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Between Myth and Reality: Unraveling Family Lore in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1982)

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DEDICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the themes of myth and reality in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*. It focuses on how family lore shapes personal and collective memory. Ondaatje's work primarily engages with fragments of family anecdotes, historical events, and personal reflections and challenges the conventional notions of truth and fiction. Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* provides a foundation to examine the tension between familial elements and the fragmented nature of personal experiences. Utilizing postcolonial theory, this thesis explores themes of identity, memory, and belonging. The findings underscore the transformative power of storytelling in shaping our understanding of the past. They also suggest that family lore, despite its occasional deviations from factual accuracy, plays a crucial role in constructing individual and cultural identities.

Keywords: Family, Identity, Memory, Myth, Reality

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the content of this dissertation represents my own work which has been done after the registration for the Master's Degree at University of Mohammed Khider Biskra.

Signature

Mr. BENABDI Fethi

Table of Content

DEDICATIONS	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	II
ABSTRACT	III
DECLARATION	IV
TABLE OF CONTENT	V

General introduction

General Introduction	1
Research Question	2
Sub-questions	2
Significance of the Study	2
Research Objectives	3
Methodology	3
Chapters Demarcation	4

1 Chapter One: The Landscape of Memory and Myth in *Running in the Family*

1.1 Introduction	7
1.2 Theoretical Framework: Memory and Myth in Literature	7
1.3 Analyzing Ondaatje's Narrative Technique	9
1.4 Interplay of Personal and Collective Memories	11
1.5 Conclusion	13

2 Chapter Two: Constructing and Deconstructing Family Narratives

2.1 Introduction	16
2.2 The Role of Family Lore in Shaping Identity	16
2.3 Fact versus Fiction: Ondaatje's Approach to Autobiographical Writing	18
2.4 Character Analysis: Real and Imagined Personas	20
2.5 Conclusion	22

3 Chapter Three: Postcolonial Perspectives and Cultural Reflections

3.1 Introduction	26
3.2 Historical Context of Sri Lanka in <i>Running in the Family</i>	26
3.3 Postcolonial Identity and Displacement	27

3.4 Cultural and Geographical Influence on Narrative Structure	29
3.5 Conclusion	31
General Conclusion	33
Bibliography	38
Appendices	41
Glossary	43
ملخص	45

General Introduction

General Introduction

The relationship between literature and personal history is deeply intertwined, each enriching the understanding of the other. Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* serves as a prime example of this dynamic interplay, where literary art becomes a medium to explore the boundaries between myth and reality. This master dissertation delves into how Ondaatje's memoir intricately weaves together family lore, personal memory, and historical context to create a narrative that challenges traditional notions of truth and fiction.

Running in the Family is a semi-autobiographical work set in Sri Lanka, where Ondaatje recounts his family's past through a blend of anecdotal tales, historical events, and reflective commentary. The memoir's unique structure, incorporating poetry, photographs, and journal entries, serves to blur the lines between what is remembered and what is imagined. This approach not only reconstructs Ondaatje's family history but also examines the broader implications of storytelling in shaping personal and collective identities.

This thesis aims to dissect the common ground between myth and reality in the novel. It examines the ways Ondaatje navigates the tenuous boundaries between historical fact and fictional techniques. This exploration is particularly relevant in understanding the implications of family narratives and their role in shaping personal and collective identities.

Research Question

- How does Michael Ondaatje blend myth and reality in *Running in the Family* to construct family lore?

Sub-questions

- What literary techniques does Ondaatje employ to blur the lines between myth and reality in the narrative?
- How do the myths and family lore depicted in the novel influence the characters' perceptions of their personal and collective identities?
- In what ways does the historical and cultural context of Sri Lanka shape the interplay of myth and reality in the novel?

