

## “Trying Toget It Straight”: Fragmentation Of Subjectivity In Michael Ondaatje’s Memoir *Running In The Family*

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### Abstract

This paper argues that Michael Ondaatje’s memoir *Running in the Family* features a fragmented self by recourse to identity evinced by means of narratives. Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity constitutes the major theoretical backup towards substantiating this notion. The study shall also employ ancillary concepts namely autobiography, memoir, Aristotelian *telos*, and emplotment (*muthos*) in fiction to advance the said objective. Fragmentation of identity<sup>1</sup> is of topical interest in the radically transformed pattern of life today. Literary works have dealt with the issue variously and Michael Ondaatje’s memoir *Running in the Family* treats the issue in a novel mode of narration, viz mythification of history and historicization of myth. Thus, the narrative convention is made to meet up a crisis with respect to teleological development of a story and also subjectivity. The topic of identity construction in this fictional memoir has obviously been taken up by critics. However, this paper is different in that the question has been addressed with insights drawn principally from the concept of narrative identity even as the focus is also on generic shifts. This study highlights the proposition of narrative identity as proposed by Paul Ricoeur and makes an attempt to throw light on self-fragmentation as evidenced in Michael Ondaatje’s fictional memoir *Running in the Family*.

Keywords: subjectivity, teleology, self-fragmentation, memoir, narrative identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Selfhood, Subjectivity and identity are used synonymously and in the larger general sense.

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## Introduction

The meaning of identity is generally traced to its etymological root 'idem' which is understood as meaning the 'same' as well as 'ipse' which means 'self-same' (Ricoeur 2). The former sense is taken to mean 'being identical'. The latter is taken to mean 'being the same despite changes'. It is this latter meaning which is being taken up by Paul Ricoeur as the defining principle which informs his proposition of narrative identity. While a person continues to be the same person, the very same person keeps changing over time in many respects which include physical as well as mental transformation.

A narrative that narrativises this progression/development/evolution of a person, adds up to provide a crucial understanding of the person, and it is this significant detail that happens to be the meaning of 'ipse' and, Paul Ricoeur designates it as 'narrative identity' (Simms 102). It is, therefore, to be understood that a unique kind of identity is established by recourse to one's own narrative, no matter the kind of truth the respective narratives claim to come out with, namely fictional or factual; whichever the case, the narratives provide an illumination on the kind of person one is. Paul Ricoeur infuses special meanings to such terms as prefiguration, configuration and re-figuration, which are explanatory of the phases of progressive understanding of a person with reference to pre-narrative and post-narrative points of time. Herein, prefiguration is the understanding one has before the intervention of narrative, configuration (Narrating the self through exposition of a sequence of events) involves emplotment (*muthos*) which is understood as the gradual orchestration of events towards a climax and resolution; and re-figuration is the summative understanding which includes the additional understanding arrived with the help of narrative (Simms 86).

## Paul Ricoeur's Theory of Employment and Identity

Paul Ricoeur's proposition is predicated upon Aristotle's concept of *telos* (teleology) which insists on an order of beginning, middle and end to a narrative. He imputes a correlation between the employment (linearity) of a narrative and the identity of the narrator<sup>2</sup>. He opines that when teleology is challenged, by extension, when a non-linear narration is forced upon the narrative, the emplotment gets disrupted. A clear progression of events and fruition of a climax are not orchestrated. As a consequence, a haphazard series of events transpire and end up in the destruction of a single – unique – identity. Thus, the protagonist's identity cannot be essentially stated; rather, it comes to be seen as fragmented. The Memoir as a genre, by and large, does not typically provide such a linear narration. The non-linearity inherent in the memoir implicitly indicates the fragmentation of the narrator's identity/self (memoirs are, by rule, narrated in the first person. Thus, in a memoir, the narrator and the protagonist are the same people: one tells the story of oneself.

