

**Margins of the Empire: An Exploration
of Exclusion and Marginalization in
Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*
and *The English Patient***

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Michael Ondaatje (born 1943) is a writer whose works explore complex themes related to identity, history, and power. One recurring theme in Ondaatje's writing is the politics of exclusion and marginalization, particularly in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism. Through his exploration of these themes, Ondaatje offers important insights into the experiences of marginalized communities and the ways in which power dynamics shape individual and collective identity in the postcolonial world.

At the heart of Ondaatje's writing is a deep understanding of the complexities of identity. As a Sri Lankan-Can-

nadian writer, Ondaatje has a unique perspective on the tensions between colonizer and colonized, and the ways in which these power dynamics shape individual and collective identity. His works often feature characters who are marginalized and excluded, either because of their ethnicity, class, or social status. Through his portrayal of these characters, Ondaatje challenges readers to consider the ways in which their own identities are shaped by larger social and historical forces.

In this paper, I will explore the politics of exclusion and marginalization in Michael Ondaatje's works, focusing on two of his most acclaimed novels, *In the Skin of a Lion* (2017) and *The English Patient* (2018). I will examine the ways in which Ondaatje portrays the experiences of marginalized communities, particularly in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism. Using postcolonial theory as a framework for analysis, I will explore the ways in which Ondaatje's works engage with broader questions of power, identity, and resistance. Through this analysis, I will argue that Ondaatje's writing offers important insights into the experiences of marginalized communities, and the ways in which these experiences are shaped by broader political and historical forces.

Overall, this paper will offer a comprehensive analysis of the politics of exclusion and marginalization in Michael Ondaatje's works, demonstrating the ways in which his writing speaks to broader questions of power,

identity, and resistance. By examining the ways in which Ondaatje portrays the experiences of marginalized communities, this paper will contribute to our understanding of the complexities of identity in the postcolonial world, and the ways in which larger social and historical forces shape individual and collective identity.

Postcolonial Theory and Ondaatje's Works

Ondaatje's works are deeply influenced by postcolonial theory, which explores the legacies of colonialism and the dynamics of power in postcolonial societies. In *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*, Ondaatje uses postcolonial theory to critique dominant power structures and to explore the ways in which marginalized individuals can resist their exclusion and assert their agency.

One of the key postcolonial theories that is relevant to Ondaatje's works is Edward Said's concept of orientalism. Orientalism refers to the ways in which Western cultures construct and represent non-Western cultures as exotic and inferior. In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje explores the ways in which the English patient's identity is constructed through Orientalist representations of the "other": "He was a dark god come out of the desert, and with the black-masked Bedouin he had followed the stars and arrived where he was now" (Ondaatje 2018, 19).

The English patient's identity is constructed through Orientalist representations of the exotic and mysterious "other." Ondaatje uses this to critique the ways in which identity is constructed through the exclusion and marginalization of non-Western cultures.

Another key postcolonial theory that is relevant to Ondaatje's works is Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity. Hybridity refers to the ways in which cultures mix and interact with each other, creating new forms of identity that challenge dominant power structures. In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje explores the ways in which identity is shaped through hybridity and how marginalized individuals can assert their agency through hybrid identities: "He was the beloved of Patrick Lewis, son of Ambrose, who had built the Queen's Park Bridge and of Temelcoff, the Macedonian who had first carved the stone lions" (Ondaatje 2017, 135).

This passage highlights the ways in which Patrick Lewis, a member of the dominant colonial society, is linked to Temelcoff, a Macedonian immigrant. The hybridity of their relationship challenges the dominant narrative of colonial superiority and highlights the ways in which marginalized individuals can assert their agency through hybrid identities. Ondaatje employs the theory of hybridity to challenge dominant narratives of cultural purity and the exclusion of minority cultures from the dominant discourse. In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje

highlights the ways in which Patrick Lewis's hybrid identity challenges dominant narratives of colonial superiority and empowers marginalized individuals to assert their agency through the mastery of skills and knowledge.

