

# **Exploring Ethical Selfhood and Otherness in Michael Ondaatje's *The Cinnamon Peeler*: A Levinasian Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

This study analyzes *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1991) by Michael Ondaatje through Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy, particularly his concepts of "Ethics and the Other," shifting the focus from postcolonial to ethical and existential dimensions of identity. Levinas argues that the self is fundamentally shaped by encounters with the Other, emphasizing an ethical responsibility that deeply influences one's sense of self. This analysis explores how situations and events in the text construct an environment where the migrant experiences fragmentation, alienation, and a profound ethical connection to the Other. Levinas's ideas suggest that identity is not a fixed essence but a continuous process of becoming, influenced by ethical demands from the Other. Migrants, whose pasts are marked by trauma and displacement, grapple with reconstructing emotional, psychological, and social connections in a new environment, where their identity is continuously redefined. The study investigates how the poetics of selfhood and otherness are reflected in the characters' lexical, psychological, and physical gestures, highlighting the continuous ethical engagement that shapes their existence. By tracing this ongoing process of ethical transformation through Levinas's philosophy, the analysis determines how the identity of a migrant undergoes profound changes when faced with the Other in a new cultural context. This approach challenges the notion of a fixed, singular identity, emphasizing instead the constant process of ethical responsibility and engagement that defines human existence, as articulated by Levinas.

**Key words:** Differences, Existentialism, Migration, Self and Other

## Introduction

The research focuses on the intricate dynamics between the self and the Other, particularly how the presence of colonizers in the Caribbean world profoundly influences the lives of migrants in a new land. It discusses selected poems from *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1991) by Michael Ondaatje (1943), framed within Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical concepts of the self and the Other. From 1983 to 2009 a civil war in Sri Lanka broke out as a result of a conflict between the government and the militants called the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who sought a separate independent Tamil state in the country's northeast. The conflict germinated due to the ethnic commotion Sinhalese and the Tamils that resulted in a prolonged war which consequently led to violence riots and displacement of many civilians as they fled the country to save their lives, with both sides committing severe atrocities.

Michael Ondaatje, as a Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer, migrated to Canada long before the Sri Lankan Civil War (Anandakugan, 2020). While the war did not directly prompt his migration, his Sri Lankan heritage and his connections to the country deeply inform his work. Ondaatje often reflects on themes of displacement of the self, cultural identity clash between the self and the other, and the violent legacies of colonialism and nationalism in his poetry and fiction. Levinas's philosophy emphasizes that the self is fundamentally defined and reshaped through its ethical encounters with the Other.

The analysis delves into how Ondaatje's metaphors, adjectives, and narrative techniques reflect the complex and often painful process of identity formation in a postcolonial context. The study highlights how the interactions between migrants and the dominant culture invisibly shape their psychology, creating a hybrid consciousness that is both fragmented and evolving.

The research borrows Levinas' idea of an absolute "Existence" that affirms itself without referring itself to anything other... It is identity... and" there is "the need to break the most radical, most" from its "irremissible enchainment" of the "ego" itself. Levinas posits that identity is not a fixed essence but is continuously constructed through encounters with the Other, leading to a "self" that is always in a state of becoming. This idea aligns with the experiences of migrants who undergo profound psychological and social transformations in response to the trauma of migration, especially following periods of colonization.

Levinas's concepts of "self" and "other" provide a framework for understanding how these encounters lead to the deconstruction and reconstruction of identity in a migrant's life.

Levinas's ethical philosophy suggests that through the recognition of the Other, migrants can reconstruct their identities in a way that allows them to find psychological and social stability. In this context, the research explores how the cultural and social forces at play in a diasporic environment contribute to the formation of a migrant's identity, not merely as a reaction to external pressures but as an ongoing ethical responsibility to the Other.

This research offers a significant contribution to the study of *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1991), which has not been extensively explored through the lens of Levinas's ethics. By applying Levinas's ideas, the study sheds light on themes of memory, nostalgia, multiculturalism, and the silent struggles of marginalized individuals. Ondaatje's work, rich with autobiographical elements, is explored here as a reflection of the broader human condition, making this research a valuable resource for readers and scholars alike.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of ethics (1969) , particularly his concepts of the self and the Other, has a deep connection to Michael Ondaatje's collection of poems, *The Cinnamon Peeler*, where the speaker's relationship with his beloved illustrates Levinas's belief that the self is fundamentally shaped by its encounter with the other. Throughout this poem, the speaker's identity as the cinnamon peeler is deeply entwined with her perception of her beloved, aligning with Levinas' notion that identity is not an isolated entity, but continually redefined by the relationship with others. In identifying himself repeatedly as the cinnamon peeler, and in tying this identity to his partner, the speaker suggests that he bears an ethical responsibility (Levinas 85).

