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"A Well-told Lie": Autofiction and Local History in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*

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Abstract

The term "autofiction" as invented by the French author-critic Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 related to a paradoxical portmanteau, which strove to combine two mutually inconsistent narrative forms such as the autobiography and fiction. As a genre primarily associated with the French literature, autofiction very soon became a special favourite of the postmodern that forever located itself in the frontier between imagination and reality, fact and fiction. Along with a fictional rendering of a life story, autofictional novels often provide insights into the local history of the protagonist. Running in the Family is a semi-autobiographic fictional narrative of the Srilankan-Canadian migrant author Michael Ondaatje in which the author searches for his roots, his family, his parentage, and the social, cultural, political and economic affiliations of his family tree. As Ondaatje himself acknowledges, it is the product of his two journeys to his homeland Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980, in which the author attempts to understand a world (Sri Lanka) which he had known rather vaguely during his early childhood. This paper analyses the text of Ondaatje for its elements of autofiction and local history by using the postmodern methodology.

As a neologism formulated in 1977 by the French author-critic Serge Doubrovsky in connection with his novel *Fils*, "autofiction" or the fictionalized autobiography refers to a portmanteau genre that combines the characteristics of both fiction and autobiography. To Doubrovsky himself, autofiction is located at a confluence between two contradictory narratives pertaining to the factual and fictional; amidst three identities that of the author, narrator and the protagonist; and on the claims of fiction in its narrative terms and peritextual information. Despite its coinage in 1977, the term got inclusion into the literary circles as a

valid genre only in 1984 when it found entry to the *Encyclopedia Universalis*. Jacques Lecarme becomes one of the first and foremost critics to recognize the value and validity of the genre as originally conceived by Doubrovsky.

Autofiction.org defines the term as a multifaceted and indefinable concept which is built on "the author's apparent refusal of the autobiography, of the constraints or delusions of transparency, enriched by its many extensions all while solidly resisting the incessant attacks of which it is the object" (qtd. in Ferreira-Meyers n.pag.). It subtly problematizes the established and therefore, almost taken for granted notions of reality, truth, sincerity, fiction and literature, by "plowing through the unattended galleries in the field of memory" (ibid.). In his book *Is it I? Autobiographical Novel and Autofiction*, the French critic Philippe Gasparini establishes the criteria to determine and differentiate autofiction thus:
There has to be onomastic identity of the author and hero-narrator as well as the subtitle "novel". The narrative itself is of primary importance while the author is in pursuit of an "original form". The writing aims to "immediately articulate" and there is therefore often a reconfiguration of linear time (through selection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, disorientation). The present tense is used widely in an effort to only tell "strictly real facts and events" and this is linked to the urge to "reveal one's self truly". The writing style as a whole can be seen as a strategy that aims to require active engagement from the reader. (n.pag.)

For Doubrovsky, autofiction pertains to the ontological instability typical of the postmodern. To Gasparini it is a hybrid discourse that occupies the frontier territory "where body and writing take on the fantasies, illusions, aspirations, rooted cultural imagery of the writer" (Robin 47). However, according to Vincent Colonna, the term autofiction encompasses all the processes of fictionalization of the self where the writer identifies himself with a character of his story, using the first person singular or through a more subtle mode which is discernible to the reader, thus enabling the reader to forever construct, deconstruct and reconstruct throughout the act of reading.

As a genre that always searches for its own rules and categories, the postmodern has many characteristics in common with the autofiction. Because of its liminality, autofiction becomes a favourite tool of the postmodern reading habits and meta-literary discourse. The tendency to "irrepressible fictionalization" is, in the postmodern era, "consubstantial with writing in general and writing the self in particular" (Gasparini 214). Further, by problematizing the

authorial "I", autofiction posits the renaissance of the postmodern autobiographical writing and enables a search for the Other in the Self.

