable concomitant of patriarchal standards. Also, political issues affect individual lives through the layers of class oppression and the invasion of physical and mental impinge. The lifestyle and means of livelihood of individuals practising traditional occupations in remote regions of the country are drastically altered by political decisions. The human relationship between parents and children, between lovers and friends either binds people together in love and trust or unbinds them down to fetter and shackle. The bonds they enter load them into sustain or constrain them. Binding and bonding is another feature of Canadian Literature which deals with human relationships by portraying the bonds of love. It also shows how a person, who is bonded with relationship, tends to negate other relationships. The bond thus embraces both the action of getting something and losing something. The search for roots is the salient feature of Canadian Literature. The urge is to strike roots in the new country and think of it as their home. But that doesn't mean that they wish to blend without trace into the dominant culture. The process also involves the resurrection of the history of their communities in Canada. English writers in Canada are very often caught between the old-world traditional modes and the modern American model across the border. Canadian identity rose up in the post-1960s paving the way for Canadian Literature to reflect a regionally diverse and multicultural society. Thus the varieties of literature in Canada foster the growth of a unique composite identity.

Michael Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka on 12 September 1943. He migrated to England in 1954, and in 1962 moved to Canada where he has lived ever since. He was educated at the University of Toronto and Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and began teaching at York University in Toronto in 1971. He promulgated a volume of memoir, *Running in the Family*, in 1983. His compilation of poetry consists of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* (1981), which won the Canadian Governor General's Award in 1971: *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems* (1981) and *Handwriting* (1998).

Ondaatje's first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), is a fiction portraiture of jazz musician Buddy Bolden. *The English Patient* (1992), set in Italy during the Second World War, was joint winner of the Booker Prize for fiction and was contrived into an Academy Award-winning film in 1996. Michael Ondaatje lives in Toronto with his wife, Linda Spalding, with whom he edits the literary journal *Brick*. His contempt novels include *Divisadero* (2007), *The Cat's Table* (2011) and *Warlight* (2018).

The discussion of Ondaatje's work *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) aims to highlight his writings that lack cultural baggage which he has brought with him from Sri Lanka. While his writings present otherness, his characters tend to search for their roots of identity in the society where they exist. Michael Ondaatje's works bring mutual advantage and continued existence of the immigrants and their sufferings in the alien land. Ondaatje as a migrant writer stakes his claim to a cross-cultural inheritance, and pieces together an alternative literary tradition that answers to his most pressing concerns. His creative writing is influenced by the aspects of his life such as his migration to England and later to Canada, his journeys across the continents, his alienation, his exile from his own existence and his individual experiences.

Ondaatje, as a posh writer, writes about both immigrants and non-immigrants whose sharing characteristics are frequently identified with immigrants. The representations of international rogue and cultural outsiders of uncertain allegiances and lots of nationalities are linked in his stories. The immigrants and non-immigrants are distanced from the notion of homeland and from their own existence. Isolation is a common human experience that is indirectly linked to nationality or homeland. The theme of psychological state is explored in most of his novels. Ondaatje consistently and consciously writes from different points of view about statelessness, lack of allegiance to homeland or nationality, the permeability and impermanence of human-imposed borders and the isolation of human beings, instead of choosing to write down from a specifically ethnic minority point of view about his homeland, his past, his experience of otherness, conventional history, politics or economics. The characters Buddy Bolden, Patrick, *The English Patient* and Anna in his novels like *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), *The English Patient* (1992) and

*Divisadero* (2007) without the facility to authorise the versions of truth, finds their voice through Ondaatje, who writes fiction in order to propose their points of view. Thus this paper Focuses on the concepts of homelessness, detachment, and choicelessness of the immigrants in Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) who have enabled him to write down with different, global and inclusive perspectives about isolation, non-belonging and the power of storytelling within the margins of history.

