

LIFE WRITING: STRADDLING FACT AND FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally any autobiographic writing is expected to document past in retrospect just like history. But memoirs like Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* and Sheila Ortiz Taylor and Sandra Ortiz Taylor's *Imaginary Parents* go against this traditional expectation both in form and content and while doing so they question the traditional idea of autobiographic writing as well as history. Through the atypical way they search for truth these memoirs have made us re consider the traditional expectation from this genre. While reconstructing the respective family history these two books deconstruct the general understanding of documented history as a centripetal, teleological narrative, something that projects absolute, objective reality.

Keywords: Life writing, History, Fiction, Truth, Multi perspective.

I. INTRODUCTION

History has been regarded as a reservoir of absolute truth, fact for a long time in the sphere of western thought. In literature, life writing – by which I mean memoir or any kind of autobiographic writing – enjoys the same elevated status as history and is considered to be more true to life than any other form of fiction. Because of this affinity with history, the general expectation from this genre has become limited to excavating historical truth about an individual. But no longer can we draw the equation between history and autobiographic writing straight away. Literature is to some extent reflection of life but being an artistic, creative mode of expression it has ends more aesthetic and demanding than mere documentation of facts over time. This paper will discuss two memoirs – *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje and *Imaginary Parents* by Sheila Ortiz Taylor and Sandra Ortiz Taylor to show how these memoirs break free from the traditional role ascribed to them by the conventionally drawn equation between autobiographic writing and documented history. Like any memoir these two books are about remembering and transforming the past but through their experimentation with form and the atypical way they search for truth they have made us re consider the traditional expectation from this genre. While reconstructing the family history these two books deconstruct general understanding of documented history as a centripetal, teleological

narrative, something that projects absolute, objective reality.

Section II and III will discuss *Running in the Family* and *Imaginary Parents* respectively to see how in their own way they veer away from the preconceived notion of a memoir and make a statement about the role of fiction in making of history. Section IV will trace some features common in both memoirs that negate any possible affinity between this genre and documented history.

II: ONDAATJE'S "GESTURE" IN *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY*

Michael Ondaatje's fictionalized memoir, *Running in the Family* is a return of a native kind of story where Ondaatje, an immigrant comes back to his home place – then Ceylon and now Srilanka, after 25 years of living in England and Canada, gets intrigued about his family's past and the sources of his own identity buried in it, finds out places and people that feed his thirst for knowledge, and eventually comes to know his family and himself a little bit better than before he started. Thus, Ondaatje's book is replete with the paraphernalia of traditional westernized autobiography. But, surprisingly, in his "Acknowledgements", Michael Ondaatje writes: "... I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or 'gesture,'" which is so much unlike western idea of life writing.

Literary critic Douglas Barbour explains the significance of the word “gesture”:

Gestures can either signify something else, or it can merely signify itself, the act of gesturing, of pointing toward that, which cannot be named. In a book full of naming, full of stories, full of both the writer’s family and his own life as a writer, great mysteries remain, and all the text can do is point them out. [Barbour, 124]

That is what Ondaatje does in *Running in the Family*. Even though he is excavating what he calls “the lost history” of his own family he only points towards many layers of truth rather than an absolute reality [Running, 54]. But it is interesting to note that his gesture towards his family, history, and truth is not a static and predetermined one. Thus, the word “gesture” is crucial stylistically and thematically in understanding Ondaatje’s preoccupation with his origin.

Ondaatje begins like a historian when he places the readers geographically in the narrative with the map. But this historian-like approach doesn’t guide his quest as professor Milica Zivkovic observes: “even before we turn the page, we are confronted by a contradiction” [Zivkovic, 104]. Ondaatje presents two epigraphs about Ceylon – one by a Friar who claims to have travelled to the island, upholding a magical, exotic perspective, the other by a contemporary journalist awed by foreign wonders, presenting a colonizer’s perspective. As Zivkovic suggests, “the statements defy any attempts to pin realities on that map” [Zivkovic, 104]. These two epigraphs that at the same time suggest two existing reality about his birthplace, are Ondaatje’s subtle gesture towards his stand in the interplay between truth and fiction. Place plays an important role in his quest for his past. He does try to locate himself physically in the place of his origin, but he needs something more flexible and nuanced than geography and factual truth. His quest then is for something more encompassing, giving him freedom to accommodate new layers of truth as the narrative progresses.

