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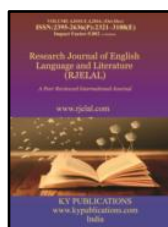
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DIASPORIC REBIRTH: HYBRIDITY, TRANSNATIONALITY AND MULTICULTURALISM IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *THE CAT'S TABLE*

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ABSTRACT

Diasporic literature is concerned with depiction of diverse experiences of the dispersed people starting with their displacement and dislocation to their translations and transformation in the unfamiliar situations. It is the translations and transgressions that are often addressed by the term diasporic rebirth that signifies the experience of the diasporic self from 'unsettling' to 'resettlement'. It is perceived in the achievement of hybridization, development of multiculturalism and transnational sense of the diasporas. In fact, the journey of the culturally shocked diaspora from the state of dislocation to that of a transnational-multicultural-hybrid-resurrected self speaks volumes for diasporic success as against all odds of alienation and marginalization, fluidity and instability. Sri Lankan-Canadian diasporic author Michael Ondaatje is incessantly preoccupied with the depiction of diasporas' translation to hybrid, transnational and multicultural individuals. The present paper is an attempt to explore how Ondaatje highlights the issue of diasporic rebirth through a depiction of hybridity, transnationality and multiculturalism in his fictional work *The Cat's Table* (2011).

Key words: Diasporic rebirth, Hybridity, Transnationality, Multiculturalism, Michael Ondaatje, *The Cat's Table*

Introduction

Diasporic rebirth is basically associated with the new diasporas who voluntarily migrate to the prosperous western countries in the hope of fulfilling their dreams. While the old diasporas resigned their fate in the host land with stoic endurance, the new diasporas accept and undergo translation several times; in other words, they are reborn time and again. In this respect, all sorts of trials and tribulations, anxiety and suffering, trauma and culture shock turn up as blessings in disguise for the new diaspora. In fact, the experience of the diasporic self from 'unsettling' to 'resettlement' is a journey of diasporic rebirth that is perceived / showcased in the achievement of hybridization,

development of multiculturalism and transnational sense of the diasporas. The terms as used in postcolonial discourse are highly relative since they signify 'trans-cultural forms', 'intercultural space' and the space of 'in-betweenness'. Hybridity is the fusion of the 'self' and the 'other' that reduces the sharp dualistic thinking by bridging up the colonizer and the colonized. In this connection, Bhaba aptly observes that "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power" (159). Hybridity contests the colonial view of the native as 'subaltern'. In fact, the postcolonial subject with access to various material and academic developments of the globalised world achieves a hybrid identity and it is in this respect Diaspora as a

postcolonial subject is no exception.

Hybrid identity of the diaspora is constructed in the 'in-between' space which is termed by Bhaba the 'third space': "Hybridity for me is the 'third place'" (Rutherford 211). Given the fact that postmodern identity is always in a flux, Bhaba challenges the essentialist notion of identity. His notion of the third space is an *ambivalent* site that itself challenges any 'primordial unity or fixity'. To him, the third space initiates 'new signs of identity' (*Location* 1) and displaces the histories that constitute it. In Bhaba's scheme of things, all forms of culture constantly undergo 'translation and negotiation' to constitute hybridity (Rutherford 211). Viewed from this perspective, diasporic negotiation between two cultures of home and host land strongly indicates cultural hybridity. Rushdie's views on diasporic identity can be said to both counter and supplement the concept of hybridity. He observes that identity of the diasporic person is 'plural and partial' and that diasporas are 'translated men' who 'straddle two cultures' (Rushdie, *Imaginary* 17, 15). His observation highlights the diasporic negotiations of identity, the 'in-between' space and transnational characteristics of the diasporic individual.

Uma Parameswaran adds a new impetus to diasporic identity by correlating the 'in-between' space of cultural hybridity with the mythic space called 'Trishanku's heaven'. Like Trishanku in the Indian myth who stands for an in-between space between heaven and earth, the diaspora is relocated neither in his/her place of origin nor in the host land. In spite of the denial of heavenly pleasures, the diaspora, like Trishanku, has to reconcile himself in a state for rebirth to the new home with a realization that 'home is where our feet are' (38). In this connection, Parameswaran's conceptualization is significant in that it indicates an elevation or resurrection of the diasporic 'self'.