Significance of the Study

Ondaatje's work is celebrated for its poetic prose and rich, evocative imagery. By delving into the myth-reality dichotomy, this thesis will contribute to the existing body of literary criticism on Ondaatje's oeuvre, offering fresh insights into his narrative techniques and thematic concerns. The novel's setting in Sri Lanka provides a unique backdrop that reflects the complexities of postcolonial identity and memory. Understanding the interplay of myth and reality within this context can shed light on the broader cultural and historical narratives of Sri Lanka. Family lore often blurs the lines between fact and fiction, influencing the psychological development of individuals within the family. This thesis will explore the psychological

dimensions of Ondaatje's narrative, particularly how family myths shape personal identity and memory.

Research Objectives

- **Analyze Narrative Techniques:** Investigate the literary devices Ondaatje employs to blend myth and reality, such as fragmented narrative structure, poetic language, and the use of multiple perspectives.
- **Explore Themes of Identity and Memory:** Examine how the interplay between myth and reality affects the characters' understanding of their identities and histories.
- **Cultural and Historical Analysis:** Contextualize the family lore within the broader socio-cultural and historical backdrop of Sri Lanka, exploring how national history and personal memory intersect.
- **Psychological Impact:** Assess the psychological impact of family myths on the characters, particularly focusing on themes of memory, trauma, and reconciliation.

Methodology

The thesis employs a qualitative method and thematic analysis to explore the intricate interplay between myth and reality in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*. This literary analysis involves a close reading of the novel, identifying and analyzing passages that illustrate the blending of myth and reality. An interdisciplinary approach will be incorporated, utilizing theories from psychology, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory to provide a comprehensive and multi-faceted analysis of the text. Additionally, historical contextualization will be

undertaken to investigate the historical and cultural backdrop of Sri Lanka during the period depicted in the novel, using historical records and secondary sources to contextualize the family lore.

Chapters Demarcation

General Introduction provides an overview of Michael Ondaatje's literary contributions and the significance of 'Running in the Family' within his oeuvre, outlining the research aims and scope of the thesis. Chapter One, titled "The Landscape of Memory and Myth in 'Running in the Family'," includes an introduction, theoretical framework on memory and myth in literature, analysis of Ondaatje's narrative technique, and the interplay of personal and collective memories, concluding with a summary. Chapter Two, "Constructing and Deconstructing Family Narratives," examines the role of family lore in shaping identity, Ondaatje's approach to autobiographical writing, and character analysis of real and imagined personas, concluding with a summary. Chapter Three, "Postcolonial Perspectives and Cultural Reflections," explores the historical context of Sri Lanka in 'Running in the Family,' postcolonial identity and displacement, and the cultural and geographical influences on narrative structure, concluding with a summary. The General Conclusion recapitulates key findings, discusses the study's contributions to the literary analysis of Ondaatje's work, and suggests avenues for further research.

Chapter One:

The Landscape of Memory and Myth

in Michael Ondaatje's Running in

the Family

1.1 Introduction

This chapter embarks on an exploration of the intertwined themes of memory and myth as they manifest in Michael Ondaatje's work. The chapter begins with an introduction that contextualizes these themes within the broader scope of literary studies, emphasizing their significance in shaping narratives and understanding historical and personal identities. The subsequent section provides a comprehensive theoretical framework that delves into the concepts of memory and myth in literature, drawing on various critical perspectives to elucidate their functions and implications. Following this theoretical groundwork, the chapter offers a detailed analysis of Ondaatje's narrative technique, focusing on his innovative blending of personal and collective memories. This analysis reveals how Ondaatje constructs a complex, layered narrative that reflects both individual experiences and broader cultural histories, highlighting the fluid boundaries between fact and fiction, and the role of storytelling in preserving and reshaping memory.

1.2 Theoretical Framework: Memory and Myth in Literature

The theoretical framework for understanding the role of memory and myth in literature is deeply rooted in the notion that literature often serves the aims of the community that creates it. Miftari posits that in certain historical periods, literature is inextricably linked with the cultural, national, and ideological intentions of its community. This connection endows literature with the dual function of expressing and cultivating common values, thereby becoming a vital conduit for increasing sensitivity to shared experiences and values. Literature, in this context, is not merely a passive reflection of cultural traditions but an active participant in the construction and reinforcement of communal identities. The ideological function of literature in such societies

underscores its role as a bearer of significant movements and its potential to inspire collective action (Miftari 152). This perspective provides a foundational understanding of how literature can be both a product of its cultural milieu and a shaper of that culture.

