

The Social Eudemonia of Immigrants in ‘The New World’: A Critique of Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*

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ABSTRACT

The process of colonisation has brought about several changes in the socio-cultural condition of the colonised countries as the imperialistic policy of waging wars against the third-world countries induced millions of people to migrate from their homeland to distant lands. In the novel ‘In the Skin of a Lion’, Ondaatje traces the inception of the process of migration to Canada and explicates the condition that leads to the multicultural social and cultural scenario of Canada. Moreover, he portrays the bourgeois tendency of colonisers who utilised the manual labour of the migrants and rarely provided suitable living and working conditions. This article has made a scrupulous study on the interconnection between the socio-cultural condition and the identity of an individual. This study claims that as the stable self represents the psychological wellbeing, individuals should strive hard to maintain their mental health and thereby play a significant role in the social development of the country. Ondaatje insists the government of the countries to acknowledge the contributions of all races and afford healthy living conditions to foster social eudemonia of the immigrants in ‘the new world’. He believes that the discouragement of ghettoisation, violence and racial discrimination would create endearing circumstances for the peaceful coexistence of various cultural groups. He affirms the need for the insistence on the value and dignity of all people regardless of their racial or ethnic origins, language or their religious affiliation.

KEYWORDS: Social Eudemonia, Michael Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion, Canada, Multiculturalism.

The process of colonisation has brought about several changes in the socio-cultural condition of the colonised countries as the imperialistic policy of waging wars against the third-world countries induced millions of people to migrate from their homeland to distant lands. British colonisers employed skilled immigrants from countries like India to work in the British army and made unskilled workers from Canada to work in construction works, tanneries and factories. Ondaatje portrays the bourgeois tendency of the colonisers who utilised the manual labour of the migrants and rarely provided suitable living and working conditions. Moreover, he expounds notions of social and cultural plurality activated in a multicultural environment, which affected both the physical and mental health of the immigrants in the

postmodern world. Hans Bak (2004) in the article entitled ‘Site of Passage: The City as a Place of Exile in Contemporary North-American Multicultural Literature’ states that in the postmodern world, ‘the city becomes a multicultural collage or kaleidoscope – a contested and ever changing site of conflicting voices, cultures and beliefs – it permits itself to be read most effectively as a postmodernist arena of plurality, fluidity, discontinuity and difference, less a static mosaic than an ongoing process of ever-shifting interactions and dialogues between a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. The city becomes the territory where the postmodern drama of irony and indeterminacy – of self, of language – most forcefully plays itself out.’ (p. 285–286).

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In the novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje traces the inception of the process of migration to Canada and explicates the condition that leads to the multicultural social and cultural scenario of Canada. He posits that Canada has a long history of immigration where the political unrest in European countries like Macedonia, Italy, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Bulgaria led to a phenomenal increase in the influx of immigrants during the inter-war years. It is the creation of nation states out of the former empires in Central and Eastern Europe that ensued in the persecution of minority groups. Political activists, national guerrillas and freedom fighters in Bulgaria, Turkey and Serbia were tortured and expelled from the country as large-scale conflicts began to emerge in these countries. Millions of people who were left homeless and stateless sought Canada as a country of asylum. The immigrants in Ondaatje's novel like Daniel Stoyanoff, Nicholas Temelcoff and Ambrose Small migrated to Canada so as to escape the religious, racial and political persecution in their homeland. Lack of economic opportunities and famine also prompted many immigrants to move out of their European homeland.

The colonial government in Canada encouraged immigrants with numerous economic prospects. They encouraged immigration to their colonies in Canada as an integral part of their trade and economic development. The ships that brought migrating European labour to the colonies in search of land and work, carried fur, fish and timber back to Europe on their return trips. Canada became the country of adoption for people of varied ethnic groups. A major proportion of inhabitants of the country was either immigrants or could trace their ancestry back to immigrants.

Ondaatje evinces that the booming economic prospects of Canada attracted political refugees from various European countries. They believed that they could become wealthy by the wide-scale opportunities available in the country. Immigrants who settled in the country played a significant role in shaping Canadian identity and history. They became integral to the social, economic and political fabric of the country, but Canadian officials lacked effective policy tools, such as long-term economic

incentives and safe working environments to encourage permanent immigration.