Whereas self-narratives characteristically contribute to identity construction apparently, memoirs by their very non-linear character do not orchestrate a unique identity; the resultant identity evinces fragmentation). Another significant observation is that whereas autobiography

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<sup>2</sup> See Ricoeur

narrates the entire life story of a persona, memoir does not do it. It singles out a crucial phase in one's life and narrates its significance in relation to his/her entire life. On account of such reasons, the role of employment of the larger life narrative is, arguably, cut short in a memoir. Such textual devices and generic choices with reference to a shuffled/fragmented narration of events of one's life could be textually seen as attempts to depict disfigurement of identity.

Narratives and culture are closely related to culture inform the narratives. Subjectivity or identity which is contingent upon culture gets established also through language and narratives are chief media of linguistic expression. Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires accentuate the flippant nature of identity that is dependent upon various cultural discourses which are usually connoted by verbal narratives or otherwise, and rejects the essentialist paradigm which disregards the variety of impinging influences. Cohan and Shires highlight the self-consciousness realised in language: "...Subjectivity is not a unified or transcendent psychological essence but a process. The subject, continually (re)activated and (re)positioned in the multiple discourses of culture, is an effect of signification" (149). He further explains how the subject repeatedly comes to realise himself as the same person by referring himself as "I":

"...the speaking subject achieves a sense of self-presence as the originator of his or her utterance by identifying with the pronoun "I". This signifier refers to its syntagmatic position in discourse for both its antecedent and its differential field of possible meanings; furthermore, it paradigmatically implies, and also locates in the discourse, the subject whom the utterance addresses, *you*." (149).

### **Paul Ricoeur and Narrative Identity**

The notion that self is a narrative evolves from a metaphysics of potentiality and actuality based on the changes occurring to an individual in organic life (Polkinghorne 151). Philosophical anthropology's preoccupation to establish the identity of Man, at first, raises a question of "what am I?" and later changes it to "Who am I?" Narrative accounts for them by a provision of a framework. Narrative supplies a framework that puts forth an image of the person by means of delineating whatever that one has been. This delineation entails actions carried out by the concerned individual. The answer is not expected in just physical terms, instead of something more. This pre-understanding is of someone or someone's activity as human action is transformed and refigured by narrative (151). That is, the event one undergoes or the action one initiates on one's own would remain as just an event, and would be sensed in a modality that is responsive to oneself. Over the course of the narration, one makes an attempt to make sense of the event or action by mediation to a medium entailing emplotment which is designated as "narrative" and this presupposes narrative competence of the individual. For, if not for this narrative competence, narration - a way of seeing, a feasible pattern of a story development - would never materialize.

This competency identifies a certain event in relation to other events or actions while encoding it in a narrative medium. This process of making sense of events/actions provides a pattern susceptible to one's mind. This appropriation (mediation of narrative) indicates how an

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event/action is experienced by him/her. The narrative provides a pattern interpretable by the individual. Such pattern provides the integrating plot as it connects all other events and actions into one unity. The resultant structure provided by narrative helps one understand oneself in the light of narrativized (by extension, unified or generalized) insights derived from experiencing the events or actions carried out by oneself. Thus self-identity could be seen as inevitably associated with a person's life story.

Narratives typically unify the events, phenomena, and experiences to facilitate narration by virtue of their propensity for the teleological arrangement. By virtue of their inherent unifying tendency, narratives construct an identity for the text in which they are narrated. In narratives which are fragmented, the creation of such narrative unity is challenged. This would mean that the identity of the text is threatened. Dechronologisation, inter alia, provides one of the chief means that disrupt the presumed essence/unity that might possibly be the result of a linear narrative development. Fragments work out to dispel the essence, and the traditional narrative unity cannot endure, at that. The identity at this point, if any, evinces traces of the decent ring.

At any rate, on the one hand, human understanding today has moved away from the traditionally conceived essentialized self, and takes a stand in favour of fragmented self on account of the heterogeneity of experiences, and linguistic representation, on the other, too has its own consequences on Man owing to peculiar behavior of language, and correspondingly that of the narrative. Despite these instabilities and complications, there persists a necessity to comprehend the changes. Hence, the search after the changing identities. Narrative, being the only verbal means, provides a potential medium to gauge the situation by enabling a relatively fixed picture, and thus, helps assign an identity to talk about the human condition. It is also valid to quote Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires here: "...a narrative text does not simply represent subjectivity to readers or viewers, more importantly, it also signifies their subjectivity for them" (Cohan and Shires 149).

