
Cultural Property and Individualism: A Study of Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*

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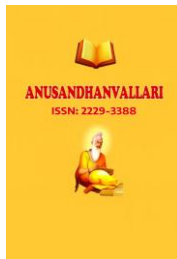
Abstract: - In an attempt to understand how his long-ignored Sri Lankan history shapes his identity, *Running in the Family* journeys to Sri Lanka. It essentially questions the conventional view of culture, which holds that the past is recorded and interpreted by history. This article's goal is to analyze, from a personal viewpoint, how culture is portrayed in *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje, which is characterized as a fictionalized autobiographical memoir. After a lengthy absence, Ondaatje, a Canadian diasporic writer, returns to his birthplace of Sri Lanka and reconstructs his family history and culture through rumors, gossip, and recollections—all of which are subjective and untrustworthy.

Similarly, the narrative used to reconstruct Sri Lankan culture is founded on colonial discourse that mythologizes or even fantasizes about the island. Therefore, by focussing on trustworthy recollections, this essay aims to show how culture is reconstructed and narrated in subjective ways that highlight various ethnicities. In his autobiography *Running in the Family*, Michael Ondaatje examines how his birthplace of Sri Lanka intersects with his cultural background, personal identity, and family history. Questions of how broader historical and cultural influences impact individual recollections and experiences are brought up by Ondaatje's literature. *Running in the Family* can function as a reflection on the nature of cultural property as well as the human quest for identity because of the mingling of individual and collective tales.

Keywords: - Individual identity, family history, perception, relationships, shadows, and cultural legacy.

Introduction: - *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje explores the intricacies of culture and identity from both a personal and a societal perspective. Ondaatje questions conventional narratives about culture, family, and national identity by fusing aspects of history, fiction, and memoir. The conflict between individualism the emphasis on one's own identity and autonomy and cultural property, or what belongs to a community or group, is at the heart of this investigation. Ondaatje's thoughts on his own family as well as Sri Lanka's historical and cultural legacy serve as the backdrop for this conflict. "Half a page and the morning is already ancient" is how Ondaatje introduces himself at the outset (Ondaatje, 11). However, this existence progressively disappears and is replaced with the lives he recalls from Ceylon, sometimes with a sense of urgency to find significance in their existence to forge his own identity.

The writing appears to be quite emotive and may have been written by someone who immigrated to Canada at the age of eleven after first moving to England. Because he lost his youth to emigration, Ondaatje's return after 25 years justifies his recalling memories of events in an attempt to relive the childhood he lost at a young age. By remembering several important people in his life, Ondaatje attempts to comprehend himself. "The self uses the other to try to understand itself" (Miriam, 3). Ondaatje encounters the intricacy of his ancestry while pursuing self-realization via the reflection of others.



His return begs the question of where he truly belongs, given his early migration and life lived largely outside of his homeland. Because of his expatriate status, he is in a condition of juggling multiple identities and needs a firm foundation. Since he is already a migrant, Ondaatje holds the issue of identification in the highest regard and is therefore looking for a definitive and unadulterated identity. Because of this, his identity is a result of hybridized ethnicities composed of invaders and outsiders. Ondaatje discovers in his search for his identity that the location he is attempting to remember and connect to is not in a pure state but is instead "made up of sedimentary layers of memories piled upon memories which do not seem to solidify" (Milica, 104).

However, this multiethnicity weakens the foundation that Ondaatje so urgently seeks to establish. He can't relate to even his forebears because it exacerbates his feeling of identity. Because of the ambivalence of his true lineage, he is still distant from his forefathers and so, he is unable to fulfil the goal for which he so desperately sought it. According to him, "Everyone had a long line of Dutch, Tamil, Sinhalese, and Burgher ancestry and was somewhat related." Between this group and the English and Europeans who were never a part of the Ceylonese community, there existed a significant social divide (Ondaatje 32).

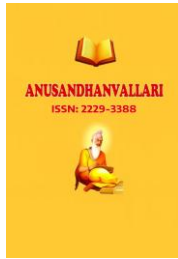
The tangible and intangible components of a society's customs, artwork, heritage stories, and activities that define and mold cultural identity are referred to as cultural property. This idea is made more difficult by Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, which illustrates the individualized and disjointed ways that culture is experienced and remembered. The author reveals a complex story that links his identity to a variety of cultural customs, ethnic conflicts, colonial legacies, and familial legacies as he investigates his family history.