Ondaatje who is regarded as an arch-romantic is also regarded as the least obvious Canadian writer in his subject matter, vision and the verbal texture of his work. However, a closer look at his works reveals a distinct Canadian sensibility. Canada's situation on the North American continent deeply involves itself in the

Machine Age. The inhuman, materialistic existence, literal-mindedness and rude self-assertive optimism of Americans are strongly rejected by Ondaatje. He insists on rationality and on the unerring faith in its ability to control the irrational forces within oneself and the wilderness around oneself, as both superficial and false. Like Buddy Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), humans are often unable to reconcile the warring forces within us.

The existential complexity and the fundamentally chaotic nature of life's experience is devoid of facts. *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) which won the Books in Canada's First Novel Award, fictionalizes the afflicting life and tragic death at the turn of this century of a black African-American cornetist, one of the primary and most powerful musicians to play what was subsequently called hard jazz and whose blues for dancing is believed to be that of Charles Buddy Bolden. Bolden's popularity during his lifetime is clearly indicated by the jazz critic, Jelly Roll Morton's work *Buddy Bolden Blues*: "Anytime it had been a quiet night at Lincoln Park because it could also be the affair that had not been so well publicized, Buddy Bolden would publicize it. He'd turn his big trumpet around toward the town and blow his blues, calling children home" (183).

The entire town would know that Buddy Bolden was at the park, ten or twelve miles away from the middle of the town. Since Gabriel, he was the ever-lived blowingest man.

However, since Bolden's career predated the making of commercial records of this kind of music, there is nothing left of him but legend.

Ondaatje was diverted by a Cryptic newspaper reference that Buddy Bolden, became a legend when he went berserk in a parade. Ondaatje is obsessed with Buddy Bolden's legend. Douglas Barbour in his work, *Michael Ondaatje* rightly observes: "Ondaatje desires to speak the inner world of figure silenced by either too much documentation or far too little"

(7). Ondaatje gives voice to the figure of the New Orleans Jazz cornet player Buddy Bolden in his novel. Ondaatje states: "I wanted everything about this person. I read that reference in the newspaper. I became obsessed with him while I was working on another book. I realized that I was going to have to face this character. He took over and I started writing about him instead and left the other thing" (3).

In his debut novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje has successfully presented a striking portrait of urban America of the early 1900s. The novel is mostly set in the New Orleans Black community. It is also centred on Buddy Bolden, the Afro-American musician, who is a key figure in the development of the New Orleans music style mostly known as jazz. The culture of New Orleans plays an important role in Bolden's life. Ondaatje focuses on the forgotten story of Buddy Bolden where there is no recorded history. According to John Bolland's work *Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient*, he states: "The conflict between creative and destructive energy is returned to in Ondaatje's first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) in the figure of the New Orleans jazz cornet player, Buddy Bolden" (21).

The expression of Bolden's life was his spontaneous, anarchic and transient music.

Essentially post-modern in his preference for fragments, his music with the perfect arches and mechanistic pleasure is sharply contrasted with that of his contemporary John Robichaux.

In spite of the surface anarchy, there exists a discipline in his music that his contemporaries failed to understand. As a part of Bolden's band, Frank Lewis in *Coming Through Slaughter* describes his music as: "It had so little wisdom one wanted to clean nearly every note he passed, it seemed along the way as if travelling in a car, passed before he even approached it and saw it properly" (203). Except for the mood of his power, there was no control. Echoing as if, when he was playing he was lost and looking for the proper accidental notes. Taking note of him was like talking to Coleman. Bolden's music was regarded as formless but the fact was that he was tormented by order. A similar split between the rival desires for order and disorder compelled him to madly oscillate between the two, till the moment of his mental breakdown at the public parade in New Orleans in 1907.

