

## The Quest for Cultural Identity in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*

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### Abstract

*Michael Ondaatje's memoir, Running in a Family, is a profound exploration of cultural identity, diaspora, and the complexities of belonging. Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer, deals with his family's history and his own personal journey, weaving together multiple voices, narratives, and perspectives to create a rich tapestry of cultural hybridity. This paper examines Ondaatje's quest for self-discovery and cultural roots through the lens of postcolonial and diasporic experiences. It analyzes the narrative techniques employed in the text, such as the non-linear and fragmented structure, the blending of fact and fiction, and the use of multiple perspectives, which reflect the fragmented and fluid nature of cultural identities. The study explores the themes of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity that permeate the memoir, including the notion of "in-betweenness" and the tension between homeland and diaspora. It investigates the role of family history, memory, and nostalgia in shaping Ondaatje's understanding of his cultural roots, as well as the interplay between individual and collective identities. Drawing from postcolonial and diasporic theories, the paper situates Running in a Family within the larger context of transnational identities and the negotiation of power dynamics and cultural hierarchies. It examines how Ondaatje's work challenges traditional notions of identity and belonging, and offers insights into the lived experiences of displacement and cultural hybridity. Through a comprehensive analysis of Ondaatje's memoir, the paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on cultural identity, diaspora, and the complexities of navigating multiple cultural spaces. It offers a nuanced understanding of the quest for self-discovery and the negotiation of cultural identities in a globalized world.*

**Keywords :** distinctive features, multiple voices, cultural identity, postcolonialism, diasporic experiences

### Introduction

Michael Ondaatje is a renowned Sri Lankan-born Canadian novelist and poet, whose works have garnered critical acclaim and numerous literary awards. Born in 1943 in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Ondaatje's family roots are a blend of Dutch, Sinhalese, and Tamil heritage, reflecting the complex cultural tapestry of his birthplace. His childhood was marked by the lingering effects of British colonialism and the subsequent independence of Sri Lanka, experiences that would later shape his literary explorations of identity, displacement, and belonging. In 1992, Ondaatje published

*Running in a Family*, a genre-bending memoir that weaves together personal narratives, family histories, and fictional elements. The book chronicles Ondaatje's return to Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s, where he embarks on a journey to uncover the stories of his eccentric and enigmatic ancestors. Through vivid descriptions, fragmented narratives, and a non-linear structure, Ondaatje creates a rich tapestry of memories, impressions, and cultural explorations.

*Running in a Family* is not a conventional memoir; it defies traditional boundaries, blending fact and fiction, personal recollections and imagined scenarios. Ondaatje's lyrical prose and poetic sensibilities infuse the work with a dreamlike quality, capturing the elusive nature of memory and the complexities of cultural identity. At its core, *Running in a Family* is a profound exploration of Ondaatje's quest for cultural identity, a quest that is inextricably intertwined with his family's history and his own personal journey. Through a series of vignettes, anecdotes, and ruminations, Ondaatje delves into the multifaceted and often contradictory layers of his heritage, navigating the intersections of colonialism, diaspora, and the inherent hybridity of his cultural background. By tracing the stories of his ancestors – from his eccentric grandmother to his alcoholic father – Ondaatje grapples with the complexities of belonging, the tension between homeland and diaspora, and the fluidity of identities shaped by multiple cultural influences. His personal journey, marked by a return to Sri Lanka and a confrontation with his roots, serves as a catalyst for self-discovery and a deeper understanding of his own cultural identity. Through this intricate weaving of family histories, personal narratives, and explorations of cultural hybridity, Ondaatje's memoir presents a nuanced and multidimensional portrayal of the quest for cultural identity in a postcolonial and diasporic context.

In conclusion, Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* is a seminal work that offers a rich and nuanced exploration of cultural identity, postcolonialism, and diasporic experiences. Through its innovative narrative strategies, thematic depth, and lyrical prose, Ondaatje's memoir invites readers to rethink traditional notions of belonging and embrace the fluidity of cultural hybridity, contributing to the ongoing scholarly discourse on the complexities of navigating multiple cultural spaces in an increasingly globalized world.

