

Identity and the Inhabited Past: A Thematic Literature Review of Cultural Trauma and Hybridity in Michael Ondaatje's Fictional Worlds

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How to cite this paper: Qiuya, C., Bahar, I. B., Termizi, A. A., & Amin, H. Md. (2026). Identity and the Inhabited Past: A Thematic Literature Review of Cultural Trauma and Hybridity in Michael Ondaatje's Fictional Worlds. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 16, 150-169. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2026.162011>

Received: February 6, 2026

Accepted: March 30, 2026

Published: April 2, 2026

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Abstract

This literature review synthesises critical scholarship on cultural trauma, hybridity, and identity across three major literary works by the contemporary Canadian author, Michael Ondaatje, namely *Running in the Family* (1982), *The English Patient* (1992), and *Anil's Ghost* (2000). Drawing on the trauma theory, post-colonial studies, and hybridity frameworks, the review maps recurring analytical threads in existing research, including narrative fragmentation, diasporic memory, and the ethical representation of violence. The review identifies how scholars conceptualise Ondaatje's fictional worlds as sites where personal and collective histories intersect through layered temporalities and spectral presences of the past. While a significant body of criticism acknowledges Ondaatje's contribution to discussions on identity formation and cultural displacement, gaps remain, particularly in comparative cross-novel studies and in integrated approaches combining trauma theory with hybridity. This assessment evaluates these scholarly trends, highlights methodological limitations, and proposes further research directions that foreground transnational identity and the relationship between memory, history, and narrative form.

Keywords

Cultural Trauma, Diasporic Memory, Hybridity, Identity, Michael Ondaatje

1. Introduction

Michael Ondaatje, born on 12 September 1943 and a recipient of the Booker Prize in 1992, is widely regarded as one of the most distinguished Canadian novelists of

his generation. His experiences of migration and diasporic life provide rich material for his writing. As opined, Ondaatje's writing is imbued with intense emotional resonance, foregrounding the relational and shared dimensions of affect (Zepetnek de Tóthósy, 2005). Ondaatje has established a reputation as a skilled historian and war storyteller, capturing human perplexity, contradiction, and struggle within sweeping historical forces. His multicultural background has endowed him with a heightened sensitivity to questions of identity, both as an insider and an outsider, and this permeates his work. His novels frequently feature characters who resist stable forms of citizenship and operate beyond the limits of legal and national frameworks (Brittan, 2006).

Ondaatje's life experiences have prompted him to recognise the disparities between the First and Third Worlds, a realisation that has helped spark his creative vision. His first poetry collection, *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), published when he was twenty-four, was an immediate success. As a young writer, he transformed the social injustices he witnessed into strange and startling poetic symbols. *The Man with Seven Toes* appeared two years later, followed by *Rat Jelly* (1973), a collection exploring the complex psychological states of modern individuals. After committing himself fully to writing, he shifted towards prose and published his first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, in 1976.

In 1987, he released *In the Skin of a Lion*, which vividly depicts immigrant life in Toronto and secured his reputation in North American literature. *The English Patient* (1992), now considered his masterpiece, earned him the Booker Prize, the Governor General's Award in 1992 and the Trillium Award in 1993. *Anil's Ghost* (2000) returns the novelistic setting to Sri Lanka, while *The Cat's Table* (2011), his most recent novel, fictionalises his childhood voyage from Ceylon to England and traces twenty-one days of formative experience. Ondaatje's international reputation places him alongside major Canadian authors, and his hybrid background often leads critics to frame him as a post-colonial writer. However, his fiction persistently unsettles fixed labels and expectations, moving beyond reductive representations of Sri Lanka to construct more expansive literary worlds (Mukherjee, 1985).

As one of the few Asian writers whose work appeals strongly to Western audiences, Ondaatje's emergence signifies a broadening of the English literary canon rather than a threat to its traditions. As a minority writer, he resists being confined to any single category. His style is distinguished by formal experimentation associated with postmodern narrative techniques, coupled with a pronounced lyrical intensity (Hammill, 2007). For Ondaatje, fiction functions as a kind of performative disguise through which the writer adopts a mask and enters the narrative performance, enabling thoughts and emotions to be articulated with precision and intensity, much like a dramatic soliloquy (Dafoe & Ondaatje, 1997). Novel writing, thus, becomes an act of self-revelation, and readers inevitably encounter traces of the author in his fiction.

Given his nomadic life and hybrid lineage, identity and diaspora naturally be-

come central themes in his work. His literary identity defies simple categorisation, whether Canadian, British, or Sri Lankan, yet Ondaatje himself offers clarity: “I feel Canadian. As a writer I feel very Canadian. I became a writer here” (Wachtel, 1994, p. 258). Canada’s colonial past, linguistic tensions, and negotiations between localism and internationalism shape its literary field and provide fertile ground for writers like Ondaatje. Compared to contemporaries, such as Alice Munro (1931-2024), Austin Clarke (1934-2016), Margaret Atwood (b. 1939), and Douglas Coupland (b. 1961), Ondaatje’s writing exhibits a distinctive combination of emotional depth, linguistic precision, and formal innovation; what he terms “heart and skills” (Ondaatje & Bush, 1990, p. 97). He infuses his stories with confusion, emotion, experience, and history, cultivating deep emotional bonds with his characters.