Ethics, in Levinas' view, is not about comfort or harmony but about disruption. The coming in contact with the "Other" interrupts the "Self"('s) egocentric existence, compelling it to act and respond. This interruption is the ethical moment. In essence, for Levinas, the ethical is the recognition of the Other's irreducible difference and the infinite responsibility that this recognition entails. It is a radical call to prioritize the Other's needs and existence over one's own, challenging traditional notions of autonomy and reciprocity. Likewise, Levinas' emphasis on ethics preceding ontology—that is, ethics come before the very essence of existence—is reflected in the poem's exploration of

identity, where the speaker's sense of self is not intrinsic but shaped by his relationship with his partner, which is intimate and sensory.

By expressing the speaker's identity through his relationship with his beloved, Levinas's ideas of hospitality and openness to the Other are exemplified in this poem's rich, sensory language. A kind of ethical intimacy exists between the speaker and his partner, where the boundaries between self and other are fluid, constantly negotiated, and central to the speaker's identity. Therefore, *The Cinnamon Peeler* is an insightful meditation on how identity is not formed in isolation but in interaction with others, in keeping with Levinas's ethical philosophy.

## Analysis

In the poem "Light" from *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1991, p. 10), Michael Ondaatje delves into memory, identity, and the tension between past and present through the lens of personal reflection. The poem, dedicated to his mother, Doris Gratiaen, sees the poet engaging with an old photo album, a tangible link to his past. This act of recalling memories through the album serves as a powerful metaphor for exploring the self and the Other, as conceptualized by Emmanuel Levinas. As Ondaatje revisits these memories, the line "The Past, friends and family, drift into the rain shower" (1991, p. 10) encapsulates the inevitable erosion of past clarity when exposed to new cultural surroundings. The "rain shower" can be seen as a metaphor for the cultural and social influences that gradually blur the clear contours of one's past, echoing Levinas' idea that the self is in constant flux, shaped by its encounters with the Other.

For Levinas, the Other is not merely an external force but a crucial element in the formation of the self, constantly challenging and redefining it (*Totality and Infinity*, 1961). Ondaatje's phrase "a memory sharp as scalpels" (1991, p. 10) conveys the sharpness with which these memories pierce the poet's present consciousness. Further in the poem, Ondaatje describes how these memories, which once provided clarity, have now become "complex ambiguous grainy on (his) wall" (1991, p. 10). This transformation suggests that the poet's past, when viewed from the perspective of his current life in Canada, has lost its simplicity and become layered with new meanings and ambiguities. Levinas would interpret this as the self's ethical

responsibility to continually re-engage with the Other, recognizing that identity is not a constant entity but constantly evolving in response to external influences (*Otherwise than Being*, 1974).

The complexity and ambiguity of these memories reflect the ongoing ethical negotiation that defines the self's relationship with the Other. Levinas "argues that no matter how much a being tries to "escape(s) the prison of the present" which represents the fixed, immediate reality of the being's current state or moment, one way to escape this confinement is by turning experiences into memories or the past, thus allowing us to move forward. This act of transformation or "becoming" might seem liberating, as if we're creatively reshaping our lives and experiences. Thereby, "Light" can be read as a profound exploration of the self's relationship with the Other, where the poet's memories are transformed through his negotiations with new cultural realities.

Through the lens of Levinas' philosophy, the poem reveals the ethical complexities of identity and memory, emphasizing suggests that human beings, aware of their own existence, often experience it as a limiting force, one that traps them within the confines of their own identity. This feeling drives them to seek ways to break free from this "absolute" sense of self, pursuing freedom or transformation beyond their inherent "selfhood." (Levina, p. 25). The poet, deeply engrossed in turning over the album, employs harsh diction that reflects the intensity of his experience, with phrases such as "a memory sharp as scalpels," "I see them in my flesh," "the trees across the fields leaving me," and "these are the fragments I have of them" (1991, p. 10). The expression "a memory sharp as scalpels" uses the metaphor of a scalpel, which traditionally symbolizes precision and cutting, to convey the piercing nature of these memories in the poet's consciousness.