The cultural heritage that Ondaatje inherits is significantly shaped by Sri Lanka's colonial past, especially under British control. The socio-political climate of the era had a significant impact on his family members' lives, and the conflict between colonialism, migration, and native Sri Lankan culture was evident in their tales. Therefore, the cultural legacy that Ondaatje gets is entwined with loss, conflict, and transformation and is not just a question of pride or heritage.

For instance, the author explores the inconsistencies in his family's history. The relationship between the colonial past and the present is represented by his father, a complex and enigmatic figure. Ondaatje illustrates how cultural artifacts and symbols, such as the family's estate or the stories passed down through the centuries, are more than just sentimental or idealized belongings in his depiction of his family's colonial past. Rather, they are disputed items that can cause both pride and suffering. Although *Running in the Family* has a strong cultural heritage in Sri Lanka, it also addresses individualism. Throughout the memoir, the author's inner quest for identity beneath the burden of cultural legacy is depicted. Ondaatje tries to balance his own need for independence with the understanding that his identity has been influenced by the larger cultural setting in which he was raised by presenting his experiences alongside those of his family.

Ondaatje struggles with the conflict between the importance of cultural heritage and individualism. He starts to wonder which parts of his lineage he can claim as his own and which feel alien or oppressive as he describes his family's complicated relationships with their Sri Lankan ancestors. His examination of his father's life, for instance, is a nuanced voyage of both awe and distancing. The author's wish to establish his own identity outside of the confines of family or national history is expressed through his sense of autonomous detachment, even if he is strongly drawn to the legacy his father represents. *Running in the Family* explores the relationship between individualism and cultural inheritance as a means of both self-definition and self-discovery. For someone like Ondaatje, who was born in Sri Lanka but later assimilated into Canadian society, the narrative emphasizes how cultural identity is always renegotiated rather than being an immutable asset.

Ondaatje's story revolves around the function of memory in creating cultural and personal identity. The portrayal of memory as jumbled, erratic, and changeable frequently raises more problems than it answers. The author emphasizes the significance of how people recall, understand, and reconstruct their lives within the cultural and



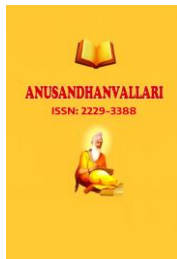
familial contexts that molded them through his examination of his family's past. Memory is portrayed in *Running in the Family* as a dynamic and creative process rather than as a permanent, constant resource. The author's stories are not just factual reports; rather, they illustrate how personal memories and cultural memories interact. As Ondaatje interweaves the stories of his forefathers and his own experiences, the lines between the imaginary and the actual become hazier. The conflict between individuality and cultural property is reflected in this historical reconstruction process. According to the memoir, reinterpreting cultural experiences to suit one's own story is a common step in the process of creating a distinctive identity. Ondaatje's autobiography highlights the erratic and flexible nature of cultural property, especially family history. His father in particular comes out as a character whose tales defy any cultural or historical categorization.

Particularly when influenced by such disparate cultural elements, the irrationality and absurdity of their choices and acts allude to the unknowability of identity. Individuals must negotiate and interpret cultural property based on their personal experiences; it is not only a legacy to be passively accepted. Ondaatje emphasizes how cultural inheritance is a complicated process by delving into his family's complicated history and Sri Lanka's colonial past. Contradictions, intricacies, and aspects of continuity and loss abound throughout it. The idea that cultural property is static is contested in *Running in the Family*, which contends that identity and culture are incredibly subjective, dynamic constructs that are never entirely established.

Cultural property, as used in *Running in the Family*, encompasses both the idea of family lineage and the material and immaterial components of Sri Lankan history and customs. Ondaatje offers insights into colonialism, post-colonial battles, and Sri Lanka's national identity as he considers his family's history, which is entwined with the country's history. Ondaatje presents culture as a dynamic, ever-evolving phenomenon that is shaped by generations but not limited to the past by sharing tales about his forebears and his recollections. In this context, the concept of historical legacy is also linked to the idea of cultural property. The colonial era is deeply ingrained in Ondaatje's family ties, and the book's protagonists' identities and recollections bear the scars of this cultural past. His father's position in the nation's social structure and his complex relationship with Ondaatje, for instance, both add to the broader conversation of how culture is passed down, changed, and understood through the generations. *Running in the Family* by Ondaatje is distinguished by its emphasis on the individual within the larger framework of societal cultural myths. The connection between personal experiences and the more extensive historical, social, and cultural frameworks that influence them is a topic the author frequently addresses.