Local history offers a comprehensive and in-depth study of everything pertaining to a certain locality. It incorporates the entire socio-cultural scenario of a geographically local context. When compared to the histories of a nation or a continent, the local history needs to be contented with fewer books and documents. It relies heavily on oral historical data such as interviews, anecdotes, rumours, gossips and so on. In communitarian societies, the identity of an individual is closely connected with family and local histories in which he/she is placed. Thus, in the text under consideration here, the individual history of the author-narrator-protagonist gets connected to his family history including the fictionalization of the author's late father and grandmother as well as the local history of Ceylon/Sri Lanka that contextualizes his genealogy. In other words, this autofictional text simultaneously narrates the local history of the island that gave birth to the narrator and his family.

Running in the Family is a semi-autobiographic fictional narrative, a "concoction of a memoir, travelogue, poetry and intriguing fiction" (Jodha 66) in which the author searches for his roots, his family, his parentage, and the social, cultural, political and economic affiliations of his family tree. It is a journey back in time to Ceylon where Ondaatje was born into a privileged group of mixed Dutch, Tamil and Sinhalese origins. As the author himself acknowledges, it is the product of his two journeys to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980, when he stayed for several months collecting stories, gossips, rumours, recollections of relatives, archival evidence, oral and recorded history, photographs, poems and newspapers to understand the attitudes, virtues, vices, strengths and weaknesses of his genealogy. In short, it is an attempt to understand a world (Sri Lanka) which he had known rather vaguely during his early childhood.

Composed in a postmodernist fractured style, *Running in the Family* is about Ondaatje's return to his native Sri Lanka in the 1970s and his imaginative reconstruction of the family history. In a way, it is Ondaatje's attempt to rediscover his roots. The novel consists of stories about Ondaatje family-ancestry interspersed with the accounts of the author's experiences during his revisit. As the novel progresses, the reader learns that Ondaatje left Ceylon to live with his mother in England and that his father, who remained in Ceylon, has died in his absence. It becomes increasingly clear that the author's desire to understand his family is in fact a desire to know and understand his father. The ontological absence of the father combined with the son's epistemological ignorance of his father constitutes an

insurmountable hiatus in the identity of the narrator-character both throughout his life and in the text of his novel. The novel attempts to fill the gap in the real life, by reconstructing the father through the stories gleaned through his visits. As he meets various friends and relatives and listens to their stories, Ondaatje struggles to understand his father's life and the father's relationship with his mother. As a result, his identity becomes double and confused so that he is neither able to accept his native land nor able to reject it. This inconsistency is discernible in "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (79). Although the western critics have been articulate in their praise for the novel (Margaret Atwood, for example, remarks that the novel "attains the status of a legend"), South Asian critics have expressed their reservations. According to Arun Mukerjee, *Running in the Family* gives very few indications of Ondaatje's Sri Lankan background. She terms the novel 'elliptical' where "we are given paradisiacal images of flower gardens, paddy fields, tea estates, and forest reserves but no contemporary picture of Sri Lanka – which Ondaatje calls Ceylon – emerges" (39).

Quite early in *Running in the Family*, when Ondaatje reveals his plans for a return journey, he introduces us to the map of Sri Lanka and the possible routes to be taken. The same book discusses the "false maps" of Sri Lanka in his brother's Toronto home that reveal the island that welcomed multiple nationalities. Soon after the dedications to his family, Ondaatje introduces a map of the magic-island of Sri Lanka marked with all the places that are mentioned in the text. This is the first indicator of the geographical locality of the land to be referred to in the novel. This map of Sri Lanka, unlike any other political or physical map of the same, is strewn with places dear to the Ondaatje family, places that are poetically dwelt upon by the people who inhabit the text. Apart from Colombo, the Lankan capital, the places that are indicated here are Anuradhapura, Wilpattu National Park, Trincomalee, Sirigaya, Batticaloa, Negombo, Kegalle, Kandy, Ruhuma National Park, Adam's Peak, Mt Lavinia, Ambalangoda, Galle, Yala and Nuwara Eliya.