Ondaatje reiterates that everything in the country was both rich and dangerous, 'You went in as a sojourner and came back wealthy' (44). He exposes the dangers faced by immigrants in Canada by relating the story of Daniel Stoyanoff, who bought a farm in his homeland with the compensation he received for losing an arm during an accident in a meat factory. He sacrificed his arm for the sake of work. His body became livid on the killing floors, 'standing in two inches of cow blood, screaming like nothing as much as cattle, his arm gone, his balance gone' (44).

Stoyanoff was content with the money he received from his employers and settled with his wife. His story was told to all children of the region at a certain age and he became a hero to them 'Look, he would say, stripping off his shirt in the Oschima high street, irritating the customers of Petroff's outdoor bar once more, *look at what a good tailor Dedora was – no hint of stitches*. He drew an imaginary line around his good shoulder and the kids brought their eyes up close . . . and saw the alternative, the grotesque stump' (45). He was proud of his accomplishments and did not care about the losses he met in his life in Canada. He felt 'As if his arm had been a dry cow he had fooled the Canadians with' (44).

Ondaatje explicates the plight of the refugees like Temelcoff who escaped the political unrest of their countries by immigrating to Canada. Temelcoff was 25 years old when a war in the Balkans began to disrupt the normal living conditions of the people. He led his life in the most impoverished conditions as he was not supplemented with sufficient amount of food and clothes. He decided to escape from his homeland as his village was burnt in the midst of the war. He migrated without any passport since he was not in a position to afford the cost for a first- or second-class ticket. He perilously crossed the borders of different nations like Switzerland and France before reaching Canada. He sought the help of ship captains and in fact bribed them to carry him over to 'the new world' (54).

Temelcoff and his friends travelled in the most unhygienic conditions. They slept in the basement of boats that were filled with the most dangerous insects. They faced the most daunting problems of dealing with diseases and destitution among those who arrived in the country. The filthiness of the boats made them susceptible to various diseases. They felt suffocated by the dismal atmosphere of thick smoky compartments and longed for a gasp of fresh air, 'They slept in the basement of a deserted factory, doing nothing, just trying to keep warm. . . . They were six or seven days in the factory basement, unaware of time' (45). They were delirious during the course of their journey as they were afflicted by all forms of fever. They witnessed the death of their close companions, but they sustained their life by keeping themselves warm until they reached Canada. They took whatever they needed from the sacks of their fellow companions who died to prolong their journey. They endured unending trauma with the belief that they could attain their dream of partaking in the blooming prospects of a new country.

Temelcoff reached Canada without any knowledge of the socio-political scenario of the country and was bewildered by the zeitgeist of the new country. He was accommodated in customs sheds along with immigrants from other countries. The steerage passengers expressed a sense of relief as they entered Canada; they 'put down their baggage by the outdoor taps near the toilets. They stripped naked and stood in front of each other and washed the dirt off with cold water and a cloth, working down the body' (46). They were subjected to a series of medical examinations. The doctors allowed them to continue over the border only when they satisfied the medical prerequisites and turned away those who suffered from communicable diseases. Those immigrants who passed the inspection made their way to farms, mines, forests or other places of employment in Canada's heartland.

The Canadian government initially aimed at attracting agriculturalists to Western Canada, but the growing demands for labourers in Canadian railway companies, manufacturers and resource-extraction industries prompted them to admit an increasing number of unskilled

and skilled labours from foreign countries. Nicholas initially worked in a Macedonian bakery. He was paid seven dollars a month with food and sleeping quarters. He sought for better opportunities in the new land and was even ready to attain it at the cost of grave personal risks. He gradually took up a job in construction works and his friends also worked as contract labourers in coal mines, steel mills, construction works and textile mills so as to make their lives meaningful. They strived hard to establish a niche for themselves in the new scenario, but they were constantly threatened by capitalists who subjugated the progress of immigrants.