Michael Ondaatje portrays Bolden as a tragic artist, whose music takes him far away from friends and family and leads him to his insanity and isolation. At the peak of his musical career, he becomes unbalanced and insane. Bolden is hooked on sex and is engrossed in infidelity. There is a relative lack of interest in the issue of race in Ondaatje's portrait of Buddy Bolden and in 1983 Ondaatje was criticized in *The English Patient* for: "the absence of any cultural baggage he might have brought with him from Sri Lanka; and for "siding with the colonizer" (22). Douglas Barbour's work *Michael Ondaatje* aptly criticizes the novel for its failure to foreground Bolden's blackness and his black community:

Faulting the text for its failure to foreground Bolden's blackness and its socio-political effects at the time, he misses the point of the cover (or in some editions, the front piece); with the famous photograph of Bolden's band a group of black men. This photographic sign says all that needs to be said. Having shown that these men are black, the text simply assumes that fact and all the cultural baggage that comes with it, and goes on from there. (102)

Bolden's friends Bellocq and Webb symbolize the contrasting attractions between order and disorder in the novel. Never professional in the brain like Bolden, the radical outsider Bellocq, symbolizes the force of disorder. Indifferent to Bolden's music and teetering on the edge of society, this crippled, neurotic photographer tries to lure Bolden out of the world of audiences into an area of silence. His steady job as a photographer for a ship-building firm provides him with the money he needs for photographing whores. The

artist Henri Rousseau even talks about his photographs because of his loneliness. Bellocq reluctantly makes a print of Bolden's band for Webb before bleaching out the negative he possesses. Later in the novel, Bellocq sets fire to the wallpaper in his room and burns himself to death. The unexplained suicide of Bellocq indicates the path Bolden would follow in case of necessity.

Bolden attempts suicide twice by cutting his wrist. The image of suicide in his hands is the last of the numerous images of wrists being in control of the conflicting forces within him. He is at peace within himself only after his breakdown at the age of thirty-one.

Ondaatje is also very much interested in silence. In a section of his poem *White Dwarfs*

### **Ondaatje says:**

There are those burned out stars who implode into silence after parading in the sky after such choreography what would they wish to speak of anyway. (47-50) Webb, Bolden's friend and the police detective is the antithesis of Bellocq. He represents order and public life which Bolden desperately needs but rejects as unbearably claustrophobic. As per his name, he attempts to weave a web for Buddy Bolden. Webb forces Bolden to return from his voluntary exile with the Brewitts who are symbolised as Bolden's most pitilessly demanding audience. Unlike Bolden and Bellocq he holds himself back from emotional involvement and is aware that sexual passion disrupts the ordered system. In *Coming Through Slaughter* to Understand Bolden, Webb interviews his friends and family members only to conclude that: "Their stories were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with every one of them" (63). Bolden's multiple selves resemble the fan in his shop N. Joseph's Shaving Parlour. Bolden dreams of the death of his children and is obsessed with death due to his living in a low-life district among prostitutes, hustlers, gamblers, alcoholics and drug addicts. The newspaper he published from 1899 to 1905 called *The Cricket* contained excessive reference to death. In death, Bolden moves into his parade of silence having come through the experience of slaughter in his life and undoubtedly through the town of slaughter, the town which John James Audubon depicted in his paintings along with its damned birds which, like Bolden, felt their skin was on fire, as they screamed and were led away.

"The making destroying duality in Bellocq, Webb and Bolden is also present in Bolden's wife Nora Bass, as her name suggests, is a basic reality to which Bolden must return, "the home of his wife's mouth" *Coming Through Slaughter* (122). Robin Brewitt likewise, true to her name, offers Bolden a fight from the world of stage and helps him to find peace in her white room with no history and no parading. Therefore for Bolden there can never be any final escape from his art. Even while making love to her, he tries to improve upon Cakewalking Babies, pressing the flesh on her back as though he were plunging into a cornet. Both the women consciously desire to lead Bolden away from the Self-destruction of the stage, though they unconsciously lead him back to it. His sexual jealousy for Nora prompts his assault on the handsome hustler Pickett and his passion for Robin disrupts the order in the lives of Brewitts.