Ondaatje opens his novel by identifying himself as an Asian migrant, who, prompted by a dream of his father, of his ancestry, of his native land Sri Lanka, desires to revisit a lost childhood in the sprawling Asia. Upon reaching the island, he describes its culture and geography, both during the times of his ancestors and at present. The first geographical site to be thus mentioned is the old governor's home in Jaffna. Built around 1700, this prize mansion has a modest exterior, is surrounded by a moat and guarded by two sentries. Constructed during the colonial days, its "doors are twenty feet high, as if awaiting the day when a family of acrobats will walk from room to room, sideways, without dismantling

themselves from each other's shoulders" (9). He goes on to describe the timeless lethargy of an Asian lifestyle thus:

The fan hangs on a long stem, revolves lethargic, its arms in a tilt to catch the air which it folds across the room. No matter how mechanical the fan is in its movement the textures of air have no sense of the metronome. The air reaches me unevenly with its gusts against my arms, face and this paper. (9).

The next building to be thus described is the St Thomas Church, Colombo, built in 1650. The author unearths the details of several of his ancestors who were chaplains there, such as Reverend Jurgen Ondaatje, who had been a translator and chaplain from 1835 to 1847; his son Simon who had been the last Tamil Colonial Chaplain of Ceylon; Dr William Charles Ondaatje who was the Ceylonese Director of the Botanical Gardens and who introduced olive to Ceylon; Matthew Ondaatje who had been a financier or a military man and Philip de Melho Jurgen who had been a lawyer or a scholar. However, the author traces his ancestry to a Tamil doctor who arrived in 1600 to cure the residing governor's daughter with a strange herb. On his success, he "was rewarded with land, a foreign wife and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje" (60). Upon the death of his Dutch wife, he married a Sinhalese woman and thus started the Ondaatje family.

Along with these ancient buildings, the geographical description includes locations such as the mountains of Nuwara Eliya, the Wilpattu jungle and the estate of Kuttapitiya, places where the privileged ancestors of Ondaatje spent their holidays. During the twenties, Nuwara Eliya or the "up country", just a five-hour-drive from the plains of Colombo, had almost been the "summer capital" where his family re-located themselves in order to spend the hot months of April and May. These geographical spaces, filled with gardens, flowers, dances, races, parties and festivities, are penned in poetic prose so that they seem to be the heavens of a lost childhood. For example, the author indulges in such contradictory depictions as "'From Seyllan to Paradise is forty miles,' says a legend, 'the sound of the fountains of Paradise is heard there.'" (80).

The autofictional aspects of the text consist of the elaborate and fanciful depictions of his father Mervyn Ondaatje and that of his maternal grandmother Lalla. Both these characters belong to a bygone past age and necessitate a fictional reconstruction from the stories and dialogues painstakingly gathered by the author and his siblings. As their lives remain undocumented, they come to life by means of the fictional text of the novel. In other words, instead of a life leading to literature as in biography and autobiography, in autofiction

literature results in the back formation of lives that would be otherwise forgotten. Thus, these characters are re-created or reconstructed by the author, who, thereby attempts to recapture a lost life he would have led in Sri Lanka had he not migrated to Britain and Canada.

As suggested at the beginning of the book, *Running in the Family* is a return to the memory of his now dead father, a celebration of a lifetime of whimsical fancies, eccentricities and idiosyncrasies that characterized most of his ancestors during the colonial Ceylon. This prompts Ondaatje to portray the freakish adventures, drunken revelries and outrageous demeanour of his father as well as his close friends Noel Gratiaen and Francis Fonseka. There are elaborate and minute descriptions of events that took place many years before the birth of the author such as Noel's expulsion from Oxford for setting fire to his room and "trying to put out the fire by throwing flaming sofas and armchairs out of the window onto the street and then dragging and hurling them into the river—where they sank three boats belonging to the Oxford rowing team" (20). This was years before Mervyn befriended Noel and got married to Doris, Noel's sister.

