

MULTICULTURALISM IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *COMING THROUGH SLAUGHTER*

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Introduction:

Michael Ondaatje is a well-known diasporic writer in the 21st century. He is a Sri Lankan novelist settled in Canada. Ondaatje has written six novels. All of these novels are diasporic novels. They depict the lives of the people living away from their homelands in other countries. In the 21st century the term diaspora has got a wider recognition and publicity. Under the effects of globalization people of one country migrate to another country in search of fulfillment of their dreams of jobs, business and other careers. In fact, the term diaspora is a very wider term. People migrate across their country under different titles such as 'exile', 'refugee', 'immigrants', expatriate, indentured, population etc. and these words reveal the mobility of population. The most common definition of 'diaspora' is seen in the Oxford English Dictionary as follows: diaspora is the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions. It concerns about various movements such as temporary or permanent movement of Europeans all over the world, leading to colonial settlements under colonialism. As a result, the consequent economic exploitation of the settled areas required a large amount of labour that could not be fulfilled by the local people. This led to the diaspora resulting from the dependence of the Africans and their relocation to places like the British colonies. There was a continued demand for workers created indentured labour. So the large number of workers from Third World countries to the West Indies, Malaya, Fiji, Eastern and Southern Africa and South-East Asia etc. are migrated.

The Britannica Concise Encyclopedia defines diaspora as "the dispersion of Jews among the Gentiles after the Babylonian exile or the aggregate of Jews outside Palestine or present day Israel. Diaspora carries political, philosophical and religious presentations in as much as the land of Israel and themselves.

The writing of diaspora is but a result of the opinion of the immigrants who are educated and literate. The diasporic writing throws focus on discrimination, nostalgia, transnationalism, multiculturalism, identity and sense of belonging. It also throws light on multiethnic politics and historical framework. The term diaspora is an umbrella term which stands for many a feature like exile, migration, immigration, identity crisis, displacement, multiculturalism, transnationalism, gender discrimination, nostalgia, survival etc. In the present article, I have tried to show the elements of multiculturalism reflected in Michael Ondaatje's first novel 'Coming Through Slaughter'. The aim and objectives of this attempt is to show Michael Ondaatje as a novelist of diaspora.

What is Multiculturalism ?

In order to understand multiculturalism it is necessary to have a clear idea of the term 'Culture'. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines culture as, "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people of a particular time." Here, culture means a way of life, customs and beliefs of a particular society of a particular time.

Mr. E. B. Taylor defines culture as, "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Primitive Culture, 1871). Here, culture means knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, habits of a

society.

Multiculturalism:

The Columbia Encyclopedia defines multiculturalism as, "a term describing the agreement, coexistence and negotiations of many cultures in a locality, without any one culture dominating the nation". Ahead to this the critics like Julian Wolfreys, Ruth Robbins and Kenneth Womack in their book 'Key Concepts in Literary Theory' define multiculturalism as follows; "Multiculturalism refers to the social and political movement and/or position that views difference between individuals and groups to be a potential venue of cultural strength and renewal: multiculturalism celebrates and explores different varieties of experiences stemming from racial, ethnic, gender and or class difference.. (Julian Wolfreys, Ruth Robbins and Kenneth Womack, 57)

In a sense, multiculturalism is one of the salient features of diaspora. It tries to overcome racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination by making differences among human beings acceptable to the largest number of people. It encourages cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious differences through legal and political means. It also represents equal rights and opportunities to all the different cultural or racial groups in a society and it doesn't regard any cultural or racial group important. Thus, multiculturalism means a co-existence and presence of diverse cultures, different cultures. It includes religious, cultural or racial groups. This multiculturalism is expressed through habitual behaviours, cultural conventions and values. It is also exhibited through certain patterns of thinking and communication styles.

The definition of multiculturalism in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary is quite adequate to understand the concept of multiculturalism. It is as follows: multiculturalism gives importance to all cultures in a society and it includes people from different races, religions, languages and traditions. It gives equal treatment to all communities and castes.

In his book 'Anthropology and Multiculturalism' Terence Turner defines multiculturalism as "manifestation of the post-modernists reaction to the de-legitimization of the state and the destruction of the supremacy of the dominant culture in progressive capitalist countries".

The term multiculturalism was at first introduced in 1960 in Canada. It replaced the term 'cultural pluralism'. At present this term is spread up from Canada to all over the world. In fact it is a most controversial term. It is used at least in three senses : (1) It refers to a society that is characterized by racial or cultural heterogeneity, (2) It refers to an ideal of equality and mutual respect among populations of racial or cultural groups and (3) It refers to policies implemented by the feudal government in 1971 and subsequently by a number of territories.