This metaphor "cut" or wounded by the presence of the Other, aligns with Levina's idea where he explains that no matter how much we creatively reinterpret or distance ourselves from the present moment, we remain bound to our existence. Our acts of "becoming" are not fully independent but are still tied to, or "in the service of," our fundamental condition of *being* (Levina, p. 25). The poet's reflection that he sees these memories in his "flesh" suggests that these experiences are not merely mental or emotional but are inscribed into his very being. Levinas would argue that this reflects the profound impact that the Other has on the self, where the self is not an isolated entity but is fundamentally shaped and defined by its ethical relationship with the Other. The phrase "the trees across the fields leaving me" symbolizes the

poet's sense of dislocation and the gradual loss of the familiar, a process that Levinas might describe as the self's continual redefinition in the face of the Other's influence.

As the poet acknowledges that "these are the fragments I have of them," he expresses a recognition of his fragmented identity. The "fragments" represent the pieces of the poet's past and identity that have been altered and reconfigured through his interactions with new cultural settings. These fragments, though disjointed, form the basis of the poet's hybrid identity, which Levinas would interpret as the self's ongoing response to the way it has to cope with challenges of the Other (*Otherwise than Being*, 1974).

In this way, the poet's harsh diction and imagery not only reflect the pain of cultural displacement but also illustrate Levinas's philosophical ideas about the self and the Other. The memories, sharp as scalpels, cut into the poet's identity, leaving behind fragments that form a complex and evolving self, constantly reshaped by the ethical obligations to the Other.

This poem is rich in sensual imagery, juxtaposition of past and present events, and metaphorical allusions to the poet's colonized past, bringing forth a vivid interplay between memory and imagination. Ondaatje navigates this space with an unconscious drive that reflects the complexities of time and experience. Ondaatje's biographical contrast between his life in Sri Lanka—marked by his mother's separation from his father—and his later life in Canada, after immigrating at eleven years old, creates a psychological tension that Levinas might describe as the contrast between "being" and "becoming." Levinas posits that the self is never static; it is always in a state of becoming, continuously influenced by its ethical relationship with the Other (*Totality and Infinity*, 1961). This is evident in Ondaatje's reflection in the poem: "When in truth like me they haven't moved. / Haven't moved an inch for me" (1991, p. 12), where he grapples with the haunting memories of his past that remain fixed even as his present self evolves.

Levinas's concept of the Other disrupting the self's sense of identity can be seen in the way Ondaatje's memories, rooted in his Sri Lankan past, persistently influence his present life in Canada. The poem's vivid imagery and the tension between past and present reflect the ongoing ethical negotiation that Levinas describes, this tension as "the need to leave oneself" (Levinas, p.26) which he further explains that a identity in a state of crisis to come in union with the other by leaving oneself which he states as a "unity is a disunity. Oneself is a twoself". (*Otherwise*

*than Being*, 1974). This creates a space where memory, fantasy, and narrative intertwine, revealing the fragmented and complex nature of identity.

The poem's exploration of memory and identity through the lens of Levinas's philosophy shifts the focus from a purely postcolonial reading to a broader existential and ethical inquiry. The haunting presence of the poet's father's memories, the contrast between his Sri Lankan past and Canadian present, and the reflection on how these memories have "moved" or remained static all underscore the ethical responsibility of the self in relation to the Other. Levinas asserted that there is a tension within each person: a part that wants to stay grounded while another yearns to go beyond. In this way, the self always strives for something outside its current state; it is never truly at rest—the dual nature of the self. There are two selves within each of us—one rooted in our current identity and one that pushes beyond it. The duality of our identity means that we are both stable and capable of change. The self is a unity (a single identity) and a disunity (an identity striving to transcend itself).

Conclusively, "Light" serves as a poignant exploration of the self's journey through memory and time, where the past is never fully detached from the present. Through the lens of Levinas's ethics, the poem reveals the deep and often unsettling connections between the self and the Other, challenging the poet—and the reader—to continuously engage with the complex and evolving nature of identity. In the poem "Light" (1991, pp. 10-11) by Michael Ondaatje, the exploration of memory, identity, and the passage of time is central to the narrative, reflecting on the poet's journey through life and the effects of his migration from Sri Lanka to Canada. The adjective "Rain shower" (1991, p. 10) is symbolic of the external influences that have gradually eroded the poet's memories and cultural norms.