Promotion of the sense of transnationalism and multiculturalism through acceptance of and assimilation into the new cultures is yet another significant aspect of the diaspora 'reborn'. The term transnationalism refers to the relations between citizens of different nation states and the networks which link them (Vertovec and Cohen xx). Multiculturalism is a perspective that respects the

cultural diversity of a pluralistic society. Peter Brooker tends to argue that the diasporic consciousness grows into a multicultural consciousness of 'tolerance and respect for difference' (Brooker 144). In fact, in the process of his journey through trauma, nostalgia, memory, recollection, dislocation, culture shock and desire for relocation and adjustment through torture and humiliation, the diasporic individual is reborn and diasporic identity progresses from the initial sensibility of the expatriate to the culturally shocked sensibility of an immigrant culminating in the assimilating outlook of the diaspora finally embracing the melting pot theory or the theory of multiculturalism which recognizes homogeneity amidst heterogeneity. In the process, far from being homeless, the multicultural diaspora finally finds 'several homes' (Parekh 106).

The dislocated diasporas constantly negotiate their 'attachment' and 'detachment' to the homeland and the host land(s). Sense of oscillation between the desire to re-embrace native land / culture and inability to leave the host land/culture pervades their whole psyche. Their predicament results from their association to both lands/cultures. As regard their association to host land, it is noticed that despite their attempts to assimilate with the people of the host country, they may still be put in the periphery. Again, although with their 'homeland orientation' they try to reclaim root through revisit, there is 'no coming back' except in memory. They are associated to both and yet belong to neither. They desire both, yet can accept neither. Sometimes they are put in the periphery by both lands since they lack any 'say' in all key resolutions of both the lands. They inhabit both lands (one psychically and the other physically), but are inhibited by both. Trapped in such dichotomies, the diasporas are forced to find their own space to (re-)construct their identity. They now identify themselves with what Bhaba calls the third space and the diaspora achieves the identity of a hybrid, transnational and multicultural individual.

Diaspora's rebirth as a trans-cultural, multicultural and transnational individual points to his respect for different cultures and allegiance to various nations as well. The broadness of vision with

appreciation, interaction, assimilation and promotion of multiethnic thoughts against monoculturalism speaks for a virtual rebirth of the diasporic self. To be precise, journey of the culturally shocked diaspora from the state of dislocation to that of a transnational-multicultural-hybrid-resurrected self speaks volumes for diasporic success as against all odds of alienation and marginalization, fluidity and instability. The present paper explores how Ondaatje highlights the issue of diasporic rebirth through a depiction of hybridity, transnationality and multiculturalism in his fictional work *The Cat's Table* (2011).

Interpretation: To start with, Ondaatje's diasporic individuals rise above the trauma of dislocation from the homeland and marginalization in the host country. The author depicts this 'rise' and reconstruction of identity through a variety of means ranging from birth and blood, i.e. lineage, to linguistic aspects; from 'diasporic moves' as theorized by different scholars to the very artistry of his presentation, i.e. the act of writing. He has negotiated both the essentialist and the postmodernist views to reconstruct the identity of the diaspora. He has also appropriated the concepts of translation of identity, hybridity, transnationality and multiculturalism in his own unique way. He has taken into account both the socio-physical and psycho-cultural aspects to assert the hybrid-transnational identity of the diasporic individuals. Yet on the whole and true to P. Kivisto's explanation of transnational immigrant community, Ondaatje's diasporic individuals are concerned with 'space rather than place' (5).