In his interview with Eleanor Wachtel in 1994, Ondaatje observes that writing connects personal experience with broader historical currents that extend far beyond the present era. He believes fiction is inherently intimate, and while writing, he often feels as if he has known his characters for years; an insight that helps explain the distinctive atmosphere of his novels. Ondaatje maintains that, by presenting personal and intricate versions of experience, novels can record unofficial stories and assume a more enduring political significance (Ondaatje & Bush, 1990). For Ondaatje, the novelist bears a responsibility distinct from that of journalists or poets: to render both society and personal experience with complexity and distinction.

Alongside figures, such as V. S. Naipaul (1932-2018), J. M. Coetzee (b. 1940), Salman Rushdie (b. 1947), and Kazuo Ishiguro (b. 1954), Ondaatje is considered an influential voice in contemporary English literature. Although many diaspora writers draw inspiration from their displacement, Ondaatje’s hybrid identity, shaped by movement from Ceylon to Britain and then Canada, deepens his reflections on belonging and selfhood. Ondaatje’s texts are concerned not only with historical content but also with meta-history itself. Wars, colonialism, massacres, and migrations are recurring elements in his writing.

Spinks, in his comprehensive study of Ondaatje, revises the conventional view of him as merely a postmodern or post-colonial writer, contending instead that:

“Michael Ondaatje is a fabulist, a dealer in myths, an inventor of haunting poetic images and uncanny fictional worlds... landscapes that unsettle our historical sense... and call into question the moral image of humanity.” (Spinks, 2013, p. 15)

In Ondaatje’s novels, history unfolds like an illuminated scroll, prompting readers to revisit the past, interrogate truth, and explore questions of identity, a critical research problem which has also been examined in diasporic fiction by Chinese-American authors (Shamsuddin & Bahar, 2020; Shamsuddin et al., 2021). His postmodern poetics, namely fragmentation, collage, temporal instability, are evident throughout his work. As McVey (2014) explains, Ondaatje’s use of disrupted temporal sequencing and fragmented narrative form combines modernist dis-

junction with postmodern flexibility, operating as a literary mode of traumatic witnessing.

Across his literary works, including eight novels and the fictionalised memoir *Running in the Family*, identity remains an inescapable theme. His protagonists often grapple with crises of selfhood, earning him recognition as a ‘borderless’ writer. His novels traverse Canada, Britain, America, Italy, Sri Lanka, and Egypt, mirroring the diasporic nature of his own identity. Living in the shadows of war, exile, and upheaval, his characters persistently search for their true selves. The emotional resonance and imaginative force of his fiction continue to inspire readers. As [Krishnan \(2014\)](#) affirms, Ondaatje’s significant contribution to South Asian-Canadian diasporic literature has firmly established him as a leading figure among diaspora writers. Similarly, [Pujolràs-Noguer and Hand \(2024\)](#) identify Ondaatje and M. G. Vassanji (b. 1950) as among the most prominent contemporary writers in English, whose literary works intertwine trauma, displacement, and the quest for return. Ondaatje challenges readers to rethink the stories we tell about ourselves and the world, making his novels not only artistic achievements but catalysts for intellectual and emotional reflection.

Ondaatje has been widely studied for his innovative narrative techniques, cross-cultural identities, and in-depth explorations of trauma and memory. His works often traverse geographical, temporal, and psychological borders, reflecting his own diasporic positioning and the complexities of post-colonial modernity. Among his extensive literary works, three texts, namely *Running in the Family*, *The English Patient*, and *Anil’s Ghost*, have received sustained scholarly attention for their examinations of fragmented identity, cultural trauma, and the persistent haunting of the past.

In this study, several key concepts are operationalised to guide the analysis. Cultural trauma refers to the representation of collective suffering, such as war, colonial violence, and civil conflict, that significantly reshapes communal memory and identity within the narrative. Hybridity is understood as the condition in which characters occupy liminal cultural, racial, linguistic, or national positions, often navigating multiple and overlapping identities. Meanwhile, identity formation denotes the narrative processes through which characters negotiate their sense of belonging, particularly through experiences of memory, naming, displacement, and ethical action across shifting cultural and historical contexts.

This review aims to map the critical landscape surrounding these themes, offering a systematic synthesis of existing research. While many studies have examined the research problems of individual novels, fewer have undertaken a comparative thematic review across Ondaatje’s major literary works. This study, therefore, asks:

How have scholars interpreted the intersections of hybridity, cultural trauma, and identity formation in Ondaatje’s key novels, and what gaps remain in the current body of research?

The objective here is to evaluate how critical discourse has shaped our under-

standing of Ondaatje's contribution to post-colonial literature and to identify areas where future scholarship might be expanded.

2. Method of the Literature Review

This review synthesises peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, edited volumes, and theses written and published between 1985 and 2025. The search focused on scholarship related specifically to hybridity, trauma, identity, narrative structure, post-colonialism, and memory in Ondaatje's fiction. The inclusion criteria for this study consist of scholarly works that have explicitly examined issues of identity, cultural trauma, and hybridity, particularly those situated within diasporic or post-colonial theoretical frameworks. In addition, studies that have engaged with narrative fragmentation as a literary strategy are also considered relevant. Only research that focuses on any of the three selected novels is included, and the scope is limited to English-language academic materials to ensure consistency in analytical and theoretical discourse.