In postcolonial literature, the interplay of memory and history takes unique and often complex forms. Rønning observes that for countries and peoples who have endured violent and traumatic events such as slavery and displacement, the representation of these experiences in literature involves a process of coming to terms with trauma. This process raises critical questions about the selectivity of memory and its potential to lead to collective amnesia. Myths and memories in postcolonial contexts can become symbols of subjugation and mechanisms for coping with past traumas. For settler emigrants, however, the conflation of memory and history often involves a glorification of a past life, which serves as a key to present belonging. This dual aspect of memory—where it can be both a source of trauma and a means of constructing identity—illustrates the complexities and contradictions inherent in the act of remembering. Naipaul's fiction, as Rønning highlights, explores these intricacies by depicting the diverse ways in which memory can shape individual and collective identities (Rønning 149).

Bell's examination of national memory challenges the concept of a unified, coherent memory shared by all members of a nation. He argues that memory, though frequently invoked, is often under-theorized and over-employed, particularly in nationalist narratives. The notion of 'national memory' tends to simplify and totalize the diverse and multifaceted experiences of a population, creating an alleged unified memory of the national past. This process of totalizing mnemonic formation is essential for understanding how myths and memories are constructed and used to support nationalist ideologies. Bell's critique encourages a more nuanced approach to studying

memory, one that recognizes its complexity and the various ways in which it can be manipulated to serve ideological purposes (Bell 74). This perspective is crucial for analyzing how literature, through its engagement with memory and myth, can both reflect and challenge dominant narratives about the past.

The examination of memory and myth in literature is further enriched by considering how these elements function as determinants of narrative. In literary works, memory and myth are not merely background elements but are often central to the construction of the narrative itself. This centrality underscores the need to analyze how authors use memory and myth to create meaning and convey thematic concerns. By investigating the theoretical frameworks provided by scholars such as Miftari, Rønning, and Bell, we gain deeper insights into the ways in which literature engages with the past, constructs identities, and negotiates cultural and ideological landscapes. This understanding is particularly relevant for studying works like Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, where the interplay of personal and collective memories, alongside the use of myth, plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and its thematic resonance. Through such analyses, we can appreciate the profound impact that memory and myth have on literary expression and the broader cultural discourses they engage with.

1.3 Analyzing Ondaatje's Narrative Technique

Analyzing Michael Ondaatje's narrative technique reveals a complex and multi-layered approach that has garnered significant critical attention, particularly for his use of imagery. Wilton notes that Ondaatje's work is characterized by the repeated use of certain images, which intriguingly shift in their significance depending on the context in which they appear. This technique creates a tapestry of meanings that evolve and transform, underscoring the paradoxical effects Ondaatje

seeks to achieve. By employing imagery in this dynamic manner, Ondaatje not only enhances the aesthetic quality of his narratives but also invites readers to engage in a deeper, more nuanced exploration of the themes and emotions embedded within his work (Wilton 6).

Ondaatje's narrative style further dissolves the boundaries between fact and fiction, a technique explored through textual analysis. Hussain and colleagues highlight Ondaatje's penchant for blending genres and re-reading history, as exemplified in his poem "Elizabeth," where he merges historical fact with myth. This blending not only challenges the rigid distinctions between historical and fictional narratives but also reinterprets historical events through a mythopoetic lens. By re-reading history with such a narrative strategy, Ondaatje invites readers to question the veracity and completeness of historical accounts, suggesting that history itself is a construct subject to reinterpretation and reimagination (Hussain et al. 5333).

In his postmodern literary techniques, Ondaatje employs parody, pastiche, irony, and temporal distortion, but perhaps most notably, he utilizes historiographic metafiction and intertextuality. As Veiga Norlander discusses, these strategies enable Ondaatje to problematize history by challenging the notion of an absolute truth in official historical narratives. Through historiographic metafiction, Ondaatje deconstructs the exclusionary nature of conventional historical accounts, offering readers an alternative version of events that includes marginalized perspectives and voices. Intertextuality further enriches his narratives by creating layers of meaning that draw on a multitude of texts, thus fostering a dialogue between the past and present, and between various cultural and historical contexts (Veiga Norlander 4).