The Cat's Table depicts negotiation of identity in the third space. The sea voyage from Sri Lanka to England turns out to be the third space of identity formation which also comes as a sort of paradise for the protagonist Michael and his friends Ramadhin and Cassius. Construction of trans-cultural identity in the face of ever fluid nature of postmodern identity has been addressed in the growth of the protagonist. The transactions among the passengers diversified by class, gender, profession and politico-legal relationships (e.g. of the night walking prisoner) points to the dynamics of negotiation of identity. Michael's associations, level

of attachments and his transformations and translations of identity on the physical, cultural and social levels explain the trans-cultural nature of his identity. Parallel to Michael's physical growth, the author has delineated his mental development and achievement in social and cultural arena. From Michael to the adventurous Mynah and the later Michael as a writer of intellectual depth, the protagonist makes a virtual journey of identity negotiation and (re)construction.

The protagonist Michael's diasporic rebirth is depicted in the act of his nicknaming. His nickname Mynah takes its name from the starling birds found in the south and the eastern Asian regions. This particular bird like the parrot has the power to imitate human language. The protagonist's experience on board the ship can be equated to the imitation of language by the bird. Notably the comparison points to a more significant aspect and that is the rebirth of the diasporic self. In fact, definition of diaspora as a 'migratory bird' (Kalsey 40) itself equates the rise of the bird from the ground to the rebirth of the diasporic self. Moreover, the bird mynah with its characteristics representing any starling bird stands for mongrelization and Michael's nickname for that matter signifies the aspect of mongrelization which even the author claims for him self -"I am a mongrel of race, of class, of gender..." (McCrum). To be precise, Michael's nickname has been contrived and constructed to symbolize his hybrid/mongrelized identity.

Michael like immigrants everywhere negotiates his identity in the in-between world of the known and the unknown, i.e. between home and foreign. His in-between status is viewed in both geographical and personal level. Geographically with his presence on board the ship proceeding from the east to the west, he is in-between countries -Sri Lanka and England. During the journey Ondaatje off and on makes the reader conscious of their geographic in-betweenness. For instance, during one visit to Emily, Michael says, "We are still in the Red Sea. We went past Jeddah." (153). Such references point to his awareness of his physical in-between status. In fact Michael's physical in-between status has been stated time and again in

his references to the ship's crew, the captain's orders, the visits made by him to the turbine room and different decks and the journey by the Mediterranean. Later on, when the adult writer Michael relates his journey by sea, he becomes the very spokesperson of his life's story. To do these he locates his state back in such a time and place that he is neither 'here and now', nor 'there and then', but in-between.

What is more important is Michael's personal sense of 'in-betweenness'. In his personal level, he is in-between the stage of childhood and adulthood. The sea is his rite of passage to adulthood since experiences on board the ship translate and transform his very character. The centrality of focus makes the on-board Michael experience his hybrid third space. His rejoice at the opportunity to escape the order of his childhood life combined with his reinvention of himself signifies his in-betweenness. This is succinctly brought out in his wild thoughts. He thought of the wild boy's nature in him. In fact, this 'first recollection' of his youth as 'someone startled' and 'half formed' means that he 'had not become anyone or anything yet' (115). That he was in the process of 'becoming' has been implied in his character. That the protagonist has not formed a stable identity inversely states his feeling of in-betweenness of fact and fiction as well as thought and reality.

The sea voyage turns out to be a Trishanku's paradise for Michael and his cohorts Ramadhin and Cassius who enjoy self-imposed liberties to all magnetic spaces on the ship. The childish activities such as entering secretly into the first class deck prohibited to them, smoking the canes taken away from furniture and smuggling of a dog onto the ship project the heavenly bliss they enjoyed. With postcolonial human movement to the imperial west that promises the bliss of opportunity and prosperity, the west becomes a symbol of 'earthly paradise' for the newly freed nations and the journeys towards them become journeys to paradise. Michael and his friends' journey has been motivated by the promise of better career in England. Their journey figuratively depicts Trishanku's upward movement to heaven. In the Indian myth Trishanku suffered the thunder/attack

of Indra, the king of Heaven and had to move back towards the earth and a paradise had been created for them. In the novel, Michael the writer moves back in memory to his childhood voyage and thus balances Trishanku's act of return. Again, just as Trishanku did not drop down to earth, Michael the writer is not so much concerned with his homeland as his activities and experiences on the 'Oronsay'. His excitement at the very 'grandeur of the ocean liner' points to its incomparable heavenly beauty. He says that he 'could never have imagined the grandeur of the castle, (i.e. the ship) that was cross the sea' (7). To be precise, the metaphor of Trishanku's in-between space fits into with the sea voyage as it is in-between the two spaces of 'home' and 'host' / the east and the west.