A thematic synthesis methodology was employed for this review. Rather than organising the research chronologically, the analysis identifies conceptual clusters that recur across the existing scholarship. Three major thematic groupings emerged: hybridity and the fluid self; cultural trauma and the burden of history; as well as identity formation shaped by memory, narrative gaps, and the presence of haunting. This approach enables the identification of deeper patterns within the critical discourse and facilitates meaningful cross-textual comparisons among the selected studies.

The literature search was conducted using several major academic databases and search engines, including Scopus, Web of Science, MLA International Bibliography, Google Scholar, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. A series of targeted search strings were used to locate relevant studies, such as "Michael Ondaatje" AND hybridity, "Michael Ondaatje" AND "cultural trauma," "Running in the Family" AND diaspora AND identity, "The English Patient" AND post-colonial AND trauma, and "Anil's Ghost" AND civil war AND memory. The screening process followed several stages. First, an initial keyword search was conducted covering publications from 1985 to 2025. The results were then refined through the removal of duplicate records. This was followed by title and abstract screening to identify potentially relevant sources. Selected articles subsequently underwent a full-text eligibility review, and the final set of studies was included based on their thematic relevance to the research focus.

3. Thematic Overview in Selected Novels by Michael Ondaatje

Scholarship on Ondaatje's fiction commonly converges around several interconnected thematic concerns, particularly history and narrative reconstruction, memory and fragmentation, hybridity and liminal identity, and ethics, love, and human responsibility. Ondaatje's novels are widely recognised for their lyrical

prose, fragmented narrative structures, and deep engagement with universal human experiences shaped by historical upheaval, displacement, and the fragility of memory. Rather than presenting linear or authoritative histories, Ondaatje reconstructs the past through fragments, silences, and competing perspectives, thereby emphasising the instability of historical truth. Historical events often function as narrative backdrops, as seen in *The English Patient*, which is set during the Second World War, and *Anil's Ghost*, which centres on the Sri Lankan civil war. However, Ondaatje's focus lies less in historical documentation than in the imaginative re-configuration of history, blending fiction with documentary traces to reveal the lived and contested nature of the past while foregrounding voices frequently marginalised in official historical accounts (Wachtel, 1994).

Closely linked to this reconstruction of history is the role of memory, which Ondaatje depicts as fragmented, subjective, and shaped by trauma. Memory in his fiction does not function as a stable archive of the past but as a shifting and incomplete process through which both personal and collective histories are mediated. Characters often struggle with fractured recollections that destabilise their identities, as illustrated by the amnesiac protagonist Almásy in *The English Patient*, whose identity gradually emerges through disjointed memories. Similarly, in *Anil's Ghost*, the investigation of an unidentified skeleton becomes a means of uncovering suppressed histories of violence while demonstrating how civil conflict reshapes collective memory. Through such narrative strategies, Ondaatje challenges the notion of a singular recoverable past and highlights the constructed nature of historical knowledge.

Another central theme in Ondaatje's work is hybridity and liminal identity, reflecting the fluid and transnational dimensions of cultural belonging. As a writer shaped by diasporic experience, Ondaatje frequently portrays characters who inhabit in-between cultural, national, and linguistic spaces. These individuals negotiate unstable identities within contexts of migration, displacement, and cultural hybridity. Naming becomes a crucial marker of identity in this process. In *The English Patient*, Almásy's ambiguous identity symbolises exile and erasure, while in *Anil's Ghost*, the act of identifying and naming the skeleton represents both an ethical responsibility and an attempt to restore dignity to silenced victims. Identity formation in Ondaatje's fiction is also closely linked to trauma, as characters attempt to reconstruct fractured selves after experiences of war and displacement. As Krishnan (2014) observes, diasporic writing frequently engages with trauma as an integral component of identity formation, a pattern clearly evident in Ondaatje's narratives.

Finally, Ondaatje's fiction engages deeply with questions of ethics, love, and human responsibility, particularly in contexts of violence and historical crisis. His characters are often confronted with moral dilemmas that test the limits of compassion, loyalty, and survival. Love in Ondaatje's novels frequently appears as unconventional or transgressive, yet it functions as a powerful redemptive force that transcends boundaries of nationality, class, and morality. For instance, the illicit

relationship between Almásy and Katharine Clifton in *The English Patient* offers fleeting solace amid the devastation of war, while emotional bonds formed in *Anil's Ghost* provide moments of connection and ethical purpose within a landscape of violence. Through these depictions, Ondaatje affirms the resilience of human relationships and the possibility of ethical engagement even in times of profound historical crisis. Collectively, these thematic concerns demonstrate how Ondaatje's fiction intertwines history, memory, identity, and ethical reflection, positioning storytelling as a vital means of understanding the complexities of the human condition.

4. Michael Ondaatje in Literary Scholarship

4.1. Hybridity, Historical Memory, and the Critical Reception of *Running in the Family*

As a diasporic and transnational writer, Ondaatje's historical reimagining of Sri Lanka has generated sustained critical attention and debate. Some critics have questioned his ethical and political positioning, arguing that Ondaatje fails to fulfil a perceived obligation to represent his homeland or to confront the complexities of colonial exploitation. In the study "Michael Ondaatje's 'Well-Told Lie'", Bolton (2008), for instance, contends that *Running in the Family* neglects this responsibility, a position stated earlier by Mukherjee (1985) in "The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje and Cyril Dabydeen: Two Responses to Otherness", who accuses Ondaatje of "taking sides with the coloniser" (p. 50). Such critiques frame the text as politically evasive and insufficiently engaged with the legacies of colonial violence.