The narrative theory proposed in relation to self is employed to seek out a correlation between narrative and identity. Paul Ricoeur's statement with regard to the character is made use of as inevitably connecting to plot. He theories plot as definitive of identity (Ricoeur 149). This means that a clear intelligible plot driven by convention is schematic of the identity. Aristotelian unity of plot explicates the smooth development of the narrative towards fruition. Realistic portrayals in linear narratives strive to provide a mimetic picture. Yet, the literary and critical turn in the middle of the twentieth century is to be critical of this verisimilitude. It contests the realistic claims. This tradition looks for means that could do reasonable justice to reality in its narrative Endeavour.

To those who champion this non-traditional orientation, the reality is constructed out of non-linear structures of memory, contingent transpiration of events, and porous character of consciousness. They take a cue from such reality to conjure up the literary narratives, for literary impulse is basically mimetic, and mimetic impulse is, in turn, pleasurable. The non-linear plot, therefore, begins to be associated with fragmentation of the identity. Indulgence in anachronism orchestrates fragmentation. Ostensibly unconnected episodic narratives too

contribute to perpetuating it. Seemingly affirmative narratives could actually be undermining the totalising selves at a subtler subtext level. This gets done through narrative strategies such as irony, parody, and so on. Language games and breakup of the syntactic order are also resorted to towards realising this objective.

In view of facilitating his proposition, Paul Ricoeur intervenes with a fresh notion of identity as having the structure of *idem* and *ipse*, with the former referring to the unchanging organic/integral component of identity (i.e. constancy) and the latter referring to the changing composition of identity. The changes that happen within (herein designated as *ipseity*, and what comes to be referred to, in totality, as narrative identity) are eventually carried over to, or superimposed on, the unchanging component, the *idem*, such that there takes place a dialectics between the *idem* and the *ipse*; and this is a seamlessly unending process; the totality of identity gets transformed incessantly at that. Ricoeur's model of narrative identity makes allowances for the element of change in this way as a major constituent element in the formation of identity.

By extension, the structure of this narrative identity is basically derived from Aristotelian teleology in reference to the genre of narrative. Paul Ricoeur states that narratives enable self-knowledge by getting the subject, who at once is both the writer and the reader, narrate his / her own experiences in a narratable fashion. This implies a strict adherence to the convention of teleological presentation of events conforming to the framework of a beginning, middle, and an end to a narrative (That the experiences should be framed into a narratable structure also would imply an ethical element built into identity. For, narrative presupposes ethical judgements as they are forms/modes of sharing of experiences, which are replete with practical wisdom; this wisdom is stored as estimations, and evaluations, which by their very character indicate either approval or disapproval).

Ricoeur establishes a reciprocal connection between identity and narrative in this way, formulating a recognisable category called narrative identity, and ushers in the ethical element into the picture by virtue of the inherent, inextricable, link between narrative and ethics. In effect, an unconventional order contrary to the Aristotelian teleology might bespeak a fragmentation of identity. Paul Ricoeur calls those fictional/semi-fictional texts that could not be explained away in terms of narrativity that is predicated upon a teleological structure as fictions of the loss of identity (Ricoeur 149). He explicates it in the following manner:

...as the narrative approaches the point of annihilation of the character, the novel also loses its own properly narrative qualities...To the loss of the identity of the character thus corresponds the loss of the configuration of the narrative and in particular a crisis of the closure of the narrative. We, therefore, find a sort of rebound effect of the character on the plot. (149)

The loss of identity, says Ricoeur, impels one of the modalities of identity namely the *idem* - the sameness (constancy) - to get displaced (removed) and to be superimposed with *ipse*, the selfhood, such that the support of sameness - the character or the identifying set of lasting dispositions - is taken off the scene (removed). So, the *ipse* represented by changing character now assumes an active role in the determination of identity. A literary narrative gives vent to

the world - the other - in words, in a bid to imitate reality; for, it is a mimesis of action. Literary narratives engage with the dialectical relation between selfhood and sameness in the wake of superimposition of selfhood upon sameness when they mediate the contingencies of experience (Ricoeur150).