Perhaps, one reason behind Ondaatje’s choice to call his book a “gesture” is the fact that the act of gesturing is replete with suggestiveness and is not definitive in nature. The interpretation of a gesture is open and depends as much on the audience as the creator of it. So, it becomes the most effective way to describe a work whose moral universe is guided

by dream, memory, imagination, rumour and gossip. For example, what propelled the urge for Ondaatje’s self discovery is “the bright bone of a dream” [Running, 21]. Ondaatje’s realization - “I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood”- a realization that he needs to go back not only in space but in time comes only in his drunkenness [Running, 22]. Ondaatje continues to play with the tension between reality and imagination, truth and fiction as he tries to bring “the frozen opera” from his memory into life by “touch[ing] them (his ancestors) into words” [Running, 22]. Accordingly, he travels back to Sri Lanka to gather information and to speak to family members who may be able to breathe life into long-ago stories. In the section called “Jaffna Afternoon,” Ondaatje describes how they begin what he calls “the intricate conversations,” the trading “of anecdotes and faint memories,” while trying to reassemble them [Running, 26]. He delves deeper into the process of this recovery of past:

“No story is ever told once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and re tell the story with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in. In this way history is organized” [Running, 26].

Running in the Family thus is a palimpsest of stories, rumors, and narrative patterns – imposed by characters, narrators, and Ondaatje himself very much the same way history is. These stories make him a part of the slipped childhood he longs to remember, and place him in the history, as he experiences in his dream: “I am a part of a human pyramid. Below me are other bodies that I am standing on and above me are several more” [Running, 27]. Hence, the truth arrived at, through dream, drunkenness, and conversation ensued in family gathering can only be gestured at rather than be claimed.

Though it is easy to be beguiled by Ondaatje’s penchant for “a well told lie” with all its vagueness and uncertainty, “over a thousands facts,” in no way does this undermine the credibility of his life writing [Running, 206]. This preference is Ondaatje’s subtle gesture towards the fact that it is difficult to grip the unseen past and the un-lived moments completely. Mystery remains around past, even if it is one’s family’s past. Even though he recounts the stories he gathers from people as factual, quoting the storytellers and often times giving dates, there is a sense of inadequacy. He is

well aware of the fact that the stories do not dig deeper into the lives and do not give all he needs. The frustration with both documented history and gossips is evident when in the chapter “Tropical Gossip” he writes:

“Truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships. There are stories of elopements, unrequited love, family feuds, and exhausting vendettas, which everyone was drawn into, had to be involved with. But nothing is said of the closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other’s presence individuals are seen only in the context of these swirling social tides... .where is the intimate and truthful in all this?” [*Running*, 54].

Ondaatje’s sense of inadequacy paves the way for the truth about his family’s life that he eventually gets at – no recollection is ever enough, nor is history which is documented by recollection – as all the stories about them and the narrators of those stories are selective. They choose details, either consciously or unconsciously, that fit their designs. This is exactly what history does as Foucault points out:

“[H]istory now organizes the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations” [Foucault, 6-7].

Ondaatje also makes prose gestures to make up for the factual inadequacies in portrayal of his family. For example, he writes in the beginning of the book that his grand mother, Lalla died of natural causes – floods, in a matter of fact way. But as he tries to breathe life to Lalla’s character, the historical narrative falls short to contain her larger than life presence. The only way he can give his tribute to “this over bearing charmed flower” is through his prose [*Running*, 125]. And that is what he does when he reconstructs her grand death or what he calls “her last perfect journey.” He describes Lalla’s swirling body being carried away by the rushing flood past the town of Nuwara Eliya with epic sweep and scope. Ondaatje does not even pretend to have captured all the “muscle(s) in her (Lalla’s) chameleon nature” reflecting so many things; instead he makes this sweeping gesture through language to match the grand yet mysterious life his grandmother led.