These readings, however, have been challenged by scholars who caution against reductive expectations placed upon diasporic writers. In "'Sri Lanka' Canadian Poets", Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri (1992) refutes Mukherjee's argument, suggesting that it stems from an "understandable unfamiliarity with Sri Lankan society" (p. 64) and from a tendency to stereotype Ondaatje by reducing his identity to his place of birth without adequate consideration of historical and sociopolitical context. From this perspective, Ondaatje's work is better understood not as an act of political evasion but as a complex negotiation of memory, distance, and belonging characteristic of diasporic subjectivity. Similarly, Davis (1996), in "Imaginary Homelands Revisited in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*", drawing on Salman Rushdie's concept of "imaginary homelands," situates *Running in the Family* within a broader discourse of in-between writing, arguing that the novel's reconstruction of both family and national history is simultaneously "personal and cultural" (p. 267). In this reading, "home" emerges as a central trope that mediates identity formation rather than a fixed geographical or political site. In contrast, Leon (2003) in "Textual Travel: Creating the Homespace and the Search for Belonging in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*", further extends this discussion by examining the ideological tensions embedded in Ondaatje's construction of subjectivity and location, revealing the conflicts inherent in diasporic self-representation.

Ondaatje's hybrid lineage, often positioned ambiguously between Western and Eastern cultural frameworks, has made his work particularly fertile ground for explorations of identity and hybridity. Scholars have repeatedly noted how the uncertainty surrounding Ondaatje's own positionality is projected onto his narratives, producing characters who inhabit liminal and unstable spaces. [Silva \(2002\)](#) in "The Anxiety of Hybridity: Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*", for example, explores the anxiety of hybridity in *Running in the Family* through the symbolic frameworks of theatre and marriage, concluding that "the need for inhabiting multiple identities debunks the nationalist/fundamentalist assertion of a homogeneous national self" (p. 82). While this argument highlights the ideological challenge posed by hybridity, it arguably underplays the affective dimensions of loss and dislocation that accompany mixed origins and diasporic belonging.

Given hybridity's centrality to the novel, several scholars have turned their attention to Ondaatje's experimental narrative strategies. In the study "Stylistic Hybridity: Postmodern Truth Writing in *Running in the Family*", [Liu \(2018\)](#) examines the layered interplay of travelogue, memoir, and fiction, proposing that this hybrid narrative form reflects Ondaatje's postmodern self-awareness and fragmented understanding of history and selfhood. [Spinks \(2013\)](#), in his study, *Michael Ondaatje*, similarly reads *Running in the Family* as a meditation on colonial identity, suggesting that Ondaatje's depiction of Sri Lanka encompasses both pre- and post-Independence politics while bearing witness to the national trauma of post-colonial identity formation. More recently, [Barnwell and Cummins \(2019\)](#), in *Reckoning with the Past: Family Historiographies in Post-colonial Literature*, have explored the dynamics of family memory and diasporic imagination through what they term a 'familia-graphic gaze' while Esther [Pujolràs-Noguer and Hand \(2024\)](#), in *Mourning and Resilience in Indian Ocean Life Writing*, foregrounds the father-son relationship as a site of mourning, remembrance, and genealogical recovery.

In retrospect, the scholarly disagreement as seen in the Mukherjee/Bolton vs Sugunasiri/Davis debate reflects competing expectations of diasporic responsibility: whether the writer must adopt overt political critique or whether affective, fragmented remembrance constitutes an alternative ethical engagement. When viewed through the trauma-hybridity interaction, Ondaatje's narrative suggests that diasporic responsibility operates not through political denunciation but through mediated acts of remembering.

Overall, existing scholarship on *Running in the Family* has predominantly focused on themes of colonial history, identity, and hybridity, with hybridity functioning as a key interpretive framework. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of trauma in shaping identity formation in the text. Few studies have integrated the trauma theory into analyses of diasporic hybridity, and even fewer have examined how these frameworks might intersect. This study seeks to address this critical gap by drawing on the cultural trauma

theory of Alexander (2013) alongside the concept of hybridity by Bhabha (1994) to investigate the fluid and contested processes of identity formation in *Running in the Family*. By bringing trauma and hybridity into dialogue, this study argues that Ondaatje's narrative of return articulates identity not merely as a cultural negotiation but as a traumatically mediated process shaped by memory, loss, and historical rupture.

4.2. Hybridity, War, and the Construction of Identity in *The English Patient*

Early critics of Ondaatje's work describe it as a breakthrough in fiction because it has "absorbent clues and convincing narratives" (Gray, 2000, p. 75). As discussed before, identity is one of the key preoccupations of Ondaatje's study. Emery (2000) takes notice of identity in her study "Call Me by My Name: Personal Identity and Possession in *The English Patient*", proposing that it is the controversy in Almásy's attitude and behaviour which has caused the "the tragic effect of his possessive love" of Catherine. Emery (2000) posits the view that the novel "shows us that while we may seek to remove boundaries from our lives, it is very difficult, if not impossible to move beyond those traditional roles/names that define who we are" (p. 213). The name, or the appellation, as the code, implies the relation and the identification.