Ondaatje summates the threats faced by the prospering immigrants in Canada. He adverts to the predicament of Ambrose Small, who was doomed to an invisible state because of his immigrant status. He was a manipulator of deals and property and established himself as the jackal of Toronto's business world. He ascended from an impoverished existence into the world of theatre management. He bought Toronto's Grand Opera House when he was 28 years old and 'then proceeded to buy all theatres all over the province – in St. Catharines, Kingston, Arkona, Petrolia, Peterborough, and Paris, Ontario, until he held the whole web of theatre traffic in his outstretched arms' (57). He owned several theatres, hotels and houses under different names all over Ontario. He became a gambler at the track and was obsessed with achieving a unique status for himself in the country.

Small rose in social status as a millionaire by his determination to surpass those capitalists who subdued him. He became a workaholic and remained secluded from the outside world. He built high walls between him and the other businessmen, compatriots and even with his own lovers. He had the habit of working out all possible scenarios before the arrival of his staff members. He reached his office at the Grand theatre on Adelaide Street an hour before the arrival of his staff members and plotted the activities of the day. He was very keen in 'choreographing his schemes, theorizing on bids and counter-bids and interest rates and the breaking point of his adversaries' (58).

Small, who succeeded in prospering economically remained obstinate to retain his status. He was conscious of the fact that if he did not win, he would lose all his property. He was caught in the battle with other capitalists of the country who disdained the flourishing immigrants and did not acknowledge their rapid progress. Hence, he and his friends attacked the remnants of the wealthy families who were at the point of devastation. He revolted against the hostile environment by becoming just like those he wanted to overtake, 'He was a hawk who hovered over the whole province, swooping down for the kill, buying up the every field of wealth, and eating the profit in mid-air' (57).

The growing hostility of the rich towards Small prompted him to disengage himself from the business world. He decided to save himself from the enmity of the rich by disappearing from the world of financial power after withdrawing a million dollars from his account. He sought abode in an isolated building in a village far away from his house. His family announced a reward of \$80,000 when the police failed in their attempt to find information about his whereabouts. The public shrouded itself in the case and hired searchers to investigate his disappearance. The searchers roamed the country and brought suspicious strangers to the police station. Investigations by several organisations turned 'the millionaire's body into a rare coin, a piece of financial property' (59). Ondaatje enunciates that when all the rich people around him aspired to exalt their status, Small treaded carefully in the hostile environment of competitors by sliding safely without getting hurt, 'The others just had to get their oldest son into Upper Canada College. Crop rotation. The only one who could slide over the wall, skip along the broken glass, was Small' (84).

Ondaatje observes that during the great depression years, the arrival of immigrants decreased to a significant extent due to economic calamities. Canadian officials applied strict restrictions on the refugees who came to Canada as they realised that the increase in the strength of immigrants simultaneously resulted in job scarcity. Valerie Knowles (2007) in his book *Strangers at our*

Gates remarks that, 'for Canadians everywhere took the view that immigrants threatened scarce jobs in an economy that saw almost a quarter of the labour force unemployed in 1933. Not only prospective immigrants but immigrants already established in Canada became targets of opposition' (p.142). They were thrown out of work during this period and Ondaatje discerns that 'over 10,000 foreign-born workers had been deported out of the country' (209). Deportation of immigrants was used as a powerful weapon to relieve surplus foreign workers from the country.

Immigration has been a key component in the development of Canadian economic, social and political fabric. It has played a vital role in the fulfilment of the new-world enterprise of the country. Immigrants built the longest bridge in the world and great water works at the east end of Toronto. Ondaatje remarks that in the year 1938, people crowded together in large dark buildings across the country to protest against the government that failed to recognise the contribution of immigrants. The immigrants were clamouring to establish a firm hold in the country, but Canada shut herself off from the world and strenuously fought against the entry of immigrants. Valerie Knowles (2007) in his book *Strangers at our* *Gates* states that,

'Hard on the Heels of the most exuberant years in Canadian immigration history came the most inglorious period, the three decades between 1915 and 1945. War, recession, uneven prosperity, grim depression, and then another world war, each in its turn helped to create antipathy to immigration and to throttle the movement of newcomers to Canada.' (p.127).