Whether stylistic or thematic, Ondaatje’s gestures towards his reconstructed family history are not limited by any preconception. This takes us right into the process of his self-discovery as he takes various stance and perspective towards the history – be it of Ceylon or his family that exists in local recollection and sifts from them what he considers proper. In the beginning though he is writing about his native land he does not try to impose an intimacy with either the people or the place. There is an urge to belong to this place and to these people but his perspective is also filtered through his experience of being a westerner. So, for the first half of the book, his gestures remain detached as that of an outsider. For example, when he recounts the tale of how Ceylon, “a pendant off the ear of India” “seduced all of Europe” and like “the wife of many marriages” became a mirror reflecting “each new power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities” he becomes any one looking over the history of Ceylon [*Running*, 63, 64]. The detachment is too obvious to be overlooked. Later in the book, Ondaatje’s narration resembles that of a travelogue as he describes “the strange mixture of people – Sinhalese, Canadian, and one quiet French girl”, traveling to exotic Asia, getting crazy by the heat but also “slightly drunk with this place – the beautiful house, the animals” [*Running*, 141]. At this point in the narrative, Ondaatje’s gesture towards Ceylon and the Ceylonese is still detached and the language reflects this distance between his two selves as he says: “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” [*Running*, 79]. Thus, starting like that of a historian his gesture shifts to that of an outsider in an exotic land. And with every shift in his gesture Ondaatje moves forward in his quest for his family’s past.

Finally, the gesture becomes an intimate gesture of love towards his father. In fact, this autobiography to a large extent is an attempt to explore who he is by understanding his parents especially his father. But his gesture towards his father also shifts in the course of the book. He doesn’t set out to write this book with a fixed image in mind. Ondaatje first recounts his father’s “manic public behaviour” that characterizes his (his father’s) public life almost like an outsider, without any emotional attachment [*Running*, 168]. Then the gesture changes to that of a son who is able to see beyond the public face. Ondaatje then talks about his father who is characterized by, “a sense of secrecy” and “a desire

to be reclusive" [*Running*, 168]. In this portrayal there is also a longing to know this man who has become "the north pole" to his family, [*Running*, 172]. He now longs for the moment in "King Lear" when Edgar reveals himself to Gloucester, but it never happens. He wants to say: "I am writing this book about you at a time when I am least sure about such words." but that moment does not come as the father dies before the grown-up son returns [*Running*, 180]. In this way, the distant gesture of an outsider both in terms of space and time in the beginning of the narrative changes to a gesture of love and intimacy as Ondaatje progresses toward a self-discovery and enlightenment.

Thus, this book, which straddles fiction and history, becomes Ondaatje's search for a way that will allow him the freedom and flexibility to come to terms with his past or truth about his family. He realizes that despite his efforts in writing the book, there are still things that remain to be told or will never be known. So, while narrating his family's past, Ondaatje exhibits "a fear of certainties" and prefers "the fluidity" of the unfinished work that cannot be labeled to avoid "the final, the conclusive, and the absolute" [Zivkovik, 99]. It may suggest Ondaatje's critique of the dominant Western understanding of history as a source for absolute truth. In the section called "Final Days Father Tongue," Ondaatje writes about his father:

"There is so much to know and we can only guess. Guess around him. To know him from these stray actions I am told by those who loved him. And yet, he is still one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut" [*Running*, 200].

Thus, his book remains "incomplete" in terms of reaching absolute truth as any tale or historical narrative will always be. The book ends as if gesturing towards almost a new beginning, a new retelling of the history, a new discovery to be made. So, with his gesture, his book, with its fluidity rather than historical certainty, Ondaatje brings together "fiction" writing which is conventionally understood to be fabricated and "memoir" writing which is ostensibly based on the real life experiences of an individual. Hence, the book creates its own form of reality, its own truth, which is very different from what we understand by historical truth.