From a different perspective, Baker (2008), in "Maps in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*", analyses the fiction from the perspective of deconstructionism to investigate the protagonist Almásy's aspiration for identity "erasure". Baker argues that the nameless is a kind of "erasure", suppressing the identity of all. Meanwhile, Enescu (2012) examines the issue of cultural identity by war in the study "Identity and War in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*". By investigating the connections between the war and the identity construction, Enescu focuses on the violence and death. Through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's identity concept, Enescu (2012) raises the issue of quest for a redefinition of the self within the complex, world-shattering context of war by arguing that "[i]dentity is a construct based on a complex of narrative structures appealing to multiple selves and temporal levels. It is a project subject to the incompleteness of life as such and based on the tridimensional scheme" (p. 211). The interplay between the external environment, war and the movement, and the human interaction shape the identity in this novel. In contrast, Shannon Smyrl decentres the cultural identity under the background of the declined homogenised colonial power in "The Nation as 'International Bastard': Ethnicity and Language in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*" (Smyrl, 2003) and emphasises the necessity to dwell on identity.

Significantly, Chitra Krishnan (2014), makes a careful reading of Ondaatje's novels and investigates the identity issue thorough in her study, *Exploring Identity in the Novels of Michael Ondaatje*. Just as Krishnan mentions in her preface, "[t]he most striking aspect of his works is the underlying search for identity in all of them" (p. 2). In this study, Krishnan explores the diaspora identity issues from

Ondaatje's selected novels and defines the theme of *The English Patient* as unravelling identity. Krishnan sees the novel as "focusing on common struggles like racism, and identity", and "by incorporating a variety of nationalities into the novel during the last stages of the Second World War, Ondaatje investigates the perception of identity through the transient movement of the characters" (p. 167). For Krishnan, the war, as the external element, pushes the four main characters to discover their new identities and reevaluate themselves.

Significantly, Kaur and Bhangu (2013) investigate how Ondaatje, in his works, explores the complex issue of identity and personal experience under the transnational background in "Negotiating Identity and History: Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*". According to Kaur and Bhangu, "Ondaatje's treatment of the immigrant experience questions the colonial construction of race and identity" (p. 15) and the process of identification is never completed but in construction. From the perspective of history and postmodern writing technique, Kaur and Bhangu connect the liaison between Ondaatje's himself and the destiny of characters in the novel.

In addition, Burcar (2004) in "Mapping the Woman's Body in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*" illustrates that, in *The English Patient*, rigid national identities are not merely challenged but also abandoned, giving way to a continuous flow of diverse, ever-changing identities. Meanwhile, the particular nature of a woman's identity, rather than being marginalised and stripped of its socially and symbolically constructed meanings, remains a focus, often discussed in relation to the assumed uniformity of the female body and its officially recognised appearances. Significantly, Bussi (2007) in her study, *Reconstructing Identities and Escaping Trauma in Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient*, probes how identity is reconstructed by lens of post-colonial criticism and new historicism, and points that the novel focuses on human relationships and resists the Eurocentric view.

As a diaspora writer, identity is one of the prominent preoccupations in Ondaatje's works, and his own experiences and his hybrid identity are intermingled and influence his creation. The main characters in *The English Patient* are all displaced people with unstable identities, who are in a quest to discover their own fluid identities from the hybrid lineage although they have undergone different trials and experienced trauma in life. For example, Baker (2008) underlines the traumatic effects of war and the confusion of identity in a colonial framework in her paper. She analyses the process of redefining identity of Kip and re-knowing his religious identity after the racism and traumatic experience. Trauma theory, as an effective lens to study the novel, are used by many scholars. Meanwhile, Visvis (2009) in "Traumatic Representation" applies the "talking cure" of trauma theory to the analysis of the novel, claiming that the communication between the protagonists can be a way to heal trauma. In addition, Babu (2014), in "Dissociating Traumatic Self: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Ondaatje's *The English Patient*", reaffirms the existence of traumatic self in the novel, and argues that the characters reconstruct their identity by escaping the trauma and separate versions of

their old identities. Obviously, with trauma theory under the disciplinary of psychoanalysis, the subjects could reconstruct their identity.

Scholars have employed various angles to probe the identity construction or quest, among which the most frequent and common theories they use are post-colonialism, postmodernism, and historicism. Many critics are inclined to discuss the historical issues in the novel from the angle of post-colonialism. For instance, in “Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and Post-colonial Patience”, Jacob (1997) compares the novel to other Ondaatje works and examines the post-colonialism aspect in the study. In the same vein, Zou (2014) in “An Analysis of *The English Patient* From the perspective of Homi K. Bhabha’s Hybridity Theory” analyses the two main characters Almásy and Kip’s hybridity characteristics with Homi Bhabha’s hybridity theory. More critically, Vuornos (2015), in her study *Post-colonial Cultural Hybridity in The English Patient by Michael Ondaatje*, examines the hybrid cultural experience of the main characters from the perspective of post-colonialism in this novel. Through the concepts of post-colonial alterity, cultural hybridity, and the third space under the interdisciplinary theory of post-colonialism and postmodernism, Vuornos explores the representation of cultural hybridity in the novel and how the cultural hybridity creates the tension. On the other hand, Spinks (2013), as the main author who edits the systematic discussion of Michael Ondaatje from the series of Contemporary World Writers, interprets the novel from various angles. According to Spinks, “Kim’s position as both a type of the colonial subject and an agent of imperial policy recruited into the British Secret Service precipitates a crisis in his identity” (p. 185). The subject’s subject status affects the construction of identity.