Ondaatje feels that although British colonisation has transformed Canada into a multicultural country, it is 'still without language, gestures and work and bloodlines are the only currency' (43). He implies that the hybrid environment of Canada became more culturally, racially and ethnically diverse with the interminable entry of immigrants after the Second World War. He advocates that the Canadian government must recognise the endless

travails of newcomers and eliminate problems to the greatest extent possible. They must ensure that immigrants are able to utilise their skills for the development of the country, and in turn, the government should also help them gain economically so as to enrich Canadian culture and society.

Ondaatje accentuates that expatriates like Patrick and Nicholas who have settled in foreign countries are conscious of otherness, of not belonging and of standing apart in the multicultural society. They share the notion of having a fragmented self due to estrangement. They feel estranged as a result of economic frustration, isolation from the society, frustration growing out of an inability to adapt to the new environment, personal displacement and loss of identity. These feelings of isolation and alienation trigger feelings of loneliness, fear and helplessness. Munir (2007) in the article entitled 'Paradigmaticity of Postmodernism' reinforces that 'The postmodernist discovered that the sense of alienation in the contemporary world is so intense and acute that it cannot be felt any longer, and thus the whole attitude about it got changed' (p.163).

The new environment threatens not only the physical health but also the mental stability of immigrants. The cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior race or culture jeopardises their sense of self. They confound the experience of cultural shock and social isolation apart from the economic turmoil they face as the difference between the host culture and the native culture widens. The linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences between the immigrants isolate them from the mainstream society. Language is considered as a major factor during the process of acculturation, as the extent of stress or homesickness that immigrants face prompt them to adapt to the language of the new land. The need to change one's language touches not only on everyday life but also on one's self-identity.

Ondaatje posits that while some of the expatriates manage to abandon feelings of depression and continue with their

lives, others succumb to them as they are unable to overcome and control the conflicting forces of society. He spotlights the fragmented identity of Canadian immigrants like Patrick and Nicholas by delving deep into the psychological trauma of dislocation inherent in the immigrant experience. He evinces that the communication gaps between the displaced immigrants make them socially alienated from the outside world. They continue to feel a profound sense of otherness, of not belonging. Moreover, they are divided from their old world and are excluded from their new one, because of their inability to communicate with their colleagues.

Ondaatje deciphers the fragmentation of Patrick Lewis' individual self as he migrates from his rural village and finds an extreme contrast between the urban and rural life. His social domain was very limited to the small village of Bellrock, a region which was not mapped till 1910. His childhood days were governed by country life and this disenabled him from social interaction. He worked in the forest or on the log drives with his father; therefore, his knowledge of the wider world was derived mostly from books. His only other link to the outside world was the presence of the thirty loggers who came to skate along the river on homestead skates. Hence, he decided to leave the village for the city after his father's death.

Patrick worked for several years in the village, but he owned nothing. He scarcely had any money to sustain his life. The prospect of the city draws him; however, reverberations of trade and the movement of people across him bewilder him. He experiences the sensation of having been lost in the labyrinth of chaos. He was accustomed to seasonal rhythm and the open spaces of his country; hence, he feels threatened by the chaotic conditions of the city. He realised the stark contrast between the serene country life and the exuberant city life. The grandeur of the buildings appalled him, and when he noticed the glass telephone booths, pink marbles he felt that 'the train station was a palace, its niches, caravans an intimate city' (34).

Patrick is socially and linguistically isolated from the outside world. His identity is ambiguously divided between his position as a native and an immigrant. He is a native of Canada but by emigrating from the country to the city, he becomes an immigrant in his own land. His poor social conditions barricade him from identifying with the native rulers. Moreover, his racial differences with the immigrant workers disenable him from mingling with them. He is secluded both from White rulers and immigrant workers.

Patrick resides with the immigrants in the south-eastern section of the city working with the muckers in manual digging. He is paid extra for his work as nobody else attempts to undergo the claustrophobic uncertainty of his work. The money he earns from his work helps him to have a hold in the uncertain world. He leads an anonymous life reducing his existence to a void space. He does not communicate with his colleagues even while working for several hours in the same tunnel, 'Patrick is as silent as the Italians and Greeks towards the *bronco* foreman' (106).