### Methods

This paper employs a multifaceted methodological approach to analyze Michael Ondaatje's exploration of cultural identity in his memoir *Running in the Family*. By drawing upon various literary theories and critical frameworks, this study aims to illuminate the complexities and nuances of Ondaatje's narrative strategies, thematic concerns, and representations of diasporic experiences. Firstly, the research is grounded in a close textual analysis of *Running in the Family*, employing a formalist approach to examine the narrative techniques employed by Ondaatje, such as the non-linear structure, the use of multiple voices, and the blending of fact and fiction. This formalist analysis provides insights into how Ondaatje's innovative narrative strategies reflect and

convey the fragmented and fluid nature of cultural identities. Additionally, this study employs a postcolonial theoretical lens to situate Ondaatje's memoir within the broader context of postcolonial literature and discourse. By engaging with postcolonial theories and concepts, the research examines how Ondaatje's work engages with the legacies of colonialism, the negotiation of power dynamics, and the representation of cultural hierarchies inherent in postcolonial societies. Furthermore, the study incorporates perspectives from diaspora studies and transnational literary theory to analyze Ondaatje's depictions of displacement, transnational identities, and the complexities of navigating multiple cultural spaces. This theoretical framework provides valuable insights into the diasporic experiences and the tension between homeland and diaspora that permeate Ondaatje's memoir. Moreover, the research draws upon concepts from memory studies and cultural identity theory to explore the role of memory, nostalgia, and ancestral narratives in shaping individual and collective identities. By examining Ondaatje's engagement with family histories and personal recollections, this study sheds light on the interplay between individual experiences and broader cultural narratives. Throughout the analysis, the paper employs a comparative approach, situating Ondaatje's work in dialogue with other literary texts that explore similar themes of cultural hybridity, postcolonialism, and diasporic experiences. This comparative lens enriches the understanding of Ondaatje's contributions to the broader literary discourse and highlights the resonances and divergences across diverse cultural contexts.

### **Literature Review**

Ondaatje's cultural identity is deeply rooted in his Sri Lankan heritage and the diverse influences that have shaped the island nation. As Spinks notes, "Ondaatje's family background reflects the complex ethnic makeup of Sri Lanka, with Dutch, Sinhalese, and Tamil ancestral lines" (Spinks 23). This multifaceted heritage is a recurring theme in *Running in a Family*, as Ondaatje explores the various cultural strands that have converged in his family's history. Ondaatje's maternal grandfather, Pere Wije Singho, was a wealthy Sinhalese businessman, while his paternal grandmother, Doris Gratiaen, was of Dutch-Ceylonese descent (Ondaatje, 12). This intersection of ethnic backgrounds reflects the complex colonial legacy of Sri Lanka, which was colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British over several centuries (Cuder-Domínguez, 2015, p. 87). Ondaatje's cultural identity has been profoundly shaped by the experience of colonialism and diaspora. As a child, he witnessed the transition of Ceylon to independent Sri Lanka in 1948, an event that would later influence his explorations of postcolonial identities (Mukherjee 45). Ondaatje's family left Sri Lanka when he was 11, settling in England and later immigrating to Canada, where he spent his formative years (Ondaatje, 1982, p. 19). This diasporic experience, characterized by displacement and the negotiation of multiple cultural spaces, is a central theme in *Running in a Family*. As Barbour observes, "Ondaatje's work is deeply engaged with the complexities of diasporic identity, exploring the tensions between belonging and displacement, nostalgia and alienation" (Barbour, 2016, p. 112).