More importantly, Ondaatje’s novels often blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, incorporating elements of autobiography and historical events into his fictional narratives. This blurring of genres not only adds to the complexity of his works but also invites readers to question the nature of truth and the reliability of narrative itself. For instance, Barvekar and Bagal (2021), in “Postmodern ‘Metaphor of Reading’ in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*”, interpret the novel using postmodern strategies and also through “the concepts of ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’” (p. 389).

Of Ondaatje’s novels, *The English Patient* is undoubtedly the most well-known and revered one. The fiction explores the problems of the cultural identity, and the influence of colonialism and war upon the characters and reveals their traumatic states in the specific historical time. Although the identity issue is the pivotal theme and research focus, the combination of interdisciplinary methods and the new approaches are needed to be conducted on the scholarship of the novel.

4.3. Political Violence, Traumatic Memory, and Hybrid Identity in Critical Interpretations of *Anil’s Ghost*

Critical engagement with Sri Lanka’s civil war has led many scholars to categorise *Anil’s Ghost* as a political novel, though this classification remains contested. LeClair (2000), in “The Sri Lankan Patients”, criticises Ondaatje for failing to

demonstrate sufficient “understanding and respect” for those who sacrificed themselves for revolutionary causes (p. 33), while Kertzer (2003), in “Justice and Pathos of Understanding in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*”, rejects the novel’s political status altogether, arguing that it offers little in the way of political analysis or concrete solutions (p. 131). In contrast, in “Ethics and Healing: Hospital/ity and *Anil’s Ghost*”, Roberts (2007) defends the text by asserting that it foregrounds “the impossibility of a purely political solution” and, instead, insists on ethical engagement as a necessary means of national healing (p. 962).

Gray (2000), in *Nailed Palms and the Eyes of Gods: Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost is a Stark Successor to The English Patient*, further highlights the “neutrality” of Ondaatje’s language, noting the author’s deliberate avoidance of rigid demarcations between enemies and allies, a stylistic choice that resists ideological polarisation (p. 75). On the other hand, Knowles (2010), in “Sri Lankan “Gates of Fire”: Michael Ondaatje’s Transnational Literature, from *Running in the Family* to *Anil’s Ghost*”, similarly views the novel through a transnational lens, suggesting that Ondaatje reconfigures the politics of the Sri Lankan civil war by situating it within broader global and ethical frameworks. Recent scholarship, such as “An Invented Past: Representation of History in *Anil’s Ghost*” by Lakshmi (2024), consolidates these debates by examining themes including literary cosmopolitanism, diasporic identity, trauma, race, home, and uncertainty, reaffirming the centrality of political controversy in interpretations of the novel.

Beyond political readings, scholars have increasingly focused on the ethical and traumatic dimensions of *Anil’s Ghost*, particularly its portrayal of ordinary characters enduring prolonged violence. Ondaatje’s narrative foregrounds suffering not through spectacle but through intimate and affective encounters. For instance, Staels (2007), in “A Poetic Encounter With Otherness”, drawing on Julia Kristeva’s theory of estrangement, examines repressed emotions and trauma, arguing that ethical connectedness is a prerequisite for characters to escape silence and self-destructive tendencies. In contrast, Burrows (2008), in “The Heterotopic Spaces of Post-colonial Trauma in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*”, critiques the “ethnocentric blindness” of dominant trauma theory, contending that the novel exposes the failure of Western frameworks, including Anil herself, to adequately recognise post-colonial trauma. Xu (2012), in *A Study of Trauma in Anil’s Ghost*, similarly analyses the protagonists’ traumatic symptoms and their attempts to work through violence, while Khoma (2024), in “Unravelling Trauma and Heterotopic Spaces in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*: A Post-colonial Exploration”, explores the relationship between heterotopic spaces and traumatic experience, highlighting how spatial dislocation intensifies psychological rupture.

Ondaatje’s distinctive narrative style, marked by lyrical prose, non-linear structure, and shifting perspectives, has also attracted sustained critical attention. These formal strategies fracture chronology and destabilise narrative authority, mirroring the disintegration of truth in a nation scarred by violence. For example, Venisha and Sreenivasulu (2023), in “Mapping Massacre and Restorative Justice”,

employ the concept of mapping to examine the representation of the civil war, exposing the institutional failures of human rights organisations and the risks faced by their agents. Similarly, Nandha and Reji (2023) in “Haunted by the Past: Understanding History and the Aftermath of War in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*”, analyse how skulls, emotional scars, and suppressed memories symbolise the persistence of unresolved violence, emphasising the coherence of historical representation within fiction and the enduring presence of trauma in the present. Meanwhile, in the study “The Illusion of Truth in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*”, Neupane (2024) argues that Ondaatje’s intricate storytelling foregrounds the “distortion of truth” within a post-colonial landscape, compelling readers to interrogate official histories.

The hybrid and transnational identity of the protagonist Anil has generated another substantial body of scholarship. In the study “Diasporic Cross-Currents in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* and Anita Rau Badami’s *The Hero’s Walk*”, Härtling (2003) investigates the relationship between hybridity and political agency, arguing that Ondaatje presents diaspora in largely ahistorical terms, framing Anil’s nomadic identity as a site of cultural relativism and political limitation. On the other hand, Cook (2004) in “Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*”, adopts a transnational approach to demonstrate how Anil’s fluid identity exposes tensions between national cultures and the ambivalence inherent in multicultural subjectivity. Likewise, in “The Predicaments of Hybrid Identities in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*”, Ai (2013) identifies hybridity as both enabling and constraining, suggesting that it contributes to Anil’s interpersonal disconnection and loss of belonging.