His complicated relationship with his father, whose personal legacy Ondaatje both inherits and defies, is the clearest example of this. Ondaatje questions the notion of a single, cohesive cultural identity, which raises the conflict between individualism and cultural property. He offers a disjointed perspective of identity through his examination of his father's peculiarities, his personal experiences, and the folktales of Sri Lankan culture. One characteristic of Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* is its emphasis on the individual within the larger framework of cultural narratives.

The author struggles continuously with how personal experiences relate to the broader historical, social, and cultural frameworks that influence them. This is particularly seen in his complicated connection with his father, whose personal legacy Ondaatje both inherits and defies. When Ondaatje questions the notion of a single, cohesive cultural identity, the conflict between individualism and cultural property becomes relevant. His examination of his personal experiences, his father's peculiarities, and the combined narratives of Sri Lankan culture offer a disjointed perspective on who he is. The way that Ondaatje handles memory and identity highlights how both are mutable, individualized, and frequently at odds with one another. Ondaatje considers the conflict between remembering and forgetting, as well as how memory is a type of cultural property, throughout *Running in the Family*. His retelling of family histories, anecdotes, and stories is influenced by his cultural and familial perspective in addition to his personal experience. Ondaatje investigates the notion that cultural



property is dynamic, divided, and frequently contested by delving into his family's past. The physical and psychological effects of displacement are reflected in this fluidity. Ondaatje's identity is linked to a location—Sri Lanka—but his attempts to make peace with the two worlds after moving to Canada have muddled his relationship with it. His sense of self is greatly shaped by this displacement, which also affects how he balances individualism and cultural belonging. Thus, *Running in the Family* is a potent examination of how identity may be inherited and created on one's own, influenced by cultural heritage but also motivated by personal initiative.

The intricacy of Ondaatje's ideas is reflected in the narrative style of *Running in the Family*. The book presents a complex picture of Sri Lankan history and culture by alternating between poetry and prose, memory and imagination. Ondaatje highlights the fragmented nature of his own experience as well as the greater tale of his nation by using a non-linear narrative. Similar to how culture is created and reconstructed over time, the author's quest for identity is reflected in this disjointed tale; it is a never-ending and ever-changing journey.

The book's structure, which alternates between the past and the present as well as between personal and national history, reflects the tension between individualism and cultural property. Identity is not a simple, fixed construct, just as the text does not follow a straight line. It is influenced by both personal decisions and ingrained cultural narratives from which it is impossible to completely break free. Ondaatje's quest to comprehend his family, his nation, and himself reflects the conflict between cultural heritage and the pursuit of personal meaning. As a result, it would not be incorrect to read Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* as a memoir that contains the author's disjointed childhood recollections, the memories of his siblings, and the stories from his parent's generation. The work depicts numerous truths derived from conflicting and inconsistent memories of Ondaatje and other individuals, much like the new historicists who focus on multiple truths.

In addition, there are also stark differences in Ondaatje's and his brother Christopher's perspectives on Mervyn. Christopher has also authored an autobiography. As he recites his brother's autobiography as "a love letter to the father Michael never knew," Christopher describes his book "as a corrective to *Running*" (Bolton, 222). He also describes himself as "deeply involved with that man...grappling with his demons" (Adams, 122). Michael Ondaatje is persuaded by a variety of rumors and tales and realizes that he will never be able to determine the truth about his father.

We can only speculate because there is so much to know, the author writes. Around him, I suppose. Those who loved him tell me that I got to know him from these random acts. Nevertheless, he is still one of those books whose pages we want to read. We remain foolish. (Ondaatje, 200) Ondaatje explains that "gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships" (Ondaatje, 53). In short, he progressively discovers that all the stories and gossip he unearths during his excursions make his father and family history more confusing and impossible to grasp. Lastly, he compares his father to "the north pole," which is also too far away to precisely approach (Ondaatje, 172).