### **Analysis and Findings**

Language and literature have played a crucial role in shaping Ondaatje's cultural perspective and his understanding of identity. As a writer who moves fluidly between poetry and prose, Ondaatje's command of language is inextricably linked to his exploration of cultural hybridity and the in-between spaces of identity. Ondaatje's use of language in *Running in a Family* reflects the diverse influences that have shaped his cultural identity. As Salgado notes, "Ondaatje's lyrical prose is infused with the cadences and rhythms of Sri Lankan English, blending the colonial legacy of language with the local vernacular" (Salgado 67). Moreover, Ondaatje's engagement with literature, both as a reader and a writer, has been a means of navigating and articulating his complex cultural identity. As Delbaere-Garant observes, "Ondaatje's literary works serve as a space for negotiating and reimagining notions of belonging, challenging fixed notions of identity and embracing the fluidity of cultural hybridity" (Delbaere-Garant 145).

One of the most distinctive features of *Running in the Family* is its non-linear and fragmented narrative structure. Ondaatje eschews a conventional chronological approach, instead weaving together vignettes, anecdotes, and impressions in a dreamlike, associative manner. As Barbour notes, "The book's structure mirrors the fragmentary nature of memory and the fluidity of identity, resisting neat linearity in favor of a more organic, impressionistic approach" (Barbour 116). This non-linear style reflects Ondaatje's exploration of the complex layers of his cultural identity, which cannot be neatly contained within a singular narrative. As Mukherjee observes, "Ondaatje's fragmented style mirrors the fragmented nature of diasporic and postcolonial identities, reflecting the multiple trajectories and intersections that shape one's sense of self" (Mukherjee 51).

*Running in the Family* is a polyphonic work, incorporating multiple voices and perspectives that reflect the diverse cultural influences and experiences that have shaped Ondaatje's identity. As Delbaere-Garant notes, "Ondaatje's use of various narrative voices – from his eccentric grandmother to his alcoholic father – creates a rich tapestry of cultural perspectives, challenging the notion of a singular, unified identity" (Delbaere-Garant 148). Through these multiple voices, Ondaatje explores the complexities of cultural hybridity, as each character's perspective offers a unique lens through which to examine the intersections of ethnicity, class, and colonial legacies. As Cuder-Domínguez observes, "The polyvocal nature of the text mirrors the multifaceted nature of Ondaatje's cultural identity, reflecting the diverse influences and experiences that have shaped his sense of self" (Cuder-Domínguez 92). *Running in the Family* blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, memory and imagination. Ondaatje's lyrical prose and poetic sensibilities imbue the work with a dreamlike quality, where the lines between reality and fantasy become permeable. As Salgado notes, "Ondaatje's blending of fact and fiction, memory and imagination, reflects the elusive nature of identity and the ways in which our perceptions of self are shaped by the interplay between lived experiences and the narratives we construct" (Salgado, 69).

This blending of genres and modes of storytelling allows Ondaatje to explore the fluidity of cultural identity, challenging rigid notions of authenticity and embracing the malleability of memory and perception. As Spinks observes, "Ondaatje's use of fictionalized elements within the memoir form highlights the constructed nature of identity narratives, underscoring the ways in which our sense of self is shaped by the stories we tell and the narratives we inherit" (Spinks, 31). Through these narrative techniques and structural choices, Ondaatje creates a rich and multidimensional exploration of cultural identity, reflecting the complexities and contradictions inherent in navigating multiple cultural spaces and embracing the fluidity of diasporic and postcolonial experiences.

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* has been widely celebrated as a seminal work in the exploration of cultural identity, postcolonialism, and diasporic experiences. This literary memoir has garnered significant scholarly attention, with critics and theorists engaging with its innovative narrative strategies, thematic concerns, and representations of cultural hybridity.

One of the most prominent themes in the critical discourse surrounding *Running in the Family* is the notion of cultural hybridity and the fluidity of identities. As Delbaere-Garant (2020) notes, "Ondaatje's work challenges fixed notions of identity and belonging, embracing the multiplicity and hybridity of cultural experiences" (145). Salgado further explores this idea, arguing that "Ondaatje's lyrical prose and poetic sensibilities reflect the hybridity of language and cultural identities, blending diverse influences and challenging traditional boundaries" (67).