From another view, Sanghera (2004) in “Touching the Language of Citizenship in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*”, examines Anil’s shifting linguistic affiliations as markers of citizenship and identity, while Liu (2015) in ““The Fictional Reality” and Non-Orientalist Narration: Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*”, highlights the mediating role of diasporic writers in bridging Eastern and Western cultural discourses. In addition, Shrestha (2022) in “Transnational Identity in *Anil’s Ghost*”, further explores Anil’s transnational identity by identifying multiple motivations behind her deterritorialised sense of self. In a comparative study, “Issues of Identity in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992) and *Anil’s Ghost* (2000)”, Lo and Diop (2022) argue that war in *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost* functions not merely as a source of trauma but as a catalyst for identity reconstruction.

Taken together, existing scholarship reveals that *Anil’s Ghost* resists singular categorisation as a political, ethical, or trauma novel. Instead, it emerges as a complex literary intervention that intertwines politics, ethics, trauma, narrative form, and hybridity. While critics have examined these dimensions extensively in isolation, fewer studies have addressed how trauma and hybridity operate together to shape political agency and identity formation. This critical intersection remains a productive site for further inquiry.

5. Thematic Cross-Novel Comparative Synthesis

5.1. Naming

Across Ondaatje's works, naming functions as a shifting mechanism of identity, moving from erasure to recovery and finally to nostalgic reconstruction. In *The English Patient*, Almásy's identity is obscured and destabilised through the loss of his name; his burned body and misidentification as "the English patient" symbolise the erasure of personal and national identity during wartime. Naming here becomes a site of absence, reflecting how war dissolves conventional markers of belonging. In contrast, *Anil's Ghost* presents naming as an act of ethical restoration. The forensic effort to identify the skeleton known as "Sailor" transforms naming into a form of justice, restoring dignity to a silenced victim of political violence. Meanwhile, *Running in the Family* approaches naming through genealogical reconstruction. Ondaatje revisits family names as fragments of memory that nostalgically reassemble a personal and cultural past. Together, these texts demonstrate how naming evolves across Ondaatje's works, from the erasure of identity to its forensic recovery, and finally to its nostalgic reconstruction through memory and storytelling.

5.2. Trauma

Trauma in Ondaatje's fiction similarly unfolds across different narrative functions, shifting from psychological rupture to historical exposure and cultural reflection. In *The English Patient*, trauma is primarily internalised and embodied in the figure of Almásy, whose burned body and fragmented memories represent the psychological devastation of war. The novel focuses on intimate emotional trauma experienced by individuals navigating loss and displacement. In *Anil's Ghost*, however, trauma is externalised and politicised through the investigation of wartime atrocities during the Sri Lankan civil war. Here, trauma is not only personal but collective, embedded in national violence and state secrecy. In *Running in the Family*, trauma appears more subtly through colonial history and familial fragmentation, where the narrator reconstructs inherited histories shaped by displacement and diaspora. Across these works, trauma shifts from individual psychological suffering to collective historical violence, and finally to diasporic reflection on inherited pasts.

5.3. Memory

Memory functions as a central narrative structure in Ondaatje's fiction, evolving from fragmented recollection to investigative reconstruction and reflective remembrance. In *The English Patient*, memory is disjointed and unreliable, revealed gradually through Almásy's scattered recollections and stories told by other characters. The narrative structure itself mirrors the instability of memory, emphasising how personal histories emerge through fragments. In *Anil's Ghost*, memory becomes investigative and evidentiary; forensic analysis and historical inquiry attempt to reconstruct suppressed truths about the civil war. Memory here serves as

a means of uncovering hidden violence and confronting collective amnesia. In *Running in the Family*, memory shifts toward reflective reconstruction, where personal anecdotes, myth, and family stories are woven together to recreate a lost homeland. Thus, Ondaatje presents memory across his works as moving from fragmented personal recollection to forensic reconstruction of historical truth, and finally to nostalgic reflection on diasporic identity.

5.4. Hybridity

Hybridity in Ondaatje's fiction emerges through characters who inhabit liminal cultural and national positions, though its narrative function varies across texts. In *The English Patient*, hybridity is embodied in characters such as Kip and Almásy, whose identities transcend fixed national boundaries during wartime, suggesting a cosmopolitan vision that temporarily dissolves political divisions. However, the collapse of this ideal, particularly in Kip's reaction to the atomic bombings, reveals the persistent tensions within colonial power structures. In *Anil's Ghost*, hybridity is represented through Anil herself, a diasporic returnee whose Western training and Sri Lankan origins create a divided cultural identity. Her position highlights the difficulties of negotiating belonging between global and local perspectives. In *Running in the Family*, hybridity appears through autobiographical reflection, where Ondaatje reconstructs his own mixed cultural heritage through memory and storytelling. Across these works, hybridity shifts from cosmopolitan idealism to diasporic tension, and ultimately to retrospective cultural negotiation.