The surroundings depicted in the novel are lewd and murky. Ondaatje describes the protagonist Buddy Bolden's Storyville district as "But here there is a little recorded history, though tales of *The Swamp and Smoky Row*, both notorious communities were about hundred black prostitutes from prepuberty to their seventies" (2). The musicians and the black whores were shipped in from the residential area located in the outskirts of a city and thus the black customers are refused. In, Jon Kertzer, *The Blurred Photo: A Review of Coming through Slaughter*, New Orleans in the *Dark* is described as the industry of sex, where the price of the teenage virgin is fixed Ondaatje also describes:

The women wore Gloria de Dijon and Marshall Neil roses and the whores sold Goofer Dust and Bend- Over Oil. By the end of the nineteenth century, 2000 prostitutes were working regularly. There were at least 70 professional gamblers. 30 piano players took in several thousand each in weekly tips.

Prostitutions and its offshoot received a quarter of a million dollars of the public's money a week (3).

Several scenes in the novel reveal the tremendous force of the connection between violence, sexuality and isolation. The girl at the parade who encourages him to play more brilliantly than ever before, drives him to a state of frenzy and causes his breakdown and his consequent plunge into silence and death. It is possible to see her as a psychic externalization of the insanely demanding audience both Bolden and Ondaatje desire and fear. The author seems to identify completely with Bolden when he says: "When he went mad he was the same age as I am now" (133). His fascination with Bolden is a particular kind of creativity in certain artists in whom making and destroying are of necessarily co-extensive. The strain in such artist can be resolved only by being identified. Thus in this novel *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje has portrayed the culture of urban America. Through Bolden, Ondaatje has portrayed the New Orleans black community who remain unrecognised. The notion of the other, the opposite as the existentialist is central to his work.

In an evocative way Ondaatje's works highlight the potential for a reconciliation of the splintered individual and the possibilities of new forms of community in contemporary society. The fiction of Michael Ondaatje is an examination of the individual self, of community and of human redemption. By using the novels as the form in which one's concerns and preoccupations are mediated, there is the concomitant suggestion that this genre of literature is salvaged from the occlusions of postmodernist strategies. Most of his novels include these times of significant isolation. Identity results from a combination of the migrant's original as well as the acquired identity in the country of adoption. His characters as migrants face challenges in the new world and also face exploitation, alienation, emotional distress, loneliness. Isolation complicates the characters'

intimate relationships and has the prospective to extend the impact of their psychological and morbid conditions. Being left alone with their thoughts and through their isolation, these characters frequently turn their violence within themselves. Therefore they are exhibited in everyday connections between ordinary people, in daily unrecognized struggles and in acts of heroism.

Ondaatje's novels depict the dilemmas of immigrant workers and labourers. He provides a voice to the individuals who are marginalized. His aim is to restore the name and identity of the marginalized people who contributed to the progress of the country. He thinks about the concept of transnationalism which is beyond home and culture. He also depicts the multicultural relations of the individual beyond their territory. The identity is not fixed and it is free in transnational spaces where boundaries are crossed. These wars have killed many Innocent people. He points out racism and discrimination that is prevalent in the world and it takes the life of various people. In his novels, Michael Ondaatje highlights the inequality which is present in society and he gives a message to fight for justice. He also gives the message that we are not one country, we belong to all countries. We are not the citizens of one country; we are the citizens of the world. He stresses equality, non - violence. Ondaatje celebrates cultural hybridity through fragmented memories and images and also the repressed voices and forms of thoughts. His novels bear a testimony of cultural hybridity.

Ondaatje is a talented craftsman who has presented an immense portrait of the modern world through his writings. Ondaatje has brought in his narratives themes and techniques like diaspora, cartography, fictional biography, immigration, multiculturalism, intertextuality, historiographic metafiction, memory, identity and binary oppositions such as the self or other, orient or occident, past or present, centre or margin. He has attempted to revolutionise the world by infusing the importance of cultivating the gentle qualities of love and compassion among his fellow beings. Thus Ondaatje envisions a social structure in which equal status is provided to citizens of all cultures and groups, as the world's well-disposed scenario is important for people's psychic well-being.

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