Ondaatje looks at several maps of the island while he is making travel plans, but none of them match Ceylon as he recalls. To rediscover the locations he wishes to regain, he so searches through his memory map. He sees these locations when he returns to Ceylon, and they help him mold his recollections. Ondaatje feels uneasy about the others since they are different, even though some of them are consistent with his memories. Ondaatje finds Rock Hill, the "family home" constructed by his paternal grandfather "on a prime spot of land right in the center of the town of Kegalle," to be one of the sites that unnerve him (Ondaatje, 55). Ondaatje is disappointed by the disparity, which is described as follows: What we had thought was a beautiful, large mansion was suddenly little and dark, disappearing into the surrounding terrain. Rock Hill was inhabited by a Sinhalese family. For Ondaatje, a tree is the only thing that endures in his recollections. In addition, Rock Hill, which Ondaatje remembered as magnificent, has become a "depressed garden" (Ondaatje, 60). As a result, Ondaatje fabricates an entirely new past and appears to have lost reality. After seeing Rock Hill, Ondaatje is acutely aware



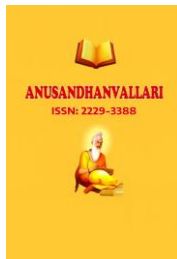
of this rupture with the past and that it will always be unpredictable. The conflict between Ondaatje's memories and those of his older sister Gillian is increasingly unsettling.

As Ondaatje recalls Rock Hill as a peaceful house where they spent their carefree and lovely days, Gillian's memories highlight their difficult upbringing by reminding their alcoholic father of some of the locations where he concealed his bottles. "Here, and here," she said (Ondaatje, 59). Ondaatje realizes that his recollections might be erroneous and untrustworthy after noticing the discrepancy between them and the real Rock Hill and Gillian's memories. Additionally, these disparities reflect scattered and fragmented memories, which Ondaatje refers to as "dark rooms with various kinds of furniture" (Ondaatje, 110). They only become comprehensible after Ondaatje organizes them, which turns out to be another replication of memories.

Ondaatje emphasizes that despite their constant engagement with the past, they are flexible and elusive. Accordingly, "long lists of confused genealogies and rumor" (Ondaatje, 206) largely rebuild Ondaatje's story. After realizing the unachievable magnitude of learning about the past, Ondaatje concludes that recollections and stories cannot fully convey or comprehend the past, nor is it rigidly held in any location. The work reconstructs and chronicles the histories of both sides while fusing the author's past with the island's colonial experiences. Ondaatje uses maps to locate certain routes to Ceylon even as he prepares to return to Canada. He calls them "false maps," nevertheless because they were all created by people who had come ashore to seize Ceylon's wealth or the island itself (Ondaatje, 63).

Furthermore, these maps' shapes are so dissimilar that they appear to be translations by academics from other scientific disciplines. Furthermore, Ondaatje emphasizes that the ancient maps "reveal rumors of topography, the routes for invasion and trade, and the dark mad mind of travelers' tales appear throughout Arab and Chinese and medieval records" (Ondaatje, 64). These maps also convey virtually no real information. These maps show Ceylon's colonial history as the colonizers tried to identify the island's elusiveness while looking for ways to occupy it. Edward Said also emphasizes the importance of these varied maps, characterizing them as perceptions of various locations. Said adds that the term "Orient," which was coined by Europeans, has long been used to refer to a "place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said,1). Accordingly, *Running in the Family* begins with the following quote: "I saw in this island fowls as big as our country geese having two heads... and other miraculous things which I will not here write off" (Ondaatje, 9). Ondaatje shares Said's viewpoint.