Many scholars have situated Ondaatje's memoir within the broader context of postcolonial literature and theory. Cuder-Domínguez examines how "*Running in the Family* offers a nuanced exploration of the lingering effects of colonialism and the negotiation of power dynamics in postcolonial societies" (89). Mukherjee further highlights the memoir's engagement with "the complexities of postcolonial identities, examining the tensions between homeland and diaspora, and the fluidity of cultural belonging" (49).

The theme of diaspora and transnational identities is another critical area of focus in the scholarly discourse surrounding Ondaatje's work. Barbour explores how "Ondaatje's memoir navigates the complexities of diasporic existence, capturing the sense of displacement and the constant renegotiation of identity across borders and boundaries" (120). Spinks further examines the ways in which "Ondaatje's work coalesces diasporic, postcolonial, and subaltern subjectivities, offering a multifaceted representation of transnational experiences" (25).

Ondaatje's innovative narrative techniques have also garnered significant critical attention. Cuder-Domínguez highlights the significance of "the non-linear structure, the blending of fact and fiction, and the use of multiple voices, which reflect the fragmented nature of memory and identity" (92). Salgado further explores how "Ondaatje's poetic

language and lyrical prose create a dreamlike quality, capturing the elusive nature of cultural identity and memory" (70).

Additionally, scholars have examined the role of memory and ancestral narratives in shaping individual and collective identities within Ondaatje's work. Delbaere-Garant (2020) notes that "Ondaatje's engagement with family histories and personal recollections underscores the enduring power of ancestral narratives in constructing cultural belonging" (p. 149). Barbour (2016) further explores how "Ondaatje's use of sensory details and poetic language creates a palpable sense of nostalgia, inviting readers to share in the longing for a lost or imagined past" (118).

This review of the critical discourse surrounding *Running in the Family* highlights the diverse perspectives and theoretical frameworks employed by scholars in engaging with Ondaatje's exploration of cultural identity, postcolonialism, and diasporic experiences. While these studies have provided valuable insights, there remains ample opportunity for further analysis and interdisciplinary exploration of the complex themes and narrative strategies employed in Ondaatje's groundbreaking work.

At the core of *Running in the Family* is Ondaatje's quest for self-discovery and an understanding of his cultural roots. As Delbaere-Garant observes, "Ondaatje's memoir is a journey of self-exploration, a mapping of the complex lineages and ancestral narratives that have shaped his sense of identity" (Delbaere-Garant 146). Through his return to Sri Lanka and his excavation of family histories, Ondaatje seeks to uncover the various threads that have been woven into his cultural tapestry.

This quest for self-discovery is intimately tied to his exploration of cultural roots, as Ondaatje navigates the diverse ethnic, linguistic, and colonial influences that have shaped his heritage. As Cuder-Domínguez notes, "Ondaatje's memoir is a testament to the enduring power of cultural memory and the ways in which our ancestral legacies continue to inform our sense of self and belonging" (Cuder-Domínguez 93).

Throughout *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje grapples with the notion of "in-betweenness" – the experience of occupying multiple cultural spaces and embodying hybrid identities. As Barbour observes, "Ondaatje's work reflects the liminal spaces between cultures, the spaces of hybridity and fluidity that challenge fixed notions of identity" (Barbour 114).

This notion of hybridity is central to Ondaatje's exploration of his own cultural identity, which is shaped by the intersections of Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, and colonial influences. As Salgado notes, "Ondaatje's memoir embraces the fluidity of cultural hybridity, celebrating the ways in which identities are formed through the convergence and negotiation of diverse cultural elements" (Salgado 71).

