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19	<b>TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND COMMUNAL CONFLICT IN THE SELECT POEMS OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE</b>	128
20	<b>DEFENSE MECHANISM AND RELATED CONCEPTS: A REVIEW</b>	131
21	<b>COMPUTATION OF TOPOLOGICAL INDICES OF ALOE EMODIN – A POTENTIAL PHARMACOLOGICAL AGENT</b>	139
22	<b>BURANJI WRITING TRADITION: A LEGACY OF REGIONAL HISTORY WRITING OF AHOM IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM</b>	146
23	<b>विद्यालयी वातावरण एवं सामाजिक आर्थिक स्तर का विद्यार्थियों की शैक्षिक उपलब्धि पर प्रभाव</b>	152
24	<b>ECO-TOURISM IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH</b>	155
25	<b>सूरकाव्य की अतर्वस्तु</b>	159
26	<b>DEFINING THE GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY OF SATYAGRAHA AND ITS RELEVANCE</b>	165
27	<b>IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN IN KARNATAKA: AN OVERVIEW</b>	171
28	<b>PROJECT MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY- A STUDY OF MEDIUM AND SMALL SCALE INDUSTRIES</b>	176



TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND COMMUNAL CONFLICT IN THE SELECT POEMS OF  
MICHAEL ONDAATJE

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Abstract

This research article entitled **Traumatic Memory and Communal Conflict in the Select Poems of Michael Ondaatje** aims at examining the traumatic memory and communal conflict that the poet witnessed in his country as he presents the social hierarchy in his poem "The Cinnamon Peeler" and the issues of immigrants during the civil war in Sri Lanka in his poem "The Wars". The conflict between Tamilians and Sinhalese and hierarchy among the labour-oriented castes in Sri Lanka are the backdrops of the poems chosen for study. Though the Poem "The Cinnamon Peeler" is widely discussed as the poet's nostalgic sense that unveils his sexual desire for his wife whom he divorced later, there is scope for exploring the labour oriented caste system in Sri Lanka.

**Key words :** Traumatic Memory, conflict, patronize, ideology, transhistorical trauma

Michael Ondaatje, a prolific writer widely known for his novels, began his writing career with a series of his poems that record his traumatic memories through the sense of nostalgia. Though he elevated himself as a novelist, his first four published books were volumes of poetry. *The Dainty Monster* (1967), *The Man with Seven Toes* (1970), *Rat Jelly* (1973), *There is a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning To Do* (1983) are the early poems of Ondaatje. The connection between psyche and nature and the relationship between violence and art are the predominant themes of his early poems. His later poems *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems* and *Secular Love* are known as widely acclaimed poems. They explore largely the traumatic memory of the author raised by the internal and external factors that trouble the author's inner self. Communal conflict, riots and rebellions have broken out periodically in the most parts of South-Asia in modern times. Both the early resistance to the British rule and the ethnic and nationalist violence not only took the lives of many victims but also forced many people to flee from their countries to settle in foreign lands as refugees.

Sri Lanka is one of those countries that witnessed unhealing pains as a result of the civil war that broke out in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Writers like Ondaatje and Shyam Selvadurai made their significant contributions in unleashing the issues of their war-torn countries through their writings in literary arena. Ondaatje's poems, *The Cinnamon Peeler* and *The Wars* make a vivid picture of communal conflict and social hierarchy that inflict the hostile nature among the people.

Cathy Caruth's formulations of trauma and memory primarily based on Freud's notion which has become an important source for the theorisation of literary trauma studies, especially, as a source to support trans-historical trauma. Traumatic experience is repetitious, timeless and unspeakable, yet it is also a literal mummified event. Caruth is of the view that the experience of trauma haunts. Trauma is triggered by psychological or environmental destruction as well as an unfulfilled desire of an individual. Ondaatje's works have become the source of understanding the quest for familial bond and the connection between psyche and nature. Since he is an immigrant writer who was born in Sri Lanka,

England and settled in Canada, nostalgia landscape has an important role in his works, The interconnectedness of psyche and nature turns as a repetitious memory in the author. War and violence is the main backdrop of the majority of his works.