Conclusion: - Ondaatje writes Sri Lanka's history from the perspective of the migrant, not as it was. He uses his memories, creative outbursts, and humorous anecdotes to describe Ceylon as he remembers it, not as it was. His exoticism of Sri Lanka represents a disengaged immigrant attempting to remember his legendary homeland while envisioning the rich, sensual delights of a combination of life and color. He tries to overcome and fill in the blanks of his lost experience by using his vivid imagination of how he sees his country, but time and space distort his affiliation with it. As a result, Ondaatje's writing is not objective history as he discovers it. As he considers the information in front of him, it is the realization of the ramifications of the reality he finds and the linkages he sees (Milica 106). His use of exoticism makes it obvious how detached Ondaatje is from his homeland and how he defines his relationship with Ceylon by the story rather than by objective analysis. As a Canadian and an expatriate, Ondaatje has made an effort to recall and make sense of everything he can recall about his background. Ondaatje's father was an alcoholic who destroyed his own life and spent it in frivolity, while his mother, a strong-willed woman, gave him up. However, Ondaatje realized that his parents were the only pair who were considered to be soul mates. He illustrates the humor and relatability that bound his parents together in the chapter "What we think of a married life." Ondaatje, however, takes over twenty-five years after his mother and her children leave, and he recalls his father—despite his alcoholism—rather than his mother. He carried a piece of each of the characters he listed with him. He learned from his father's youth how to be naive, careless, and irrational, and from Lalla how to be loyal to one's emotions.



He realizes at the end of the story how crucial each of these persons was to help him comprehend his background. Ondaatje was able to acquire something far more than a geographical position, even though he was still uncertain of his origins and forebears. Compared to where he began, he was able to better understand himself by gaining insight into his family. "The sense of identity with his land and his family has been attained, which was the ultimate goal of the narrator's quest" (Milica 108). Ondaatje acknowledges his writing in *Running in the Family* and uses it to write his name in "Ceylon's" history. He concentrates on how his journey to confront the past is portrayed politically.

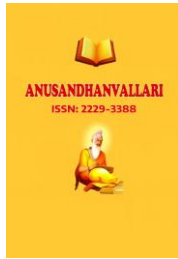
But through his writing, which may be filtered through the process of integrating the past and present, he tries to convey a sense of belonging. Instead of drawing any conclusions about identity, ethnicity, or belonging, he writes his book to let readers discover who they are. However, his experiences creating and publishing texts as well as constructing social texts result in a complex critical pattern that supports the narrative-historical experiment and demonstrates an insistence on belonging. His writing requires an engaged reader who participates in the collection of tales and sampling of sounds that symbolize intercultural identity.

Ondaatje undoubtedly demonstrates in a number of his novel's sections that he does not feel a sense of belonging to his native country; thus, he indicates in the text that he is searching for himself. He focuses on the issue of autobiography in this book utilizing a variety of techniques, constructing his story in specific ways by employing layers, displaying maps, and selecting various intertexts that relate to the self, history, and homeland. Memory is the primary document that the narrator uses in this type of literature, and memory is a type of fiction in this type of narration.

Although the content of Ondaatje's writings is equal throughout, he crafts a highly dialogic narrative in this one that includes his voice as well as those of his friends, family, and relations. To contribute to the biographical or historiographic metafiction approach, Ondaatje writes the text of the fragmental foreground, which the reader can readily share. Everywhere in *Running in the Family*, the remarkable immediacy of the language pushes beyond the bounds of chatter while maintaining the allure of gossip.

Running in the Family by Michael Ondaatje provides a thorough examination of the connection between cultural property and individualism. The author explores how cultural heritage is passed down, reinterpreted, and modified by the individual through the history of his family. The memoir also examines how a person's identity is inextricably linked to the broader historical and cultural settings in which it is shaped. The memoir paints a complicated picture of how people negotiate the difficult landscape of memory, family, and cultural legacy by fusing the personal with the cultural. Readers leave the reading with a greater comprehension of the relationship between cultural property and individual identity. It offers a more flexible, dynamic, and multidimensional understanding of identity and challenges rigid ideas of heritage. *Running in the Family* demonstrates how our inherited cultural and familial narratives are always interwoven with our quest for self-understanding. Michael Ondaatje provides a thoughtful analysis of the connection between individualism and cultural property in *Running in the Family*. Ondaatje investigates the inheritance, shaping, and contestation of culture by fusing personal and national histories. By examining memory, family, and identity, the author paints a nuanced picture of how cultural legacies may both empower and limit a person.

The book asks readers to think about how culture is a continuous process of negotiating oneself with the greater social and historical factors that define identity, rather than just a trait that is passed down from one generation to the next. Ultimately, *Running in the Family* is a reminder that identity, whether it be collective or individual, is constantly changing due to the constant interaction between cultural inheritance and personal experiences. It is a dynamic, fluid process that defies complete containment in a single story.



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