The linguistic difference between him and the other immigrants from Italy and Macedonia disorients him. The common working and living conditions of immigrants make them identify each other. Patrick relates his own position as an outsider in their image: 'The people on the street, the Macedonians and Bulgarians, were his only mirror' (112). They rely on code language to communicate between themselves. Patrick recognises that the other tunnellers working with him by looking at their ragged shirts. He finally bridges the gulf between them by attempting to learn their language:

'He had discovered the Macedonian word for iguana, *gooshter*, and finally used it to explain his requests each evening at the fruit stall for clover and vetch. It was a breakthrough. The women gazed at him, corrected his pronunciation, and yelled it to the next stall. She came around the crates and outlined the shape of a lizard. *Gooshter?* Four women and a couple of men then circled him trying desperately to leap over the code of languages between them.' (112–113).

Patrick begins to reconstruct his identity in relation to that of the immigrants from different communities – Greek, Macedonian, Russian and Italian. He makes connections with the immigrants, crossing linguistic and cultural barriers to forge ties with 'these strangers who in the past had seemed to him like dark blinds on his street, their street, for he was their alien' (113). He surmounts the sense of isolation by acquainting himself with the people around him. His friendly gestures assimilate him to the other immigrants and he suddenly feels surrounded by greetings of friendship and concern; the 'women shook his hand, the men embraced and kissed him, and each time he said Patrick. Patrick. Patrick. Knowing he must now remember every single person' (113–114).

Patrick feels happiest among people with whom he shares little ethnic identity. The compassion he receives from them overwhelms him. He is more comfortable with coloured people, although he belongs to the White race. This is evident when he claims that he loved, 'things to do with colour, hating the whiteness' (53). The new social bonding prompts him to look upon the immigrants more as potential friends than as strangers. He realises that his 'own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices' (145).

Patrick ultimately establishes himself in the nexus of Toronto's working class communities. His personal growth is accomplished when he decides to move away from his Anglo-Irish roots. He does not inculcate the attitude of parochial Englishness; instead he confronts a more extensive sense of cultural awareness and identity. His association with the immigrants actuates him to attend the gathering at the waterworks. In this congregation, the workers join together to have their communal meetings and celebrations:

'On Sundays, as darkness fell, the various groups walked up to the building from the lakeshore where they would not be seen. There was food, entertainment, political speeches. A man who mimicked the king of England stepped forward with a monologue summarizing the news of the past week.

Numerous communities and nationalities spoke and performed in their own languages.' (158).

Patrick espouses a new knowledge of his self by deciphering his role in the community. He has lived in Canada throughout his lifetime, but he was not aware of the zeitgeist of the country. 'He has always been alien, the third person in the picture' (156). His contact with immigrants enables him to know of the unknown stories around him. He also meets a whole world of other, outside his familiar boundaries. He gradually cognizes the various union battles and the threats posed by the rulers on immigrant workers. His encounters with them enable him to realign with the detritus and chaos of the age.

Ondaatje posits that in the postmodern world of migration, immigrants leave behind their homeland to search for their living in dissimilar environments and cultures. They become financially stable by working in most arduous works, but the cultural and linguistic changes that they undergo fragment their notion of a stable identity. He extrapolates the fragmented identity of immigrants by equating the dilemma of Anglo-Irish immigrant, Patrick, with that of a Macedonian immigrant, Nicholas Temelcoff. They belong to different nations and cultures, but they share the common experiences of impoverishment and seclusion.

Ondaatje insinuates that immigrants from foreign countries like Greece, Macedonia, Russia and Italy find themselves dislocated as they have to embrace the alien landscape, climate, culture and language. They are regarded as cultural outsiders and are often rendered inarticulate by language barriers. They are prevented from communicating with or expressing themselves adequately due to their inability to speak English. They typically retreat into silence, abandoning any effort to make themselves understood. This further isolates and excludes them from the rest of the society.