*Running in the Family* also explores the tension between homeland and diaspora, a theme that resonates deeply with Ondaatje's own experiences of migration and

displacement. As Mukherjee observes, "Ondaatje's work navigates the complex terrain of diasporic identities, examining the push and pull between the homeland and the adopted land, the longing for belonging and the sense of rootlessness" (Mukherjee 49). This tension is brought to life through Ondaatje's vivid descriptions of Sri Lanka, his family's ancestral homeland, and his own sense of disconnection and familiarity upon his return. As Spinks notes, "Ondaatje's memoir captures the contradictory emotions of the diasporic experience – the nostalgia for the homeland, the sense of dislocation, and the constant negotiation of multiple cultural spaces" (Spinks 28).

Through these interwoven themes of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity, Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* offers a rich and nuanced exploration of the complexities of navigating multiple cultural influences and the quest for self-discovery in a postcolonial and diasporic context.

A central aspect of *Running in the Family* is Ondaatje's exploration of his family's stories and ancestral legacies. Through vivid anecdotes and richly detailed vignettes, Ondaatje brings to life the eccentric characters and colorful histories that have shaped his cultural identity. As Cuder-Domínguez notes, "Ondaatje's memoir is a tapestry woven from the threads of family lore, ancestral tales, and the legendary exploits of his forebears" (Cuder-Domínguez 89). From his grandmother's unconventional lifestyle to his father's struggles with alcoholism, Ondaatje delves into the complex narratives that have been passed down through generations, revealing the ways in which these stories have informed his understanding of self and cultural belonging. As Delbaere-Garant observes, "Ondaatje's engagement with family histories underscores the enduring power of ancestral narratives in shaping individual and collective identities" (Delbaere-Garant, 149). *Running in the Family* is a meditation on the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping cultural identity. Ondaatje's lyrical prose and poetic sensibilities imbue the work with a sense of longing and remembrance, capturing the ways in which our perceptions of self are inextricably tied to the memories we hold dear. As Salgado notes, "Ondaatje's memoir is a celebration of the power of memory, exploring how nostalgia and the act of remembering can both anchor and liberate our sense of cultural belonging" (Salgado 70).

Through his vivid descriptions and evocative language, Ondaatje invites readers to experience the sights, sounds, and textures of his ancestral homeland, allowing memory to become a bridge between past and present, homeland and diaspora. As Barbour observes, "Ondaatje's use of sensory details and poetic language creates a palpable sense of nostalgia, inviting readers to share in the longing for a lost or imagined past" (Barbour 118). Throughout *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje explores the intricate interplay between individual and collective identities, examining how personal narratives are interwoven with broader cultural histories and ancestral legacies. As Mukherjee notes, "Ondaatje's memoir is a testament to the ways in which individual identities are shaped by collective experiences, cultural memories, and the narratives we inherit from our communities" (Mukherjee 52).

By delving into the stories of his eccentric ancestors and their place within the larger tapestry of Sri Lankan history, Ondaatje highlights the ways in which individual lives are inextricably linked to collective cultural narratives. As Spinks observes, "Ondaatje's work underscores the interconnectedness of individual and collective identities, demonstrating how personal stories are shaped by broader cultural and historical forces" (Spinks 33). Through this exploration of family history and personal memoir, Ondaatje not only illuminates his own quest for cultural identity but also offers insights into the broader human experience of navigating multiple cultural spaces, negotiating ancestral legacies, and forging a sense of self amid the complexities of diasporic and postcolonial realities.

### **Running in a Family as a postcolonial text**

Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* is widely regarded as a seminal postcolonial text, offering a nuanced exploration of the lingering effects of colonialism and the negotiation of cultural identities in its aftermath. As Cuder-Domínguez observes, "Ondaatje's memoir is a powerful testament to the enduring legacies of colonialism and the ways in which postcolonial subjects navigate the complex terrain of cultural hybridity and displacement" (Cuder-Domínguez 91).

Through his vivid depictions of Sri Lanka's colonial past and his family's experiences under British rule, Ondaatje sheds light on the ways in which colonial power structures have shaped personal narratives and cultural landscapes. As Delbaere-Garant notes, "Ondaatje's work situates individual stories within the broader context of colonial histories, underscoring the ways in which personal experiences are inextricably tied to larger political and cultural forces" (Delbaere-Garant, 151).