### **Narrativity, Subjectivity, and *RF***

It is in this backdrop, this study makes the observation that the genre 'memoir' exclusively depicts the fragmentation of self textually in his *Running in the Family (RF)*. Early on, before the advent and popularity of the genre of memoir, autobiographies predominantly enjoyed the role of performing the self textually, for they narrate the identity of oneself by means of a sequence of events that happened in one's Life. Later, however, with the realisation that realism does not serve well to narratives the self by carefully sequencing the entire panorama of events that happen in one's life, memoirs became popular by virtue of their chief attribute of fictionalizing history<sup>3</sup> Memoirs too project the selves of the writers who undertake to write them by providing a general framework of narrative and thereby a 'connectedness of life'(Ricoeur 117), but they try to be selective in what they portray and this what distinguishes it from what a conventional autobiography does. While autobiographies do not explicitly declare that they fuse fact and fiction in their narration, memoirs by their very form suggest that they fuse both fact and fiction; the very origin and genealogy of memoir is indicative of this element of fictionalisation of truth; the readers of memoir generally understand that writers of memoir do not undertake to write all that is true; While memoir is an offshoot of autobiography<sup>4</sup>, unlike autobiography, it is closer to reality by undertaking to draw closer to reality by mythicizing the history and historicizing the myth. Memoirs, like autobiographies, perform the self through narrating how the sequence of events combine to give a sense to the subject/self who goes through one event after another.

Conventional narrative unity is disrupted by metafiction, non-linearity, and other artistic and narrative devices resulting in fragmentation. Genres and narrativity in combination orchestrate a narrative crisis, resulting in breaking the narrative unity which is indicative of a narrative identity. Authorial interest to interpolate implications of migration and the attendant fragmentation/multiplication of identity finds its way through artistic and narrative means. Basically, mixing of genres and non-linearity discourage an intensification of an orientation and motivation. The latter half of the twentieth century creative narrative in literature is characterized by self-reflexivity, and these self-reflexive texts are metafictional in outlook. They do not harmonise with any of the previously existing modes of writing. As a matter of fact, they undermine the convention. This has happened to life-writing as well as novels. Accordingly, the genre of life-narrative has spawned a number of sub-generic varieties of such narrative types as autobiography/biography, a fictional autobiography, memoir, autofiction, etc. As much as what is being communicated is important, how the communication is done is also equally important given the increased awareness of narrative, textuality and the understanding of the reading processes. On this account, a transgression of the established order by way of trying out new

<sup>3</sup> See Couser.

<sup>4</sup> See Couser.

possibilities to ease transference of thought towards a better representation became trendy and began to assume a top priority among creative writers. Michael Ondaatje's narrative fiction is typically aplenty with such experimental features. For Ondaatje, representation of human thought is of paramount importance. Given the fact that language carries the thoughts of the characters, mediation of thoughts through language bear traces of human subjectivity.

### Ondaatje's Fictional Memoir

The narrative form and the narrative pattern constitute two of the most conspicuous features in Ondaatje's narratives. The interplay of realism and fiction, intertextuality, lateral references, generic mix, and collage-like techniques all contribute to the narrative fictionality. As opposed to the typical practice of conforming to the realist generic conventions, which attempt to provide a unified identity, Ondaatje's narrative ventures out to stretch the story<sup>5</sup> across a peculiar unconventional form of the narrative so much so that it metaphorically bespeaks the fragmentation of identity. The narrative in this respect could be construed as an index of identity<sup>6</sup>. An analysis of these elements and other ancillary devices by reference to *RF* is aimed at showing the failure of forming a narrative unity. Though almost all his works feature this attribute, one of the earlier narratives to be published in 1983 that is usually designated as a memoir, namely *RF* constructs a highly complicated narrative order in this respect. The writer attempts to arrive at an overall unified remark on its style of narration and to fit it to a generic nomenclature which is already in place and also in practice, fail owing to the transgressive propensity of the work's structure.