Michael has a space in-between his friends. Hence his character has to be seen vis-a-vis to these two close friends. It is a significant fact that the character Cassius also stands for certain hybridity. His very name is the result of a mixture of 'classical first names with Sinhalese last names' (51). Since the classical Roman character Cassius was a conspirator, rebellious nature of Cassius of the novel is immediately implied and this has been proved in his instigating nature. But unlike the classical conspirator, Michael's friend does not act in a mean spirited way. In fact, Cassius' (of the novel) extrovert, exuberant and outspoken traits are well established by his acts and behaviour. His rebellious nature identical to the classical conspirator and his high spirited action unlike the Roman provides a sort of hybridity to his character. His hybrid personality is stated by Michael too when he states that in Cassius there was a mixture of 'stubbornness and kindness' (54). Since Michael, in his own confession, can 'never unlearn the whisper of Cassius' (55), he can be said to be greatly influenced by Cassius' hybrid personality traits too.

Michael's other close friend Ramadhin too bears certain complex personality traits. Zoon and Herbert observe that with a quiet intelligence, he is 'the calmest and clearest thinking of the three boys' (19). He is described to be physically weak. His name which in fact is an Indian surname refers to his reserved and secretive nature. This is well established in his act of smuggling of the dog aboard

the Orsony that mortally bit Sir Hector de Silva. But his infatuation with Heather Cave, the fourteen year girl to whom he was a tutor, certainly contests his description as the calmest and clearest thinking person. He was too innocent in contrast to the 'worldly' Heather Cave (204). So Ramadhin cannot be said to take a calm and judicious decision regarding his relationship to Cave who felt no remorse even though Ramadhin had to lose his life for her. Again, although he had the 'natural sensitivity and intelligence to be an artist' (199), he only became a tutor. These diverse traits contribute to Ramadhin's complex personality traits. More over as a diaspora he had a tormented self as he is transnational in the physical sense only and felt awkward in the face of new situations. To be precise, in spite of his complex, and for that matter hybrid, personality traits, Ramadhin is not a 'reborn diaspora'- a fact endorsed by his very death.

As a character Michael is in-between his two close friends. He does possess certain traits of both his friends and for that matter he turns out to be a 'mongrelized' self. He on the whole is identical to neither of them but remains in between. Ramadhin stands for kindness and quiet intelligence, whereas with his name linked to the Roman conspirator Cassius he also signifies cruel rebelliousness. Cassius in fact had been notorious at school for misadventures like the locking up of the boarding house master in the toilet which was his way of protesting against the deplorable condition of the school lavatories. Michael's act of formation of a 'gang' with these characters projects his commonalities with them and for that matter his hybrid character. His physical and intellectual levels are between the two friends. Ramadhin is physically weak with asthmatic and heart problems, whereas Cassius is jovial and energetic. Ramadhin was cautious, careful and level headed, whereas Cassius was wild and carefree. Since both these close friends had ample influences on him, Michael achieves a certain hybridity.

Michael's association to the two friends on land after the great sea voyage points to his diasporic hybridity. By becoming a writer, Michael 'rises' to the position of a creator just as the other friend Cassius turns up a painter. His dedication of

the book 'The Voyage of the Mynah' can be read as a way of acknowledging the painter. Both of them have seen the stage of diasporic rebirth. On the other hand, his acknowledgement that Ramadhin 'allowed him affection' (183) and his desire to 'give something' to Ramadhin and help him in difficult situations (183) point to his deep sense of love for the friend. It is out of this love and desire to stay close to a community from his native land that he gets married to Ramadhin's sister. The author shows that Michael like Ramadhin really could not get fully assimilated to the host land. Ramadhin's death figuratively points to the dying sense in Michael. The phenomena of loss and death represented by Ramadhin and of gain and rebirth represented by Cassius get a fine mixture in the character of the protagonist. As two selves of Michael, the two friends project his hybrid identity only.