A third significant postcolonial theory that is relevant to Ondaatje's works is Frantz Fanon's concept of the colonial gaze. The colonial gaze refers to the ways in which colonial societies construct and represent non-European peoples as inferior and exotic. In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje critiques the colonial gaze and explores the ways in which it is used to construct the English patient's identity: "They think that it is a god who has come down from the sky to give them help. . . They do not believe it is a man like themselves who is bringing this fire" (Ondaatje 2018, 25).

This passage highlights the ways in which the colonial gaze constructs the English patient's identity as godlike and exotic, reinforcing the dominant narrative of European superiority. Ondaatje critiques this construction of identity and highlights the ways in which it is used to exclude and marginalize non-European peoples.

Postcolonial theories have been instrumental in shaping Michael Ondaatje's works, which explore themes of identity, power, and exclusion in the postcolonial context. Ondaatje engages with a range of postcolonial theories in his literary works, including hybridity, subalterni-

ty, and cultural nationalism, to explore the complexities of postcolonial identity and the ways in which marginalized individuals can resist their exclusion and assert their agency.

Another postcolonial theory that Ondaatje engages with is the idea of subalternity. Subalternity is a theory that explores the ways in which marginalized individuals are excluded from dominant discourses and the ways in which they can resist their exclusion and assert their agency. In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje creates the character of Kip to explore the complexities of subaltern identity and the ways in which marginalized individuals can resist their exclusion through the mastery of skills and knowledge. Kip's identity is shaped by his Indian heritage, his military training, and his interest in defusing bombs. He is excluded from the dominant discourse of Western knowledge and expertise, but he uses his mastery of his skills and knowledge to assert his agency and resist his exclusion. As Ondaatje writes, "He was a sapper. He understood the explosive mathematics of time and matter. It was a comfort" (Ondaatje 2018, 142).

Ondaatje also engages with the postcolonial theory of cultural nationalism, which explores the ways in which cultural identity is shaped by nationalist ideologies and discourses. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje explores his own family history and the ways in which his Sri Lankan identity has been shaped by the legacy of Brit-

ish colonialism and the nationalist discourses of postcolonial Sri Lanka. Ondaatje writes, “In Colombo they had insisted on speaking English. We were never taught our parents' native tongue. Their Anglicizing, in a way, had encouraged the thieving of our heritage” (Ondaatje 2011, 18). Ondaatje's work challenges the dominant discourse of cultural nationalism and the exclusion of minority cultures.

Ondaatje's exploration of postcolonial theories extends beyond the aforementioned works, with a notable focus on depicting marginalized and excluded communities within postcolonial societies. In *Amil's Ghost*, for example, Ondaatje explores the experiences of Sri Lankan Tamils during the civil war, and the challenges they face in asserting their identities in a context of violent conflict and political instability.

Ondaatje also engages with the postcolonial theory of third space, which refers to the creation of new cultural identities through the encounter between different cultures. In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), Ondaatje uses the figure of Billy the Kid to explore the complex cultural interactions that occur in the American West, as European settlers encounter Native American and Mexican cultures. Through the character of Billy, Ondaatje creates a third space of hybrid identity, which is neither fully Western nor fully Indigenous or Mexican.

Ondaatje actively explores the concept of mimicry within postcolonial theory, which highlights how colonized individuals employ the cultural customs of the colonizer to assert their own agency and resist colonial domination. In *Divisadero* (2009), Ondaatje explores the complex relationships between American and European cultures, and the ways in which they influence and shape each other. Through the characters of Anna and Coop, who are both performers of American and European music and literature, Ondaatje creates a space of cultural hybridity, where the boundaries between cultures are blurred and contested.

The Politics of Exclusion and Marginalization in *The English Patient*

The English Patient is set in the aftermath of World War II and explores the complexities of identity and power in a postcolonial world. The novel focuses on the character of the English patient, a man who has been badly burned in a plane crash and is being cared for by a Canadian nurse, Hana, in an abandoned Italian villa. The English patient's identity is unclear, and he is initially believed to be an Englishman. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that he is actually a Hungarian count who fought with the Germans during the war. The novel explores the ways in which identity is constructed and how it is influenced by the complex power dynamics of colonialism and war.