The episodic arrangement of episodes purports to tell a history but is cut short. It is characterised by narrative aporia whereby the mechanics of the narrative weaving is complex in that finding any overt obvious resemblance to any established conventional narrative genre proves difficult. This narrative undermines narrative sequence and opts for a preference of oblique references through unobtrusive imagery and irony to vicariously make cross connections and criticism. It could be metaphorically translated as the failure to elicit an absolute/definite identity. The generic indeterminacy in this regard is presumed to correspond to the fragmentation of the self. The fragments that go to make up the larger narrative of *RF* represent the splintered selves. Such dispersal of fragmented phenomena serves to depict the reality of the selfhood. Thus, Ondaatje's narrative fiction is multifariously illustrative of this fragmentation of the self. Such uncertain and irreducible character of the self in contemporary times abound and get designated as constructed, multiple, fragmented, decentered, so on and so forth.

The migrant character has aggravated this fragmentation by creating an opening for identity-shaping forces to enter still more forcefully into chronoscope. This part of the study focuses on how the narration (textuality) is innovatively handled in *RF* towards the depiction of multiple selves in *RF* in the backdrop of migration. As stated before, two major aspects such as narrative

<sup>5</sup> In Gerard Genette's sense.

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Bamberg

form and the narrative strategies are explored as constitutive of an alternative logic Ondaatje conjures up to give expression to the disintegration of the self. The essentialist notion of the modernist era thus gets eroded. In other words, the role of narrative is explored to see how the idea of narrative has been utilised to advance an anti-essentialist, anti-foundationalist, and anti-modernist view of selfhood. The narrative is investigated as to how it is in the service of approximating a methodology to depict an internally fractured reality.

The memoir *Running in the Family* is a migrant's narration contemplating on an era/life that has gone by, so to speak, his own selfhood. The genre of the work, namely the memoir, takes a slice from history, a specific period in the life of someone (childhood in the case of *RF*) that has been taken up for rumination. The general focus of the text, therefore, is Ondaatje's childhood life in colonial Ceylon which he does not remember, and his father Mervyn's life he does not know. Nevertheless, Ondaatje takes the trouble to cull the memories of his father from sources that could reproduce them. This desire, a longing to associate himself with the native land, could be construed as an urge shared, perforce by all migrants. The intention to retain the memories of a life that has been constitutive of the person that he is, the self that he has come to be, is evident in his retrospective, incessantly irresistible meanderings into the past with the nostalgic determination to unravel it from whatever means available: either official or unofficial, oral or written. The visit/travel reveals the urge, determination, and the fulfilment sought after in getting to know one's roots.

*Running in the Family* is a commingling of fact and fiction. It is an excavation. Facts of, and perspectives over, the events which have been scattered about among the relatives and friends and in the official documents or archives have been collected and presented to form a memoir, but with a scepticism signified by its narration and form. Memoirs, closer in nature to autobiographies are to be real expressions of the 'subjectivity and individual development' (Herman 35). Ondaatje resorts to the postmodern mode of patching them together to form a history of his family, especially that of his father. Since it is not feasible altogether to formulate the history as it has been, Ondaatje makes use of the available traces, both oral and written documents to retrieve the history of his family in Sri Lanka. That way, the work turns out to be a trace of historicity. It is not its exact reproduction. Photography, records in the government bodies, religious institutions, private clubs and associations, memories from relatives and friends and gossips all go into the making of the history.