The impacts of civil war in Sri Lanka resulted in communal, familial, psychological and environmental destruction that Ondaatje depicted in his works, especially, in his novel, *Anil's Ghost* and in some of his poems. *The Wars* is a poem published in his collection of poetry, *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems* (1991) that explore the conflict between Sinhalese and Tamilians. The poem talks of hostility, war and exile implying civil war as its backdrop. He begins his poem with line, "Dusk in Colombo," as an indication of ruining civilisation and democracy. He continues stating "Bo tree" which made Buddha intellectual remains dark. Sri Lanka is largely known as a land of



Buddhism that shows peace and prosperity as its important ideologies. The poet makes a vivid picture of Tamilians' conditions in Sri Lanka during the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The actual situation in the land was not ideal during the publication of his poetry collection. Patronize started by the various ethnic groups brought the political the unrest. The clash resulted in taking the lives of many people and driving Tamilians to settle in jungles of Sri Lanka as well as in certain parts of Tamil Nadu, a state in India. The conflict making the country a battlefield and driving the innocents out of her land are expressed in the words of Ondaatje as follows:

*Trinconalee*

They whisper

*Is my brother*

*Source of my exile*

Long slow miles to the scrub north

Whose blossoms are dirty birds

So bright they are extracts of the sea. (65)

The poet presents that the exile enables them to survive but their pain and struggles remain unhealed completely. Sri Lankan refugees were deputed to work in various regions in Tamil Nadu. The lines, "Whose blossoms are dirty birds// So bright they are extracts of the sea"(65) show the pathetic condition of migrants in an unknown land and only the sea has become their ancestor as they have lost their homeland and reached a host land which is not of their own. They struggle to get their identity as they remain landless and become vulnerable to the situation.

The hostility among the major ethnic groups of Sri Lanka is described as, "the ancient warrior/ whose brother/ stole his operating tongue." The poet speaks of his voiceless conditions of the victims of civil war, especially, Tamilians. He reveals the communal struggle between both the groups that lived harmoniously together for many years earlier. He calls Tamilians as ancient warriors whose identity and happiness stolen by their brothers of the land. He doesn't fail to record the retaliation of Tamilians as stated below:

Plunges

in pure muscle

towards his neighbours'

bloodless full

of noon moonlight.

The poet concludes with the necessity of brotherhood in Sri Lanka to bring the communal unrest to an end.

The connection between psyche and nature or landscape is always firm and deliberate in the works of Ondaatje. In an interview with Catherine bush, he said, "I think many of the poems, even in the first book, were about my landscape here in Canada, my family here, certain rural landscapes here, but certainly in the first longer works, the first serial works like *The Man with Seven Toes*, there was a jump from the self to a mask of some kind." His attachment with Sri Lanka that influences his works as his traumatic memory is expressed in his words: "There were stories that took place outside Sri Lanka but I decided to keep everything on this one island."

Ondaatje's poem, *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1982) was published as a part of his book, *Running in the Family* and later it appeared in his poetry collection *Secular Love* (1984). It drew a considerable academic attention as many poems in the later work are dealing with pain and guilt. Besides, Ondaatje's *Secular Love* is distinguished as the poet's knowledge about inter-personal relationship comes from his study of sensual love. This poetry collection is semi-autobiographical works since they display the poet's memory of the past. *The Cinnamon Peeler*, one of the notable poems of Ondaatje has been interpreted in different ways by many critics. Michael Hulse, in his article, in *Times Literary Supplement* states that the poem deals with the themes which could be found commonly in Ondaatje's works. Douglas Barbour, on the other hand, in his early entry on Ondaatje for *Twayne's World Authors Series Online* observes the comical aspects of the poem and calls it as a "subtle comedy of marriage."



The traumatic memory of the poet is shown as the complexity of the inter-personal relationship with his wife separated them. Many critics discussed the firm prints of the memory of the poet's wife remain unforgettable, though he has parted his way from her and remarried someone else. The strong sexual desire of the poet is not only describing his sexual need but also the rootlessness of the poet. The very first line of the poem, "If I were a Cinnamon Peeler" shows the identity crisis of the poet. Tamara Fernando, a Seattle based editor explicates that the poem *Cinnamon Peeler* explores the complexity of identity and displacement through the use of a mythical identity. Besides, being a record of the poet's intimacy with his wife and trauma inflicted by the repetitious memory of his wife, the poem also allures with several Sinhala castes which are often associated with occupation. The Cinnamon Peeler, honey gatherer, grass-cutter and the lime burner represent the working-class communities in Sri Lanka. The poet is meticulous in showing the communal conflict evoked by social hierarchy. Castes are assessed with the occupation of the people. Cinnamon peeler caste known in Sri Lanka known as Salagama.

In the fourth stanza, the poet makes a strong statement on Sinhalese caste system:

I could hardly glance at you  
Before marriage  
never touch you  
-your keen nosed mother your rough brothers (154)

Even a slightest physical contact between the cinnamon peeler and his love will make her body emit the smell of cinnamon and it will unfold the secrecy to the keen nosed mother and it will make her brothers angry when they find their sister in love with a cinnamon peeler. It makes an obvious description on the view of Sinhalese caste society on marriage. Cinnamon is a spice, a source of livelihood and social identity in countries like Sri Lanka where a man's profession is determined by the caste. In such a rigid caste system, there is no social mobility among the castes. The ideal country that the poet dreams or aspires echoes the class conscious society through the poem.

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