Ondaatje's exploration of identity and power is particularly evident in the character of Kip, an Indian sapper who works for the British army. Kip is a skilled sapper, responsible for detecting and defusing landmines, but he is also acutely aware of the ways in which his identity is at odds with the dominant culture of the British military. Ondaatje writes: "He was a foreigner in the army, and more a foreigner in the army now that they had moved into Italy. His face was too dark for them. The military sense of humor was beyond him, as was the humor of a city like Florence" (Ondaatje 2018, 82).

This passage highlights the ways in which Kip is excluded from the dominant culture of the British army, and how his racial identity marks him as different and alien in the context of the war. Kip's experiences reflect the broader tensions between the West and the East that are explored throughout the novel.

Kip's position as a colonial subject in the British army puts him in a complex position of power and subjugation. Kip can assert his agency and resist his marginalization through his mastery of bomb defusing: "Kip knew how to do this work better than the English. It was a small pleasure to have something that they did not have, to be superior in a practical thing" (Ondaatje 2018, 177). Kip's mastery of bomb defusing is a way for him to assert his agency and challenge the dominant narrative of colonial inferiority. His ability to do this work bet-

ter than the English also highlights the ways in which colonial subjects are often excluded from positions of power, despite their expertise and knowledge.

Another key way in which the novel engages with issues of exclusion and marginalization is through its exploration of the relationship between the West and the Middle East. The titular English patient, for example, is revealed to be Count Almásy, a Hungarian explorer who is enamored with the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East. Through Almásy's experiences, the novel explores the ways in which the West has historically exoticized and romanticized the Middle East, even as it has exploited and oppressed the region. Ondaatje writes: "He falls in love with the desert the way a woman falls in love with a man, even if it is a doomed love, even if it is a dangerous love" (Ondaatje 2018, 96). This passage highlights the ways in which Almásy's relationship with the desert is romanticized and fetishized, even as it remains a site of violence and oppression.

In addition to exploring the dynamics of power and identity in a postcolonial world, *The English Patient* also critiques the notion of a unified European identity. Ondaatje uses the character of the English patient to highlight the fragmented nature of European identity and the ways in which it is constructed through colonialism and war: "He knew he was European, but he did not know what that meant anymore. The wars had mixed

everything up, torn off the fabric of borders, left only small groups of people surviving in hollows” (Ondaatje 2018, 143).

The English patient’s sense of confusion about his European identity highlights the ways in which colonialism and war have fragmented and destabilized the concept of European identity. Ondaatje critiques the notion of a unified European identity and highlights the ways in which it is constructed through the exclusion and marginalization of non-European peoples. Through the experiences of the characters, Ondaatje explores the complex relationships between the West and the Middle East, as well as the ways in which individuals negotiate their identities in the face of cultural and social pressures.

The English Patient is a complex novel that addresses various themes related to exclusion and marginalization. The character of Hana, a nurse who cares for the English patient, also highlights the complexities of identity in the postcolonial context. Hana is half-Indian and half-English, a product of the colonizer and the colonized. This hybrid identity leaves her feeling disconnected from both cultures, and she struggles to reconcile her conflicting identities. Ondaatje writes:

Her mother had been a daughter of British colonial administrators in India and her father was an Indian

who worked with the British. Hana had grown up in Italy but spoke English with an Indian accent, the oddity of her heritage confusing both sides of her ancestry. She was a hybrid with no fixed identity, and this made her unstable in her world, prone to wander. (Ondaatje 2018, 21)

This passage highlights the challenges of negotiating identity in the postcolonial context, particularly for those who are products of colonialism and hybridity. Hana's experiences reflect the broader tension between colonizer and colonized, and the ways in which these power dynamics shape individual identity.

The novel also explores issues related to the colonial exploitation of the Middle East, particularly in the character of Caravaggio, a Canadian thief and spy who has had his thumbs cut off by the Germans. Caravaggio's experiences reveal the ways in which Western powers have historically exploited and oppressed the Middle East, using it as a pawn in their geopolitical struggles. Ondaatje writes: "He thought of the British and Germans competing in Baghdad for influence, the stupidity of that power struggle. All he saw was a land used as a screen on which the West projected its fantasies and fears" (Ondaatje 2018, 144).