Presentation mode is also reflective of the migrant interiority; for a member of diaspora the loss of home represents a way of life, his/her self is cleaved between the traditional homeland and the new home; divided loyalties make him/her anxious; hence the disruption of a homogenous generic mode and anachronistic presentation in an effort to get across the dilemma, and indecision. There is no formal teleology as in a traditional work of art/literature conceived along the Aristotelian principles. It is a metanarrative that incorporates a range of generic forms. Nonetheless, new art forms such as photography too have been included to synthesize the various possible sensations that could issue forth from real-like encounters. It is an attempt to juxtapose the selves that were in a process of subsequent radical transition, namely the earlier self-represented through either his father or other members of his family and the transformed

migrant self. That the author is on a travel is reminded occasionally in course of narration and that he could not fully identify himself with his relatives who continue to live in the native land is an obvious indication of the transformation that has come to be.

### Formal Transgression

*Running in the Family* resists the boundaries of a conventionally defined genre by its inconsistent resemblance to them which itself suggests the challenges entailed in the attempts towards the apprehension of reality. Despite the manifest preoccupation of a personal and familial history, an idea compellingly evoked with details of the father, family and native country, the text betrays in its structure as one befitting a travelogue. It records the experiences and meetings the narrator had with people he came across as if a pastiche, or collage or a montage in cinematography is produced. All these cumulatively creates a reality which is much closer to what one would experience in real life than that of an autobiography which sacrifices/trades life-likeness for pretensions of orderliness. Cutting through the confusing conundrum of generic interpenetration runs a personal objective: recreating his father in his imaginary. Now, the motive is obvious: one's selfhood is inextricably bound up with one's father, one's family, kith and kin, and one's lineage. The narrator collects and presents a plethora of material, both objective and subjective towards serving this end. A heterogeneous material that incorporates tape recordings, interviews, maps, photographs, acknowledgements, etc find their way into the text. The material also carries imaginative pieces such as songs, lyrics, poems etc.

It is obvious that the author didn't want to choose the more traditional means called autobiography to give form to his selfhood. Ondaatje's indulgence in subverting the generic order implicitly indicates life-like disorderliness and nonlinearity encountered in reality. He implies that what he narrates is not an exact record of his father's life or the life of his family in Sri Lanka, but a fictive representation, a fabrication out of material that had been culled from available sources, official as well as unofficial. It is the recreation of his father in the narrator's consciousness, of a father whose company and associations had been missing to the son who had travelled far owing reasons beyond his control even as he was about to pass into his adolescence. Now, it is an excavation; an excavation of memory long called for. Hence the random-seeming collage of various episodes narrating discrete incidents. Thus, the work defies definition as an autobiography. Hence the general rubric of it as a memoir. However, the inversion in the sequence of a narrative order is obvious.

### Non-linear /Fragmented Narration<sup>7</sup>

A narrative in the Aristotelian sense is made of a beginning, middle, and end, by default. It follows that there would be a progression from one state to another. As far as *RF* is concerned, there is no such overt successive structuration. By extension, there is no clear-cut exposition, climax, denouement, and resolution. The entire work, at first sight, gives out an impression of a conglomeration of scattered pieces of episodes. (The dissolution of the hierarchy of the

<sup>7</sup> John Paul Sartre introduced the term anti-novel to describe the novel that entails unconventional ordering of events in a novelistic work

narrative levels contributes further to this threat.) Leaving out the generic specificities, the sequence of events does not obviously make sense even within a given genre. A shuffled order rejects chronicle from the picture in the first place. Chronicle would not be in the scenario at all given the fact that there is a narrator's mediation in the presentation of events and phenomena. Yet, they do not cohere well enough to make unity clearly evident and to produce a familiar narrative style with easily connectible links. The attempt to narrative thread fails, let alone a proper ending having been led through successive logical episodes. There is an ending but that does not pass through the narrative succession. Again, the progression of the story is not in adherence to temporal chronology either. The temporal inversion of the story is commonplace. A deliberate attempt is witnessed in the disruption of any of these orders. However, it is decipherable that there is inevitably a story, a unifying thread to the entirety of the narratives, for, the narrator continues to talk about his father Mervyn Ondaatje, bringing in reminiscences relate to him. It is the only link across the two hundred pages despite the breaks in the linearity of the narrative of *RF*.