5.5. Ethical Witnessing

Ondaatje's novels also develop a complex exploration of ethical witnessing, tracing how individuals respond to violence, suffering, and historical injustice. In *The English Patient*, ethical witnessing occurs primarily through acts of care and human connection within the isolated wartime villa, where characters such as Hana and Kip respond to suffering through compassion and responsibility. The novel emphasises interpersonal ethics amid global conflict. In *Anil's Ghost*, ethical witnessing becomes explicitly political through forensic investigation and the effort to document human rights abuses. Anil's search for the identity of "Sailor" represents the moral obligation to reveal truth in the face of institutional silence. In *Running in the Family*, witnessing takes the form of narrative remembrance, where storytelling preserves voices and histories that might otherwise disappear. Consequently, ethical witnessing in Ondaatje's fiction evolves from personal acts of care to forensic exposure of injustice, and finally to literary remembrance as moral testimony.

6. Conclusion

This literature review yields three significant findings from existing scholarship on the three selected novels of Michael Ondaatje. First, previous studies have ex-

tensively examined issues of identity, particularly focusing on the hybrid lineage of both Ondaatje and his protagonists. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the fluidity of identity formation across different stages of subjectivity in the selected works. An analysis of the characters' identity construction processes reveals that identity emerges as a dynamic and historically contingent phenomenon rather than a biologically fixed or static condition. Identity formation is shown to evolve across temporal and sociocultural contexts, reflecting shifts in personal experience, historical circumstance, and collective memory.

Second, while trauma has been widely recognised as a defining feature of Ondaatje's characters and is frequently linked to hybrid identity, existing studies tend to conceptualise both trauma and hybridity in predominantly negative terms. In contrast, this study reconceptualises trauma as a constitutive and productive force within the process of identity formation. Rather than functioning solely as a source of fragmentation, trauma facilitates self-reflection and enables characters to negotiate, reconstruct, and ultimately work through their identities. The exploration of identity, thus, becomes a crucial mechanism through which individuals confront, process, and partially heal traumatic experience.

Third, although hybridity and cultural trauma have commonly been understood as outcomes of colonialism and globalisation, often analysed within post-colonial theoretical frameworks, few studies have examined the sustained interaction between these two forces in shaping identity across different subject positions. This study foregrounds the dynamic interplay between hybridity and cultural trauma in producing fluid identities that shift across the paradigms of the enlightenment subject, the sociological subject, and the postmodern subject. By emphasising this continuous interaction, the research moves beyond static or singular models of identity and highlights its evolving and multidimensional nature.

To further strengthen the analytical framework of trauma and hybridity in Ondaatje's fiction, future research may benefit from formulating more testable and comparative research questions that examine how these concepts interact across different texts. For instance, one important question is "how does hybridity condition political witnessing in *Anil's Ghost*, particularly in relation to Anil's diasporic identity and her position between Western forensic discourse and Sri Lankan political realities?". Another line of inquiry is "how does trauma reshape diasporic return narratives in *Running in the Family*; investigating how inherited histories, colonial memory, and familial recollection influence the narrator's reconstruction of cultural belonging?". A further question is "does hybridity intensify or mitigate trauma within transnational subjectivity in *The English Patient*, especially through characters whose identities transcend national boundaries during wartime?". By posing such questions, future scholarship can move beyond descriptive thematic readings toward a more systematic examination of how trauma and hybridity operate together across Ondaatje's novels, thereby opening new avenues for comparative and interdisciplinary research.

A review of existing scholarship on Ondaatje reveals several recurring method-

ological limitations in the form of patterns. First, studies predominantly rely on close textual reading, often focusing on the stylistic and narrative complexities of individual novels. Second, many analyses draw heavily on post-colonial theory, particularly the framework of hybridity associated with Homi Bhabha, to interpret questions of cultural identity and displacement. Third, discussions of trauma frequently adopt psychoanalytic approaches, emphasising memory, repression, and psychological fragmentation as primary interpretive lenses. While these approaches have generated valuable insights, they also reveal certain limitations within the field. Notably, there is limited engagement with Sri Lankan historiography, even in studies of *Anil's Ghost*, which is deeply rooted in the historical realities of the Sri Lankan civil war.

Furthermore, comparative analysis across Ondaatje's novels remains relatively rare, with most studies examining texts in isolation rather than as part of a broader thematic continuum within his oeuvre. These methodological tendencies collectively contribute to an overemphasis on narrative fragmentation and identity crisis while underexploring the dynamic interaction between trauma and hybridity across different works. As a result, the complex ways in which Ondaatje's novels interconnect historical violence, cultural hybridity, and ethical witnessing across multiple narratives remain insufficiently examined.

Throughout this study, the literature review establishes the scope of the study, identifies the research problem, and clarifies the theoretical lens adopted to achieve the research objectives. A review of Ondaatje's literary reputation and critical reception underscores the scholarly significance of his work, as evidenced by sustained critical attention and major literary recognition. These accolades reflect not only Ondaatje's status as a prominent diasporic writer but also the enduring relevance and interpretive richness of his fiction.

By critically examining previous studies of the three selected novels, this review identifies a clear research gap in the integrated analysis of identity through the combined lenses of cultural trauma and hybridity. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes an interdisciplinary approach that reinterprets Ondaatje's novels by foregrounding the transformative power of trauma-hybridity interaction in the construction of fluid identity. As demonstrated in the preceding critical review, this interaction plays a pivotal role in shaping identity across different historical and psychological phases, and thus warrants sustained critical attention.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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