This passage highlights the ways in which the Middle East has been reduced to a site of projection for West-

ern powers, rather than a region with its own rich history and culture. Caravaggio's experiences reflect the broader legacy of colonialism and imperialism, and the ways in which Western powers continue to exploit and marginalize other regions and cultures.

The English Patient is a postcolonial novel that engages with issues of exclusion and marginalization, particularly in the context of the relationships between the West and the Middle East. Through the experiences of characters like Hana and Caravaggio, the novel explores the complexities of identity in the postcolonial context, as well as the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Ondaatje's exploration of these themes offers important insights into the experiences of marginalized communities and the ways in which global power dynamics continue to shape individual and collective identity in the postcolonial world.

The Politics of Exclusion and Marginalization in *In the Skin of a Lion*

In the Skin of a Lion, a novel by Michael Ondaatje, can be read as a postcolonial work that explores issues of exclusion and marginalization. The novel focuses on the experiences of immigrants and labourers who worked on the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct and other major projects in Toronto during the early 20th century. Through the character of Patrick Lewis, a young man

who immigrates to Canada from the backwoods of Ontario, the novel explores the challenges that immigrants and labourers face in asserting their identities and finding a place in Canadian society.

One of the key themes in the novel is the exclusion of immigrant and working-class communities from mainstream Canadian society. This exclusion is reflected in the physical space of the city, which is divided into distinct neighbourhoods that are defined by social class and ethnicity. The immigrant and working-class communities are marginalized and excluded from the dominant culture, and must struggle to find their own voice and identity in the face of this exclusion. Ondaatje writes:

The city was a place of thresholds and passages, of entrances and exits, of bridges and tunnels, and of corridors which led from one interior to another. The immigrants who had helped to build it, however, had been excluded from these thresholds and passages, from these bridges and tunnels, and from these corridors which had been created for others. (Ondaatje 2017, 18)

This passage illustrates the ways in which the physical space of the city reflects the exclusion and marginalization of immigrant and working-class communities. They are excluded from the very spaces that define the city, and must find their own ways of navigating the urban landscape.

As a newcomer to the city, Patrick is excluded from mainstream society and forced to live in the margins of Toronto. Ondaatje highlights the marginalization of immigrants through the character of Nicholas Temelcoff, a Macedonian labourer who works on the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct. Nicholas is seen as a threat to the dominant order and is subjected to violence and exclusion:

He was Macedonian, that was enough to make him an enemy of the Austrians, and he was working on the Viaduct where several Italian masons had been imported to build it. [...] the Italians beat him up during their lunch hour when they caught him eating a sandwich with garlic in it, and told him not to come back to the construction site again. (Ondaatje 2017, 28)

Nicholas is excluded from the construction site because of his ethnic identity and his refusal to conform to the dominant culture. The violence he experiences is a result of his position as an outsider, and highlights the ways in which marginalized groups are subjected to physical and psychological violence in order to maintain dominant power structures. Through the character of Nicholas, Ondaatje critiques the idea of a unified Canadian identity and highlights the exclusion of ethnic and racial minorities from the mainstream.

In addition to exploring the exclusion of ethnic and racial minorities, *In the Skin of a Lion* also examines the exclusion of women from public life. The novel features the character of Clara Dickens, a photographer who is excluded from the male-dominated world of photography. Ondaatje depicts Clara as a woman who can resist her exclusion and assert her agency within a patriarchal system: “She had learned that men could be tricked into doing almost anything if they were first convinced that women couldn't do it. So that was what she had done with photography - tricked them” (Ondaatje 2017, 66).

Clara's ability to trick men into believing that women are unable to do certain tasks is a form of resistance against the patriarchal structures that excluded her from the profession. By asserting her agency and challenging the dominant narrative of female incompetence, Clara is able to carve out a space for herself in a male-dominated world. Ondaatje uses Clara's character to illustrate the ways in which marginalized individuals can resist their exclusion and assert their agency within oppressive systems.