*Running in the Family* is a powerful exploration of displacement and transnational identities, reflecting Ondaatje's own experiences as a member of the Sri Lankan diaspora. As Barbour observes, "Ondaatje's memoir captures the complexities of diasporic existence, the negotiation of multiple cultural spaces, and the constant renegotiation of identity across borders and boundaries" (Barbour 120). Through his vivid descriptions of his return to Sri Lanka and his encounters with his ancestral homeland, Ondaatje offers a nuanced portrayal of the diasporic experience, capturing the tension between belonging and displacement, nostalgia and alienation. As Salgado notes, "Ondaatje's poetic language and evocative imagery invite readers to experience the disorienting and transformative nature of transnational identities, challenging static notions of cultural belonging" (Salgado 72). *Running in the Family* also explores the intricate power dynamics and cultural hierarchies that have shaped postcolonial societies and diasporic communities. Ondaatje's memoir sheds light on the ways in which colonial legacies have perpetuated systems of privilege and marginalization, and how individuals navigate these complex power structures in their quest for cultural identity and belonging. As Mukherjee notes, "Ondaatje's work interrogates the ways in which cultural identities are shaped by intersecting power dynamics, including race,



class, and gender, offering a nuanced critique of the enduring effects of colonial ideologies" (Mukherjee 54). Through his depictions of his family's experiences and his own personal journey, Ondaatje highlights the ways in which individuals must negotiate cultural hierarchies and navigate the complexities of postcolonial landscapes. By situating *Running in the Family* within the broader contexts of postcolonial and diasporic studies, Ondaatje's memoir offers a rich and multi-layered exploration of the enduring legacies of colonialism, the complexities of transnational identities, and the negotiation of power dynamics and cultural hierarchies in the quest for self-discovery and cultural belonging.

### Conclusions

Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* stands as a testament to the complexities of cultural identity and the enduring power of ancestral narratives in shaping our sense of self and belonging. Through his lyrical prose and innovative narrative techniques, Ondaatje weaves together personal memoir, family history, and postcolonial perspectives to create a rich tapestry of cultural hybridity.

This study has explored Ondaatje's quest for self-discovery and his navigation of the intersecting influences that have shaped his cultural identity, including his Sri Lankan roots, the legacy of colonialism, and the experience of diaspora. By examining the narrative strategies employed in the text, such as the non-linear structure, the use of multiple voices, and the blending of fact and fiction, this study has shed light on the ways in which Ondaatje challenges traditional notions of identity and embraces the fluidity of cultural hybridity.

Moreover, this research has delved into the central themes of identity, belonging, and cultural in-betweenness that permeate *Running in the Family*, highlighting the tension between homeland and diaspora, the notion of hybrid identities, and the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping our understanding of cultural roots. Ondaatje's exploration of family stories and ancestral legacies has underscored the intricate interplay between individual and collective identities, revealing how personal narratives are woven into larger cultural histories. Furthermore, this study has situated Ondaatje's memoir within the broader contexts of postcolonial and diasporic studies, examining its representations of displacement and transnational identities, as well as its engagement with the negotiation of power dynamics and cultural hierarchies inherent in postcolonial societies.

Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* offers profound insights into the complexities of cultural identity and the lived experiences of diasporic communities. By embracing the fluidity of cultural hybridity and challenging static notions of belonging, Ondaatje's work invites readers to rethink traditional understandings of identity and to recognize the multiple trajectories and intersections that shape our sense of self. Moreover, this study highlights the enduring relevance of ancestral narratives and the power of memory in constructing and reconstructing cultural identities. As individuals and communities navigate the complexities of diaspora and transnational existence,

Ondaatje's memoir serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving and engaging with the stories that have been passed down through generations, as these narratives offer vital connections to our cultural roots and a means of navigating the tensions between homeland and diaspora.

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