The various aspects of multiculturalism reflected in the novel 'Coming Through Slaughter':

The novel 'Coming Through Slaughter' is the very first novel of Michael Ondaatje published in the year 1987. This novel throws focus on a fictionalized biography of Charles 'Buddy'. Buddy Bolden was a legendary African American Jazz musician in America. He was an extrovert man. The portrayal of Buddy Bolden is exactly opposite to the portrayal of a photographer 'Bellocq' who was but an introvert. Bellocq expressed his own irritated desires in his erotic photographs. The actual lives of both of these characters are portrayed in this novel. However, the narrator of the novel sidelines the fact and explores multiculturalism and transnationalism as the main subject of the novel. Bolden exists outside official history and he lives only through music, stories and rumours. The novelist, Michael Ondaatje himself appears in the novel as a character and focuses the blurred boundaries between real and fictional lives. In the novel an attempt has been made to show that life and art, biography and fiction are not opposites but mutually constitutive categories.

In the novel we come across the following features of multiculturalism:

1) The element of marginalization:

In the novel 'Coming Through Slaughter' Michael Ondaatje depicts the life of the marginal people

in the Canadian i.e. New Orleans Society. The marginal people live outside the mainstream of society. These include the African in America, Negroes, Dalits, the Black Slaves, minorities as well as women. They are seen all over the world. The literature of the marginal throws light on the sufferings, humiliations, exploitation, suppression and pains and agonies of the marginal people.

In this novel Ondaatje points out that people who have contributed to the development of the country are no more seen in the official records of that country. They are but neglected and dropped from any such an official record. In this novel Buddy Bolden and E. J. Bellocq are marginal characters who are not recorded in the official history of the country.

Buddy Bolden is a protagonist, an African American Jazz musician, a New Orleans cornet player in the 20th century. Initially he is a normal, hard drinking and gossiping barber by day and jazz musician by night. While focusing him as a drinker and barber the novelist has portrayed him as a marginalized character in the novel. Ondaatje has deliberately portrayed the marginal people in his novel. In this regard he comments as follows:

By the end of nineteenth century, the Storyville district of New Orleans has some 2000 prostitutes, 70 professional gamblers and 30 Piyano players (Ondaatje, 3).

Next to this Ondaatje refers to Tom Anderson, a writer of the 'Blue Book' who records the history of the marginal people and represents their identity as the citizens of the country. He writes "Each year he published a Blue Book which listed everywhere in New Orleans. This was the guide to the sporting district, listing alphabetically the white and then the black girls, from Martha Alice to 1200 custom house to Louis Walter at 210 North Basin, and then the octoroons".

The novel is set in the black community of New Orleans. It represents the history of the marginal community which is not found anywhere in the official record of the country. Buddy Bolden is a hard drinker, a barber who is married to the New Orleans prostitute, Nora Bass. He is a good husband, father and a famous man in the town. In fact, Buddy is the first Black Jazz musician and he has his own good history in American music history. But being a black man, he is neglected from publicity. The men like Buddy have no voice of their own, no identity of their own in the history of their country, even though he has contributed a lot to the development of the country. In this regard Buddy's friend comments:

"Then you should have never heard him at all. He was never recorded. He stayed away while others moved into wax history, electronic history, those who said later that Bolden broke the path." (p. 37)

In the novel Ondaatje has portrayed the Black community of the New Orleans, the place known for prostitution Buddy wants to focus marginal people and hence he publishes a scandal sheet 'The Cricket' in which he writes about the marginal. The novel depicts the culture of 19th century urban America. All characters mix up with each other and live together. Buddy has no home of his own. He was full of dirt in every part of his body. He would spend most of his time with the prostitute Nora, with whom he later married.

Lee Spinks points out how Buddy was dispossessed from history in his following comment:

"The marginal position of Buddy's Storyville within the cultural iconography of New Orleans is represented as a form of historical dispossession". (83)

The marginal people are neglected from history. They have no official record of their own. The place of Buddy in New Orleans represents his historical dispossession.

Bellocq is a photographer from New Orleans, a marginal character in the novel. He takes photos of each whore in New Orleans and men to focus them. The women characters Nora, Bridget and other prostitutes are marginal characters. The novelist tries to give voice to the marginal people with the help of Buddy and Bellocq. The portrayal of all these neglected people like Buddy, the Jazz musician, Bellocq, the painter, Nora and Bridget, other prostitutes, in fact represents the marginalised in the novel.