Just as Michael's association with Ramadhin and Cassius makes his character hybrid, the diverse characters on board equip him with trans-cultural/multicultural sense. The transformation and translation he undergoes under the influence of or for the association with the various onboard characters contribute to the formation of his multicultural sense. He has to negotiate the sense of 'tolerance' – an essential trait of multiculturalism (Brooker 144) when he is put at the least important dining table. He rises from this as he later states that he is 'no longer at the cat's table' (353). The kind treatment of Mr. Hastie the man in charge of the animals on board who shared his (Michael's) room, and who in off time played cards in the room but careful enough that Michael's sleep is not disturbed makes him realize the importance of tolerance.

In much the same way, the ship was filled with different categories/class of people and there was an undercurrent of racism lurking among them. The captain's insult to Cassius as 'a loathsome little Asian Polecat' (130) is an instance of racism in work on board. Michael notices such differences from the very start of the journey. His entry to various sections of the ship symbolically means his trans-cultural sojourns. He is made to realize the differences existing among the whole crew. The journey consists of a medley of characters from the

spinster Miss Lasqueti to Miss Emily, the free spirit; from the reserved tailor Mr. Gunasekera to the gossiping Flavia Prins. Michael's association to these people gave him not only a sense of variety, but also taught him to 'respect and endure' the differences. In fact, the voyage becomes a site for cultural assimilation through negotiations between its various dualities – self /other, inside/outside, familiar/strange and center/periphery. Paul Gilroy's image of the ship as a space of transnationality and multiculturalism is aptly applicable here. While negotiating various aspects of cultural identity, Michael the narrator, allegorically the author, becomes the voice of the migrants.

As the spokesperson of the diverse migrants Michael insightfully depicts their problems and threats, prospects and transitions. With his assignment to the cat's table, he becomes a representative of those so-called least important migrants. He is their voice since he penetrates into the psychic workings of the characters. It is through the lens of Michael that migrants on board come before the reader. Ondaatje's use of the two voices of the child and the adult provides him opportunities to deal with issues related to the migrants. With the child voice, he jumps into the future and discovers what would happen to the characters and with the adult voice, he looks back at Mynah the adventurous character. In fact, he provides a hybrid voice to the narrative. In an interview, he clearly states that he 'had to allow ... a voice that allowed both an adult and a child's perceptions' (Geiger n.pag). With this doubling of voice he depicts Michael's character. As for instance, Michael as a passenger on the ship was enamoured by the 'unusual and interesting' stories (78) of Fonseka, but as a young writer he 'feared his response' (199). His dual feelings speak for the diverse diasporic experiences. As a child he foresees Fonseka's probable 'embarrassments' over pronunciation when he would act as a teacher in England and retrospectively he peeps into his (Fonseka's) views on Ramadhin who was supposed to possess the 'natural sensitivity and intelligence to be an artist' (199). In a figurative way, Michael stands for diverse sensitivities of the migrants like Fonseka. Added to this, due to the

multidimensionality of time and continuous redefining of identity, Michael's voice becomes dynamically multiple, hybrid and trans-cultural.

Conclusion: Ondaatje in *The Cat's Table* unites the differences of age, gender, class and race; the east and the west as well as the painful and the pleasant. He also highlights the contribution of ordinary people in the development of an individual and construction of his/her identity. Despite undergoing losses Ondaatje's characters progress with time and expand their socio-cultural dimensions. The development and achievement of Michael as writer and the fame of Cassius as a painter are symbolic of the reconstruction of their identity as re-born diasporas. While inhabiting two diverse worlds, Michael achieves a certain in-betweenness, hybridity and multicultural sense. Initial losses are erased from life/memory or replaced by hopeful future. The 'hope' leads to a rebirth that embraces the trans-cultural sense. To be precise, in *The Cat's Table*, Ondaatje delineates diasporic rebirth as a hybrid, trans-national and multicultural individual.

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