III: THE DUAL MEDIUM AND MULTIPERSPECTIVE IN *IMAGINARY PARENTS*

Imaginary Parents is a collaborative attempt of the Ortiz Taylor sisters to recreate a life they shared as children in relationship to their parents. If Ondaatje takes into account all the possibilities instead of claiming one historical truth by his open-ended gestures – both stylistic and thematic, the Ortiz Taylor sisters experiment with the form with which to relate the truth about their family and themselves. Working in two mediums, they create a narrative interspersed with visual images. Together their effort produces a distinct yet complementary commentaries on their past "without undercutting each other's personal memory"[Adams, 68]. This parallel narrative in art and text enriches the family history with a kaleidoscopic view, provides multiple insights into family members, and reinforces a need to go beyond the accepted need for a fixed point of view in writing a life.

Sheila Ortiz Taylor creates the text that includes poetry, prose and prose photographs, while Sandra Ortiz Taylor provides works of three-dimensional arts consisting of photographed miniature assemblage of "found objects" that represent her memories and impressions [*Imaginary Parents*, xvi]. The juxtaposition of two art forms allows them to do justice to their individual quest.

It is evident from the introductory notes by the sisters that, this book is meant to be a tribute to their glamorous parents: "My (Sandra's) motivation partially comes from a need to try and understand my parents and our lives together"[*Imaginary Parents*, xv]. Sheila calls this book "an altar, an *ofrendra*;" an altar to their past and to their parents as the book reveals [*Imaginary Parents*, xiii]. But surprisingly, the sisters choose to call their rendering of their parents "Imaginary" as opposed to a well grounded claim to the reality of their creation; "Juanita Loretta Ortiz Taylor and John Santray Taylor are hardly imaginary in the sense of never having existed, nor are they semi fictional characters invented by their artistic daughters . . . their imaginary quality lies in the way each daughter has used her particular artistic medium to depict their parents' own ability to imagine themselves as living "the American Dream. South California style. It was as if they invented themselves" [Adams, 58]. This invention

did not happen overnight and the whole transformation with time is captured beautifully in Sandra's "sculptural narrative," "Texas Two-Step/History of a Self-made Man" where she depicts the story of her father's "odyssey from a small town in Texas to Los Angeles" [*Imaginary Parents*, ix]. Having descended from an artisan, their father was a man of varied interests as shown by the collection of objects in Sandra's box: his clarinet, hand saw, ropes, books etc. The journey represented by a train drawn on the open lid is more than the physical journey from Texas to Los Angeles; it is a journey through various possibilities that life offers. He learns clarinet, oboe, Spanish from strangers, reads books on sailing, laws, chess etc as Sheila's description of the same photograph later adds. Gradually he emerges as a man completely immersed in Law, music and sailing: the three obsessions in his life, as the objects in Sandra's box depict. The daughters' inventive use of two mediums to understand their parents seems a tribute to their parents' self-invention.

The use of two artistic mediums to depict one life is more inclusive as it widens the scope of the depiction by incorporating all the bits and pieces of that life. This endeavour casts cursory yet bright light onto the shadowy, grayish parts of the family history. So, it is no wonder that in her "Forward," along with the list of other suggestive genre Sheila mentions "Codex" as a possibility for the book though it comes nothing closer to the collection of code of laws. As we go through the sisters' presentation of the relationship of their parents we soon become aware of the "patriarchal codex" that operates in the family [Adams, 60]. Throughout Sheila's creation Juanita Ortiz Taylor is seen as "resisting the status quo, hiding her preferred dull knife from her husband, who insists on sharp knife and soft pressure"[Adams, 66]. Her love for creative space is suggested in Sheila's description of her mother as a student defying her rigid sewing teacher who made her do things in the prescribed way. She lost that creative space again as she tried to fit into the ascribed sexist relationship in her family, but it finds its expression in sewing which becomes her art form in the "domesticated, contained" life as Sandra presents in "Family Room," a complement to Sheila's prose in "Singer" [*Imaginary Parents*, xv]. "Only with the death of my father does she begin to emerge as a self-defining individual," writes Sandra [*Imaginary Parents*, xi]. She beautifully captures this transformation in the exterior and the interior of the

box named "El Musico y la Dama." In the interior the mother figure is overshadowed by the father, a sailboat captain with his clarinet; the exterior shows the eyes of the mother magnified to a larger proportion overarching the small cut out photograph of her father, foreshadowing their mother's ever growing independence.