The author relies heavily on memory and magic realism as devices to narrate the tale of this exotic world where contracts and engagements were made and announced only to be broken soon after. Following the conventions of folklore and oral tradition, the novel becomes a composite tale of the memories of several generations of friends and relatives who had known and heard of the Ondaatje family. In other words, unlike the Western world, the author's first memory pre-dates his lifetime as in

About six months before I was born my mother observed a pair of kabaragoyas 'in copula' at Pelmadulla. A reference is made to this sighting in *A Coloured Atlas of Some Vertebrates from Ceylon, Vol. 2*, a National Museums publication. It is my first memory. (74)

Besides locating his "first memory" at a point of time six months before his birth as a visual experience of his mother, by inserting this very personal detail into a reference journal printed in italics, the author is authenticating the experience and establishing the dictum, "personal is political".

As if dissatisfied with the tale he attempts to tell, Ondaatje includes a chapter titled "Dialogues" where eleven short passages gathered from their friends and relatives reconstitute the married life of Doris and Mervyn Ondaatje, Mervyn's passionate love and life, his dipsomania, the breaking up of his marriage with Doris, his second wife Maureen and so on. Following the postmodern metafictional tradition, the author goes on to describe the way he put together the book in the chapter named "Aunts":

How I have used them….They knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong. They lead me through their dark rooms crowded with various kinds of furniture—teak, rattan, calamander, bamboo—their voices whispering over tea, cigarettes, distracting me from the tale with their long bony arms, which move over the table like the stretched feet of storks. (113)

Equally outrageous is the portrayal of his grandmother Lalla, who a young widow at thirty, single-handedly raised her two children, Noel and Doris; leading a flamboyant life as much as his son-in-law Mervyn, throwing parties and dances even while living an impoverished life; a "lyrical socialist" whom the children loved to be around as she never pampered them; whose meticulous designs of fancy dress costumes enabled Doris to win all the fancy dress competitions for three years during her late teens; a woman who had an unbeatable sense of humour and claimed to be the first in Ceylon to have a mastectomy; an "overbearing charmed flower" (132) that was finally claimed by death in the form of floods.

The text of the novel also consists of the local history, culture and social life of the elite of Ceylon as well as the outrageous demeanor of the Ondaatjes. In his descriptions of Sri Lanka, the author seems to be translating and introducing the diversity of his native island for the benefit of a Western reader: "After the spaces of India and Canada it is so small. A miniature….The country is cross-hatched with maze-like routes whose only escape is the sea. …Villages spill onto streets, the jungle encroaches on village" (159). The other examples of local historical details include the opinions of the "Karapothas" or the foreign visitors like D H Lawrence, Pablo Neruda and Robert Knox; W H Ondaatje's knowledge of many species of poisons (81-82) and zoological specimens native to the island such as the "kabaragoyas" and "thalagoyas". The text even includes some poems, photographs and other drawings of himself as well as a few others such as Lakdasa Wikkramasinha who was Ondaatje's senior at St. Thomas' College Boy School.

Another instance comes when the author sees a book of charcoal drawings done by an insurgent. To evade the censorship laws the book had to be published in Switzerland, which, according to a librarian is necessary "to keep the facts straight, the legends uncovered" (85-86). The author has noted that his mother worked as housekeeper in hotels in Ceylon and England till her death in order to support her children through their school education (190). In the novel, the author mentions that his father Mervyn Ondaatje was sent to Cambridge University for his higher studies. Celebrities like D H Lawrence, Leonard Wolf and Pablo Neruda found the place "stinking", "evil" and "oppressive" respectively (77-80). When Ondaatje visits the island as a transnational adult, he is fearful of snakes and sub-aquatic

monitors; at the same time he relishes a lunch of crab curry, while his children grow belligerent at the New Year's festivities in Sri Lanka (79).

While Ondaatje thanks a great number of friends and relatives for the composition of this book in its "acknowledgement" section, he rejects the air of authenticity that would accompany such acknowledgements. He confirms that "the book is not a history but a portrait or 'gesture'" (232). He further endorses his position by arguing that in Sri Lanka a well told lie is more valuable than a thousand facts. This, again, is in keeping with the fictionalization of the autobiography according to the postmodernist tradition.

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