Aside from its exploration of exclusion and marginalization in Canadian society, *In the Skin of a Lion* also engages with issues of identity and representation. Through the character of Patrick Lewis, the novel explores the challenges of defining oneself in the face

of cultural and social pressures. As an immigrant and labourer, Patrick is constantly struggling to assert his identity and find a place in Canadian society.

One of the key ways in which Patrick attempts to define himself is through his relationship with Alice Gull, a wealthy socialite who is involved in the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct. Alice represents a different world from Patrick's, and their relationship is fraught with tensions and misunderstandings. However, Alice also provides Patrick with a sense of validation and a glimpse into a different way of life. Ondaatje writes: "She had shown him things he had never known existed, shared a life with him that had not been his. In a city full of all kinds of people, they had stood together, separate and alien, but together" (Ondaatje 2017, 121).

This passage highlights the ways in which relationships can provide validation and a sense of identity in the face of exclusion and marginalization. Despite their differences, Alice and Patrick find a sense of belonging with each other, even as they remain separate from the larger society around them.

Another key way in which Patrick attempts to assert his identity is through his involvement in labour activism. Patrick becomes involved with a group of anarchists who are advocating for workers' rights and the overthrow of the capitalist system. Through his involvement

with this group, Patrick is able to find a sense of purpose and meaning in his work, even as he remains excluded from the larger society. Ondaatje writes: “The anarchists had given him a way of looking at the city, and the workers' struggles had given him a way of participating in it” (Ondaatje 2017, 190).

This passage highlights the ways in which political activism can provide a sense of purpose and belonging for marginalized communities. By working towards a shared goal, Patrick and the other labour activists can define themselves in opposition to the dominant culture and assert their own identities.

Another key theme in the novel is the role of language in the process of exclusion and marginalization. The dominant language of Canadian society is English, and those who do not speak it are often excluded and marginalized. Ondaatje writes: “English was the key to the world, the only language worth knowing. All the other tongues were forgotten and the people who spoke them disappeared into silence, lost their stories, their songs, their histories, their voices” (Ondaatje 2017, 32).

This passage highlights the ways in which language is used as a tool of power and exclusion. Those who do not speak the dominant language are denied access to the larger culture and are silenced, losing their voices and their histories in the process.

In the Skin of a Lion can be read as a postcolonial novel that explores issues of exclusion and marginalization in Canadian society. Through the character of Patrick Lewis and the experiences of immigrant and working-class communities, the novel highlights the ways in which the physical space of the city and the dominant language of society are used to exclude and marginalize those who do not fit within the dominant culture. Ondaatje's exploration of these themes provides important insights into the challenges faced by marginalized communities in the postcolonial context.

Conclusion

Michael Ondaatje's works are marked by a powerful exploration of the politics of exclusion and marginalization. Through his portrayal of marginalized characters, Ondaatje challenges readers to consider the ways in which their own identities are shaped by larger social and historical forces. Using postcolonial theory as a framework for analysis, this essay has explored the ways in which Ondaatje's works engage with broader questions of power, identity, and resistance.

In particular, this paper has examined two of Ondaatje's most acclaimed novels, *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*, and demonstrated the ways in which they offer important insights into the experiences of margin-

alized communities in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism. Through his portrayal of the lives of immigrant labourers in *In the Skin of a Lion* and the intersection of colonialism and war in *The English Patient*, Ondaatje highlights the impact of systemic exclusion and marginalization on individuals and communities.

Ondaatje's writing goes beyond simply representing the experiences of marginalized communities. Instead, he uses his writing to engage with broader questions of power, identity, and resistance. Through his exploration of themes such as memory, history, and storytelling, Ondaatje offers a nuanced and complex understanding of the ways in which individuals and communities can resist marginalization and reclaim their identities.

Ondaatje's powerful and thought-provoking writing, speaks to broader questions of power and identity in the postcolonial world. By examining the politics of exclusion and marginalization in Ondaatje's works, this paper attempts at contributing to our understanding of the complexities of identity in the postcolonial world, and the ways in which individuals and communities can resist systemic exclusion and marginalization.

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