Another piece of Sandra's artwork dedicated to her mother, "Ofrenda for a Maja" includes a full photograph of her mother with her family. In this three-fold box, Sandra graphically chronicles their mother's life before and after their father's death. The journey of self-discovery she is to embark on after their father's death is suggested by "small objects with big meaning set out in order" in the middle part of the box [*Imaginary Parents*, xiii]. The luggage indicates an imminent voyage, a symbol for the voyage of self-discovery. The broom waiting for her to resume her constant labour indicates finding her lost self-confidence, which Sheila captures when she describes how her mother learns to drive in three days when her father was in the hospital. Thus working on the "evidence" left by their deceased parents –the "bones" to which they add the flesh of memory and imagination, Sheila and Sandra create two parallel narratives defining a single life and eventually an autobiography of a family [*Imaginary Parents*, xiii].

Both sisters in their attempt to recreate their selves in relation to the remembered relationship with their family seem to enjoy the sense of discovery not only in terms of form but content. Mention of different weapons with which their grandfather, Mypapa takes his life is a case in point. The difference is not only between the versions of two sisters; it occurs within Sandra's own interpretation as well. Sheila describes Mypapa's preparation before taking his life:

His clean fingers will move like those of a blind man skirting furniture until they close on something hard, something wrapped in a soft cloth(his eldest son's old flannel shirt; the green silk scarf that belonged to his mother; his wife's black mantilla) and he will set the bundle down(on the bed; on the small table, on the stool) and slowly unwrap it until the gun(the Colt given by Pancho Villa; the German Luger his son David brought back from the war; the 38 he bought last week in a pawn shop on riverside Drive) lies in the

single bar of light from the window.
[*Imaginary Parents*, 130]

In Sandra's tribute to her grand father, "Recuerdos para los Abuelitos", he is represented by a skeleton, with a rifle at his side. But in her illustration of that photograph, Sandra mentions: "*The shotgun*[my italics]that he will use is beside him" [*Imaginary Parents*, x]. Here, the text is suggestive of different interpretations and the brilliance of this book is in the fact that it doesn't wipe out the details just because of the privileged position that distance in time provides the writers with; rather it takes into account all the "what ifs" that a sensational incident like a suicide is susceptible to. It seems to be a conscious decision on the sisters' part as they at once show and question the selective nature of history. By allowing scope for several interpretations of the event, together they reinforce a need to overcome the limitation of a fixed point of view in depicting a life, be it in text or photograph. Undoubtedly they succeed in replacing "the mono-vocality" of most collaborative autobiographies with a text that gives voice not only to the family history they strive to portray but to the artists in them [Kreiger]. By taking into consideration all the might- have-been(s), truer than truth, it challenges the way we single out a perspective or meaning from context and questions the certainty of that fixed, unitary meaning we take for granted.

Other than this selectiveness of history this different version of one truth also shows the relation of fiction and history and how fiction imposes its own pattern on history. It shows how randomness is either built into or discarded from the structure, creating uniformity out of heterogeneity. It is possible that the narrators who transform the story existing in local recollection, frame as well as relate it and the further they stand from the events the more they tend to rely on inference to grasp the reality. They use inference extensively and test them like historians who eventually impose patterns when retrospectively history is written. Thus the two sisters play with what we take for granted as truth and diffuse interpretation, meaning and challenge the idea of unitary meaning, making their family's history a "centrifugal" work as opposed to the "centripetal" that imposes unitary meaning [Bakhtin, 270-272].