In this context, the "Rain shower" can be seen as the influence of the Other—represented by the colonizers and the new cultural environment—on the poet's identity. The poet's reflection that his memories "stand/ complex ambiguous grainy on (his) wall" (1991, p. 10) illustrates this idea of a fragmented and evolving identity, one that has been altered by the external forces of migration and cultural displacement. The phrase "a memory sharp as scalpels" (1991, p. 58) further underscores the painful and invasive nature of these changes. Levinas's notion that the Other disrupts the self, causing it to constantly reassess and redefine its identity, is evident here.

The "scalpel" metaphor highlights the deep, almost surgical, impact that the experience of migration and colonization has had on the poet's sense of self. The poet's memories, once clear and cohesive, are now fragmented, leaving him with only "fragments" of his former identity—a process that aligns with Levinas's idea "leave oneself" is not a flaw but a defining feature of human existence, a built-in tension that fuels personal growth, transformation, and ethical engagement with the world. He further states this "break" creates space for true ethical relations, where we respect the Other's mystery and autonomy.

Throughout the poem, Ondaatje uses sensual imagery and the juxtaposition of past and present to convey the complexity of his experiences. The "trees across the fields leaving me" (1991, p. 58) metaphorically represents the loss of connection to his past and the inevitable distancing from his former self. Levinas's exploration of the self as always in relation to the Other resonates here, as the poet navigates the tension between his Sri Lankan heritage and his life in Canada. This ongoing negotiation between past and present, self and Other, reflects Levinas's assertion that identity is always in flux, shaped by the ethical responsibility to the Other. In the line "When in truth like me they haven't moved. / Haven't moved an inch for me" (1991, p. 12), the poet expresses a longing for the past that remains unchanged in his memory, despite his own transformation. This static image of the past contrasts with the fluid and evolving nature of his present identity, a tension that Levinas would describe as the ethical demand of the Other, which forces the self to continually reassess and redefine itself.

Nevertheless, this poem can be interpreted through the lens of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy as a profound exploration of the self's relationship with the Other. The poem's imagery and metaphors capture the ongoing process of identity formation, influenced by the ethical and cultural challenges posed by migration and displacement. Through this, Ondaatje's work reflects the complex and often painful journey of becoming, as the self navigates the demands of the Other and the remnants of its past.

Next in the poem "Signature" (1991, p. 17), Michael Ondaatje delves into the theme of identity, particularly focusing on the notion of a "transformed self." This transformation is depicted as emerging from the poet's encounters with new cultures and customs in the Caribbean, reflecting his ongoing search for a new identity in the context of migration. Ondaatje uses



evocative imagery to express this phase of identity transformation, as illustrated in the lines: “The obvious upsets me, / Everyone (the colonial subject) has scars (maybe of nostalgia) which crawl / into the mystery of swimming trunks” (1991, p. 17). Here, “the obvious” represents the apparent normality and freedom in Canadian civil society, which in reality, unsettles the poet. This discomfort stems from the inability of Ondaatje and other migrants to fully assimilate into the new culture, leaving them with “scars” of marginalization and nostalgia for their former norms and values. These “scars” metaphorically “crawl” into the migrants' lives, symbolizing the persistent struggles they face as they navigate a foreign environment.

This poem can be aligned with Emmanuel Levinas' concept of ethics and the Other, which emphasizes the ethical responsibility that arises when one encounters the Other. Levinas argues that the self is always in a relationship with the Other, and that the face of the Other demands an ethical response, creating an obligation that transcends cultural and social differences (*Totality and Infinity*, 1961). Ondaatje's depiction of the migrant's experience, particularly the scars of marginalization and in-adjustability, resonates with Levinas' idea that the encounter with the Other challenges the self to recognize and respond to the Other's vulnerability and suffering.

Furthermore, the reflective tone and the sense of regret expressed in the poem echo Levinas' notion that the self is inextricably connected to the Other, and that the suffering of the Other imposes an ethical responsibility on the self. This is evident in Ondaatje's reference to the “stigma” of racism and the colonial experience, which he describes as an “ulcer”—a metaphor for the enduring and painful legacy of colonialism. Levinas' ethical framework, which emphasizes the infinite responsibility of the self towards the Other, can be seen in Ondaatje's portrayal of these deep-seated scars as not merely personal afflictions but as a shared burden borne by all who have been touched by colonialism (*Otherwise than Being*, 1974).