The Macedonian immigrant, Nicholas Temelcoff, is a representative of both types of exclusion. He experiences the linguistic and cultural isolation as he finds it difficult to cope with the new environment. He is cut off from his

family and friends and is linguistically excluded in Canada. He loses any signifiers of identity as he had migrated from his homeland without any passport that stands an attestation of one's identity in a foreign land. He remains invisible and silent after having crossed the border, after having left behind his own language and the old images of himself. Moreover, his inability to talk in English disenables him from finding jobs, and so he decides to learn English. He becomes obsessed with the learning process as he realises that 'if he did not learn that language he would be lost' (46).

Ondaatje highlights the metamorphosis of immigrants' identity by accentuating their struggle to adjust and assimilate with the new country. This process of cultural metamorphosis involves several profound changes in their identity. They almost exchange their old identity to acquire a new self, but their greatest obstacle is the difficulty in learning a new language. They realise that to become fully integrated into their new worlds, they must learn and become fluent in English.

Temelcoff reckons the process of learning the new language as a strenuous task as he finds it difficult to understand the intricacies of the language. In order to acquaint himself with the pronunciation, speaking styles and mannerisms of the new country, he forsakes his old accent and pronunciation. He depends on recorded songs, wall posters, Fats Waller and talkies to learn English. He tries to become affluent in pronunciation and accent by reciting songs and mimicking actors on stage:

'It was a common habit to select one actor and follow him throughout his career, annoyed when he was given a small part, and seeing each of his plays as often as possible – sometimes as often as ten times during a run. Usually by the east-end production at the Fox or Parrot Theatres the actors' speeches would be followed by growing echoes as Macedonians, Finns, and Greeks repeated the phrase after a half-second pause, trying to get the pronunciation right.' (47).

Ondaatje suggests that immigrants can acquire a place for them in the society by conquering language barriers

and by overcoming their sense of considering themselves as outsiders. He apprehends that the notion of alienation and bewilderedness caused as a result of displacement can be surmounted by adapting to the new culture and language. Temelcoff succeeds in assimilating himself to the new environment by learning the English language. This enables him to find a job in bridge constructions. He involves himself in the most laborious jobs; and hence, 'In a year he will open up a bakery with the money he has saved' (49). Moreover, his knowledge of the language avails him to associate with immigrants from other countries.

Ondaatje contrives that migration of people from one place to another displaces them from the society. This sense of uprootedness and instability disrupts their stable self. He adumbrates that to surpass the fragmentation of the self, immigrants must assimilate with the new environment and engender ties with people around them. He avows that by developing a collective identity, immigrants will be able to sustain a stable identity in the new land, but when they fail to confront with the social condition, they degenerate from their static state.

Ondaatje contrives a social scenario where people of different communities live peacefully amidst diversities in culture. He establishes that in the globalised world, migrants have chances of flourishing economically, but they require favourable working and living conditions. He negotiates that the interference of the government of Canada on the conditions of immigrants like Stoyhoff,

Nicholas and Small will mitigate them from the indignant state and overcome conditions of poverty and help them live an enhanced life. Jean S. Phiney *et al.* (2001) in the article 'Ethnic Identity, Immigration and Wellbeing' notices a positive relation between the acculturation strategies adopted by the Canadian government in 1971 and the progress of the country. He affirms that the present government 'supports a policy of cultural maintenance among immigrant groups, and immigrants to Canada tend to prefer integration as an acculturation strategy' (p.499). The multicultural policy adopted by the Canadian government in 1971 is an optimistic enterprise that ensures formation of a genial society with people of varied cultures under cordial relations.

Ondaatje has made a scrupulous study on the interconnection between the socio-cultural condition and the identity of an individual. He claims that as the stable self represents the psychological wellbeing, individuals should strive hard to maintain their mental health as it plays a significant role in the social development of the country. He insists governments of countries to acknowledge the contributions of all races and afford healthy living conditions to foster social eudemonia of the immigrants in 'the new world' (54). He believes that discouragement of ghettoisation, violence and racial discrimination would create endearing circumstance for peaceful coexistence of various cultural groups. He affirms the need for the insistence on the value and dignity of all people regardless of their racial or ethnic origins, language or their religious affiliation.

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