In this way, retaining their individual standpoint the two sisters collaborate in producing a seamless

commentary on their childhood. The effect this collaboration has on the representation of their past is aptly summarized by Sheila: "While our individual memories always differed, we learn to value this difference and to use it as a way of layering our work" [*Imaginary Parents*, xiv]. Like true "shadow masters" [*Imaginary Parents*, xv] in control of their respective strings, the sisters enjoy complete freedom in their respective medium and operate in parallel level justifying Sheila's claim:

"In our working we did not try to make art and text replicate each other but rather to refract, casting new shadows, throwing new angles of light" [*Imaginary Parents*, xiv].

As we see, that ray of light diffuses, refracts and the object in question – history of their family is presented in a penumbral situation where meaning, history and truth are diffused.

IV. CONCLUSION

Like any autobiographic writing the two memoirs discussed in the paper excavate and reconstruct past, but their unconventionality lies in their understanding of historical truth. They undermine and challenge the authoritative status of history both structurally and thematically. Traditionally history is considered to be teleological in nature with an ascribed beginning. While reconstructing the personal history both these memoir go beyond this traditional need for chronology and a beginning, middle and end structure and present the history in vignettes. Both present the history in bits and pieces. Sheila begins *Imaginary Parents* by reconstruction of a birth scene, as if moving towards a historical – hence, teleological narrative, but instead of leading us to the child's adolescence this is followed by the first meeting of the child's parents and their marriage. Thus, accomplished action precedes the one, which initiated it. Ondaatje's memoir on the other hand begins in present day with a time jump but nowhere has that backward time jump been linear. This "discontinuity" as Foucault will say is an attempt to destroy the idea of history as a linear process started by a single event [Foucault, 8]. Document represents a linear kind of history with an ascribed beginning. It isolates a single person as a progenitor of that moment. And by doing so it suppresses other discourses and imposes pattern. The memoirs discussed on the other hand give many building blocks, which readers have to connect to establish a link. There is no beginning

and no ending and therefore no logical point of entrance. By doing this they transform a historical event to eventness, pushes the event back in time when it is happening, not shunning all competing discourses. It is like a number of given lines intersecting each other at a given time, never forming a circle, square, or a right angle.

The atypical way both memoirs search for truth is another case in point. Ondaatje goes to unconventional sources – rumours, gossips in search for the truth, incorporates stories by different narrators, not to relate different parts of the story, rather to re iterate it, to create different versions of one reality. The sisters on the other hand give a parallel commentary on the same event, taking in all possible variation. Thus these memoirs become polyphonic if we are to use Bakhtin's term. According to Bakhtin, certain novels are full of voices where no voice has a privileged position. If we take the comparison a bit further, this polyphony is suggestive of what Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia" – a constant imploding of meaning [Bakhtin, 270]. Bakhtin goes deeper when he shows how a word conceptualizes its object:

No living world relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there is an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate" [Bakhtin, 276].

Even though the words change meanings, the vestigial meaning remain. The relation between old and new meaning becomes what Bakhtin says "dialogic," a way of carrying on a dialogue with past [Bakhtin, 277]. By making space for polyphony to carry that dialogic relation with past both Ondaatje and the Ortiz Taylor sisters suggest the difficulty in absolute and complete comprehension of a word, idea, interpretation, truth, and to take it further reality.

With all these multiplicities in mind, it is easier to see the memoirs discussed as texts not made up of peaks and valleys but what Deleuze says, of thousand "plateaus", and it is not possible to know for sure which plateau holds the truth [Deleuze, 21-22.] Here, no one particular narrative is allowed to

have a privileged position, no one character is given an elevated status in terms of importance. Like a plateau, it is a continuity whose development evades any culmination point or external end.

Thus the two memoirs veer away from the conventional idea of autobiographic writing that upholds traditional understanding of history. They attempt to do what Foucault terms the "questioning of the document," and thereby shed light on the meaning of history, about the doubtful process of coming to know, reconstruct and come to grips with history [Foucault, 6].

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