In the poem's concluding lines, where Ondaatje imagines the rain “falling like white bees on the sidewalk” and ends with “my appendix / swims in jar” (1991, p. 18), there is a palpable sense of dislocation and fragmentation, symbolizing the loss of identity and the ongoing search for belonging in a new environment. Levinas' philosophy, which suggests that identity is formed and continuously reshaped through the ethical relationship with the Other, provides a lens

through which to understand the poet's struggle for identity in a context where the boundaries between native and foreign blur, and the self is perpetually transformed by these encounters (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 39).

"The Time Around Scars" (1991, p. 22) is a nostalgic poem where the poet, Michael Ondaatje, recalls his time living in Sri Lanka, reflecting on the lingering impact of racial, social, and political scars. The poet expresses this through the line "we (the colonial subjects) remember the time around (racial, social, and political) scars" (1991, p. 22). Migrants living in the Caribbean world, like Ondaatje, find themselves unable to fully adopt new norms and traditional values, resulting in a nostalgic present. They neither reject their current country nor wish to return to their past, but instead exist in a hybrid state, embodying a mixture of two cultures and histories, leading to what Stuart Hall describes as "hybridity" (Hall, 1990, p. 225).

Hall explains "hybridity" as a "passionate research" for a new identity that reflects a shared culture, a quest for one's "true self" (1990, p. 223). The subjects of hybridity, typically migrants, hold onto the hope that one day they will discover an identity beyond misery, self-pity, and abandonment (1990, p. 223). This feeling of displacement is palpable in the poet's words: "they (the colonial masters) freeze irrelevant emotions / and divide us (the colonial subjects and their past) from present friends" (1991, p. 22). In these circumstances, a migrant in a new land conceals their emotions, becoming a suffocated persona of the diaspora, as Ondaatje writes: "and would she... / or keep it at her wrist / a mysterious watch. / and this scar (of past life and culture) I then remember / is medallion (he is getting ironic here) of no emotion" (1991, p. 22).

By the poem's end, the poet, caught in the duality and hybridity of his situation, seems to reconcile himself by stating: "I would meet (the colonizers' places and structures) you now (in this diasporic land) / and I (the identity seeker) would wish this scar (of migration, nostalgia, and all kinds of differences)... never occurred between (the colonizer and colonized) us" (1991, p. 24). All these verses depict the condition of hybridity that migrants inevitably experience. In the colonizer's land, a migrant's identity remains fluid and unfixed, as Hall explains: "Identity is not as transparent and unproblematic as we think" (1990, p. 222). Hall further argues that identity is something a migrant subject undergoes as a constant phase of transformation, making cultural identity a matter of both "becoming" and "being" (1990, p. 225). For Hall, it is the very

Caribbeanness of a black migrant and his diasporic self that clashes with new cultural experiences, whether they are American, European, or African (Hall, 1990, p. 230).

This exploration aligns with Emmanuel Levinas' concept of ethics and the Other, which posits that the self is always defined in relation to the Other, and this relationship imposes an ethical responsibility upon the self to recognize and respond to the Other's vulnerability and suffering (*Totality and Infinity*, 1961). Ondaatje's portrayal of the scars of hybridity and the suffocation of emotions can be seen through Levinas' lens as the poet grapples with the ethical implications of his existence between two cultures. Levinas argues that identity is formed through our ethical relationships with others, and in this poem, Ondaatje's longing to bridge the gap between the colonizer and the colonized reflects this ethical responsibility to the Other (*Otherwise than Being*, 1974). The poet's final wish for the scars of migration and cultural differences to have "never occurred" mirrors Levinas' idea that true ethical behavior arises from a recognition of the Other's humanity, transcending cultural and historical divides.

A new understanding of identity emerges as a dynamic, ongoing process of self-definition and redefinition. This idea is vividly captured in Michael Ondaatje's poem "Billboards," where the harsh realities of cultural experiences are highlighted through stark adjectives. The poem begins with the line: "even his (the colonizer's world) jokes were exceedingly drastic" (1991, p. 33). The term "drastic" reflects the deep communication gap between migrants and natives, illustrating how the colonizers' supposed friendliness conceals a more radical and extreme reality. This resonates with Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the Other, where the superficial "friendliness" of the colonizer represents a failure to truly recognize the Other's humanity and subjectivity.