2) Reflection of violence, sufferings and humiliations

Violence, sufferings and humiliation are the features of multiculturalism. People from the third world countries are humiliated and they face sufferings and violence. All these features are reflected in the novel. The Black people in New Orleans suffer at the hands of the white people living there. They are always humiliated by the white. The murder of the black woman Mrs Bass, the mother of Nora Bass, shows violence in New Orleans and the rivalry between the white and the black. Secondly in the book 'A Blue Book' published by Tom Anderson, 'The King of District' each year gives an account of the marginalized people. They undergo sufferings, violence and humiliation. Ondaatje writes about the book as follows:

"This was the guide to the sporting district, listing alphabetically, the white and then the black girls, from Martha Alice at 1200 customhouse to Louisa Walter at 210 North basin and then the octoroom. The Blue Book and similar guides listed everything and at any of the mansions you could go in with money and come out broke." (Ondaatje, 9).

Hence, by focussing the neglected prostitutes from New Orleans, Ondaatje tries to bring them to the mainstream of the society. Ahead to this even the horrible scene of the death of Bellocq, a marginal photographer reveals the real life of black man in America who undergoes sufferings. Even Bolden's comparison of himself with a dog who tries to jump deep into water for escaping from waste material, shows the insult of the black man. Ondaatje faced worse situation both in England and Canada. Like Buddy, the time was very hard for him for surviving. In fact, Bolden is the spokesperson of Ondaatje himself in this novel who takes life as a challenge. In order to overcome the sense of homelessness Bolden tries to develop the sense of mutual trust and mutual caring.

Bolden is uncertain and unlimited among the white community people. The miserable life of Buddy forces him to become a picaro, a wanderer and face adventures. His condition was pitiable. In the following lines we see the horrible and miserable life of Buddy: "He sat frozen. Then when his money was finished he went down to the shop and slept badly told jokes that he sober as a spider perfected in silence (Ondaatje, 40).

In fact, Buddy lives a very insulting life in Shell Beach District. He has to do menial and lower types of work like picking up dirt, cleaning toilets and rubbing phones. In this sense, these features of multiculturalism point out the valley of inequality between the white and the black in New Orleans

3) The theme of cultural clashes;

Buddy Bolden lives in a multicultural society. He settles in a country which was not known to him. He tries to understand the culture of the nation and colour of the people. He gets mixed up with different cultures. His culture is but the culture of a nomadic across the borders of all other cultures.

In fact, the novel 'Coming Through Slaughter' is an autobiography of Michael Ondaatje portrayed through the hero, Buddy Bolden. Bolden leaves his homeland and settles in Canada, adjusts himself with the new environment, learns the new language of the land. In the novel he describes the secrecy of his life i.e. pre-marital, extra-marital sex, family dispute, his marriage and divorce and the relationship with a prostitute, his passion for Jazz music and desire for wild sex. All these are the controversial issues in the life of the novelist. The memories of the by gone days of the writer have been narrated in the form of fiction. But in the true sense of the term these memories are not fictional but real. The real life of the writer is fictionalized. Buddy, the protagonist has kept a number of extra-marital relations with the women in Orleans. He crosses various cultures. He comes across multicultural relations where the white and the black live together. In his article Islam writes: 'At the end of the 19th century, Storyville was divided into two parts, one is white Storyville and another is black Storyville.' (57). In fact Buddy never follows the customs of a particular society. He lives with all peoples of all cultures. He has no fixed culture.

4) Multicultural relationships;

Through the character of Buddy Bolden. we come across his multicultural relationships. Buddy, in

fact is not restricted to any particular society. He has pre-marital, extra-marital relationship with women beyond his culture, his community. He is foolish for relationships without which life is unbearable for him. He kept his relationship with the sister of Nora Bass. He doesn't consider a binary opposition of black / white, poor / rich, animal / human in his life. On his part it is but natural to transcend the boundaries of the binaries. For example, the relationship between Nora and Bass shows the blurring boundaries. Buddy never makes any discrimination. He treats everybody equally.

At the end of the novel Buddy becomes mad because he is dissatisfied with the people whom he loved most. His madness shows his loss of physical and emotional relationships. He dies on 4th Nov. 1931, shows unhomeliness which is the failure of multiculturalism policy in Canada. He becomes a victim of this policy. Here, Ondaatje criticizes the multicultural policies of Canada through Bolden.

References:

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Coming Through Slaughter is told so well—so stuffed full of the dolour and lust that both buoy and blemishes a life—it reads like a story dying to be told. A classic psychological novel. Because we enter the process, guided by Ondaatje's shadowy narrator, we, like Bolden, come through something. We get at the bones of the thing. Coming Through Slaughter displays a knowingness of the unspeakable and how we are each freighted with the dark particulars of history, with the obscene, terrible consequences of time and place goose-stepping us from birth to death. Books in Canada []. Coming Throu...