This methodology with regard to the narrative is foreshadowed by the narrator in the beginning episode entitled 'Jaffna Afternoons'. The narrator defines it by saying that she keeps telling stories of the ancestors, the Ondaatje, while her eyes are fixed to the ceiling. She is described as moving from one story to another as if she found another inscribed on the ceiling. Thus, the choice made between the linear storytelling and multiple storytellings is suggested. The stories reminisce from memories and the narrative method that has the attribute of jumping from one story to another is warranted. Thus, memory dictates the method of the narrative of *RF*, and the memory fraught with is, as already indicated, that of a man in a state of dream, drunkenness and hallucination. Hence, *RF* is mediated through the subtlest of narrative techniques in its experimentation of a narrative method which might convey the status of identity. The work begins and ends with the first-person narrative. In between, third and first-person narration alternate. Multiple voices are heard, that is to say, narrators other than the author narrators are vocalising. The textual identifiers such as the inverted marks give the clue. It is remarkable that the section titled "April 11, 1932" on page 36 presents such an example. The titles Asian Rumours, A Fine Romance, Don't Talk to Me about Matisse, Eclipse Plumage, The Prodigal,

What we Think of Married Life, The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society meet only on one point: they all speak around the narrator's family. In all other respects, no plot development is to be encountered, no climax and no resolution either. Even the smaller sections within each of these titles ruminate on varied aspects which are not sequentially connected. To be precise, no serial recounting happens (no episodic development). Splintered narratives intersect to confound. Thematically they might cohere but textually they do not yell to form a coherent conventional sequence of a story development so much as to create a coherent self, viz a narrative identity.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it is appropriate to recall from the text that Ondaatje denominates his text as a

'gesture' (Ondaatje 199). Since most of the work entails one's background of bygone days, it could be taken as a representation of self-portrait. The work is basically a search for the narrator's self. Yet the narrator does not seem to relate anything about his own personal life which again runs counter to the convention of traditional self-narratives. Very little information regarding the narrator Michael has been divulged. The narrator focuses mainly on his father and his long-missed relatives and neighbours in Sri Lanka. The work is more concerned about other characters that feature in the work. Mervyn, Lalla, Doris, Bampa, etc. The eccentricities and excesses of these characters are being given vent in greater detail. The weirdest of all is the drunken behaviour of Mervyn Ondaatje. This is really a metaphorical device towards realizing the narrator's goal of revealing about himself – revealing his own self. This technique really saves him from having to account for all these eccentricities. This process of self-discovery and self-acceptance despite the follies therein happens simultaneously in the narrator as well as the reader. Thus a new identity is being constructed for the narrator in the mind of the narrator as well as the reader. This is new to them both. The narrator is the "second self" of the writer. A narrator is created by the author to fit his purposes; he is a mediator between the writer and the reader. Therefore, the author, undertaking to write about his parents, relatives, neighbours and country, moves toward self-understanding. Hence, Ondaatje's choice of writing a self-narrative. Yet considering the limitations to access all the right information, he subverts the usual formula of autobiography/memoir. He gives it a form which does not fit into any familiar recognisable genre, which is imaginable as a textual parallel for a coherent essentialisation. Similarly, it is commonplace to tell what somebody has done in an autobiography/memoir. What is happening in *Running in the Family* is that the narrator tells who he is by means of telling who his father is. He resorts to "touching into words", that is by touching his family into words. Thus, the convention with regard to autobiography is overlooked in preference for something much more crucial, namely the textual connotation of self-fragmentation. It is obvious that Ondaatje is experimenting a textually novel means to provide a self-portrait. It is, in fact, a detour, a roundabout way. However, this contextualization does well to establish the fragmented identity of the narrator. The genre autobiography/memoir and the teleology are being manipulated in this view. This arrangement helps to see the events holistically as jumbled, haphazard and therefore, as evincing fragmentation of subjectivity.

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