Levinas posits that this ethical distance manifests when the self does not acknowledge the Other's intrinsic worth (*Totality and Infinity*, 1961). Stuart Hall (1990) also draws on Derrida's concept of 'differences' to explain the constant transformation of identity, a concept aligns with Levinas' idea of self and the other mirrored in Ondaatje's use of language. For instance, when Ondaatje writes, "All this, I was about to say, / invades my virgin past" (p. 33), he touches on the ongoing metamorphic process that Hall describes, where identity is continuously reshaped by experience.

This invasion of the "virgin past" can be seen as a violation of the self's original identity by the Other, which Levinas describes as an ethical encounter that demands the self to respond to the Other's presence and influence (*Otherwise than Being*, 1974). The phrase "my virgin past" serves as a biographical reference, signifying the untainted history Ondaatje once had, now altered by his experiences as a migrant. This change is neither wholly positive nor negative, but it represents the unavoidable transformation that occurs when one is exposed to a new culture and environment.

Ondaatje acknowledges this transformation, noting how it has "invaded" his past, suggesting that the memories of his former life—possibly his childhood home in Sri Lanka—are now irrevocably altered. Levinas would argue that this invasion is part of the ethical obligation to the Other, where the self must confront the disruption of its own identity and the resulting transformation (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 50).

The poem further explores the theme of transformation with the line: "With her came the locusts of history" (p. 33). This metaphorical use of "locusts" alludes to the destructive impact of colonial history, not only on Sri Lanka but on Ondaatje's personal and cultural identity as well. The "locusts of history" suggest the pervasive and consuming nature of colonial influence, which continues to shape Ondaatje's present and, likely, his future. Levinas' idea that history is not merely a backdrop but an active force that shapes ethical relationships can be seen here, as the "locusts" represent the relentless and often destructive influence of history on the self's identity and its relationship with the Other (*Otherwise than Being*, p. 95). This line underscores the deep connection between past political circumstances and the ongoing process of identity formation that Ondaatje experiences, a concept that aligns with Hall's (1990) discussion of the continuous and cinematic nature of identity transformation.

The poem "Heron Rex" (1991, p. 44) by Michael Ondaatje is a poignant reflection on the themes of migration, identity transformation, and the ethical dilemmas faced by individuals who find themselves in new cultural environments. These individuals are often forced to sacrifice their dreams, their true selves, and their identities, as they navigate the challenges of a foreign land. This poem captures the experience of those who are continually reshaping their identities in response to the encounters with the Other, a concept central to Emmanuel Levinas' ethical

philosophy. Levinas explains that the self is always in a state of becoming, shaped by its ethical encounters with the Other.

This process is not merely about adapting to new social or cultural norms, but about the profound ethical responsibility that arises when one is confronted with the Other's face, a presence that demands recognition and response (*Totality and Infinity*, 1961). In "Heron Rex," the title itself is symbolic, representing a bird that stalks its prey in the tall grass, a metaphor for the layers of meaning related to the encounters with new, often hostile environments. The bird's connection to Africa further underscores the themes of migration and the ethical burdens that come with it.

The poem is rich with references to the emotional and psychological tolls of migration, the experience of marginalization, and the nostalgia for a lost homeland. Ondaatje uses pronouns like "they," "those," and "who" (p. 44) to emphasize the erasure of individual identities, a phenomenon that Levinas might describe as the depersonalization that occurs when the self fails to see the Other as a subject with its own intrinsic value (*Otherwise than Being*, 1974). This erasure reflects the ethical failure to acknowledge the Other's humanity, a central concern in Levinas' work. The line "they are proud of their heritage of suicides" (1991, p. 44) captures the deep sorrow and suppression felt by those who have migrated, undergoing constant transformation and losing touch with their original identities.

Levinas argues that such transformations are inevitable in the encounter with the Other, where the self is continuously redefined in response to the ethical demands of the Other. This process is not about achieving a fixed identity, but about the ongoing ethical obligation to the Other, which disrupts any notion of a stable self (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 38). As these individuals adapt to new places and circumstances, they find themselves "proud" of their "heritage" of suicide—an acknowledgment of the cultural and existential sacrifices they have made.

The "foul connection" between colonizers and the colonized symbolizes the complex and often painful interactions that shape their identities. This aligns with Levinas' idea that history and ethical relationships are inextricably linked, where the self is both shaped by and responsible

for the historical and ethical conditions in which it exists (*Otherwise than Being*, p. 95). The phrase “crashed against black bars in the dream of escape” (p. 44) highlights the oppression and marginalization they face, unable to fully break free from the constraints of their past or the racial and social boundaries imposed upon them. This resonates with Levinas' view that the self's freedom is always limited by the ethical responsibility to the Other, where true escape is impossible as long as the Other's suffering remains unaddressed.

Hence, "Heron Rex" is a powerful exploration of the ongoing transformation of identity in the face of migration, oppression, and ethical responsibility. It aligns with Levinas' concept of the self's ethical obligation to the Other and the continuous process of becoming that defines human identity in a complex and often hostile world.

This theme of double-consciousness and conflict between the self and the Other underscores the challenges of navigating new cultural, social, and political landscapes, making Ondaatje's poem a profound meditation on the ethical dimensions of identity and migration. Michael Ondaatje uses evocative adjectives and metaphors in his poetry that reveal his deep connection to memory and nostalgia, themes that permeate much of his work. These elements reflect his inner voice as he recalls his past, intertwining it with his experiences abroad. In lines such as “who (the subject of transformation) moved round (kept on going on with their past in the new culture) the dials of imaginary clocks (of memory, regrets, cultural roots),” Ondaatje illustrates the continuous interplay between past memories and present identity. This metaphor suggests that the subject is caught in a cycle of remembering and recontextualizing their past within the framework of a new culture.

Ondaatje's exploration of identity transformation resonates with Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy, particularly his ideas on the self and the Other. Levinas asserts that the self is always in a state of becoming, shaped by its ethical encounters with the Other. This transformation is not just a physical change but an existential and ethical process. When Ondaatje writes, “There are ways of going (away) / Physically mad” (1991, p. 44), it aligns with Levinas's notion that the encounter with the Other can be overwhelming, leading to a state of disorientation or “madness” as the self grapples with its ethical responsibilities and the profound impact of these encounters (*Totality and Infinity*, 1961).

Levinas emphasizes that identity is “not static”; it is a process of continuous change influenced by the Other. The line “It belongs to (is the matter of) the future as well as to (of) the past” reflects Levinas’s idea that identity is shaped by both past experiences and future possibilities, constantly evolving as the self responds to the Other’s presence. This notion of identity as a dynamic process is central to Levinas’s ethics, where the self is perpetually in a state of becoming rather than being, always responding to the Other and reconfiguring itself in the process (*Otherwise than Being*, 45).

In this context, the “madness” Ondaatje describes can be understood as the psychological and emotional turmoil that migrants experience as they negotiate their identity in a new cultural environment. This turmoil is a reflection of the ethical struggle that Levinas describes, where the self must continually sacrifice its own stability to respond to the demands of the Other. As migrants “sacrifice” themselves “for the race” (1991, p. 44)—both the culture they left behind and the one they now inhabit—they undergo a transformation that is both a loss and a gain, a process of becoming that never fully resolves but instead constantly evolves.

Thus, Ondaatje’s poetry, through its rich metaphors and evocative language, aligns closely with Levinas’s ideas on the self and the Other. The poet’s exploration of memory, identity, and transformation reflects the ethical journey that Levinas describes, where the self is always in relation to the Other, always becoming, and never fully settled in a singular identity. This continuous process of transformation underscores the complexity of identity in a world shaped by cultural encounters, ethical obligations, and the constant interplay between past and present.

The analysis of *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1991) suggests that the migrants who are living at new places, their past memories keep on haunting their thoughts and actions. If the migrants had a colonial past and they have to live in colonizers’ land, it would be more difficult for them to adapt in the new culture with old roots. The characters in *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1991) seem to be the victims of the diaspora who are unable to find a fixed definition of self and culture for them.

The constant struggle to find their 'fixed national/cultural' identity creates an ambiguous psychological effect on their lives which longs for the rest of their future. Their future, because of their memories, remains unclear. The places are autobiographical allusions that weave a strong impression of the Sri-Lankan civil war and other political facts from the relevant history. The analysis suggests that the migrants, who undergo the colonial period, never have the same identities after that bitter experience. They live with diasporic sentiments and end up being a hybrid-conscious self.

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