The role of art and fiction in Ondaatje's work is central to his challenge against historical orthodoxy. By using narrative techniques that blend reality with imagination, Ondaatje's novels

and poems question the authenticity and singularity of historical narratives. This approach allows him to present a more inclusive and multifaceted view of history, one that acknowledges its constructed nature and the myriad ways it can be interpreted. Ondaatje's narrative techniques, therefore, serve not just as literary devices but as critical tools that interrogate and expand our understanding of history, memory, and identity. Through his innovative storytelling, Ondaatje invites readers to reflect on the power of narrative to shape and reshape our perceptions of the past.

1.3 Interplay of Personal and Collective Memories

The interplay of personal and collective memories is a central theme in Michael Ondaatje's work, reflecting his panoramic worldview that embraces fragmentation and intentional distance. Amid notes that Ondaatje's narrative technique often resembles a collage, with situations and memories revealed in new light through a fragmented structure. This approach mirrors the nature of memory itself, which is inherently non-linear and fluid, moving back and forth in time. In Ondaatje's narratives, this fragmentation allows for a multifaceted exploration of characters and events, where the trajectory of the story is never predictable, reflecting the unpredictable nature of memory (Amid 19). This narrative style not only engages readers in a dynamic reading experience but also underscores the complexities and layered nature of both personal and collective memories.

Vukcevic's analysis highlights how Ondaatje employs a special kind of intertextuality to explore collective memories, using fragmented images and texts that hint at deeper truths. These intertexts, akin to images carved into or painted on rock, serve as fragments leading towards a larger, often elusive truth. In the context of Ondaatje's work, this method of storytelling can be

seen as a means to navigate and critique the dangerous political landscapes of the present, where the truth is often deconstructed and misused. By piecing together these fragmented memories, Ondaatje constructs a narrative that challenges the reader to consider the multifaceted and often contentious nature of collective memory and its implications for identity and history (Vukcevic 591).

The theme of identity, particularly in relation to cultural and diasporic experiences, is prominent in Ondaatje's novels. Manoharan emphasizes that Ondaatje's characters frequently grapple with their cultural identities, especially within the context of the Sri Lankan diaspora or mixed cultural backgrounds. This navigation of identity is deeply intertwined with the characters' personal and collective memories, as they seek to reconcile their past with their present realities. The fragmented narrative style Ondaatje employs allows for a rich, nuanced exploration of these themes, where identity is not presented as a fixed or singular concept but as a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by memories, both personal and collective. This exploration of identity through the lens of memory offers a profound commentary on the fluid and often conflicted nature of selfhood in a postcolonial context.

Ondaatje's narrative technique, which seamlessly blends personal and collective memories, serves as a powerful tool for exploring the complexities of identity and history. By utilizing fragmentation and intertextuality, he creates a tapestry of interconnected stories and perspectives that reflect the multifaceted nature of memory and identity. This approach not only enriches the narrative but also invites readers to engage in a deeper contemplation of the themes at hand. The interplay of personal and collective memories in Ondaatje's work underscores the idea that our understanding of the past and our sense of identity are continually being reshaped by the stories

we tell and the memories we preserve. Through his innovative storytelling, Ondaatje challenges conventional narratives and offers a more inclusive, nuanced view of history and identity, one that acknowledges the complexities and contradictions inherent in both.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the landscape of memory and myth in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, revealing the intricate ways in which the author interweaves personal and collective memories to construct his narrative. The theoretical framework established a foundation for understanding how literature serves as a vessel for cultural, national, and ideological expressions, reflecting the broader aims and concerns of the community. Through a detailed analysis of Ondaatje's narrative technique, it is evident that his use of fragmentation, intertextuality, and the blending of fact and fiction not only enhances the aesthetic quality of his work but also challenges conventional historical narratives. This chapter has demonstrated how Ondaatje's storytelling reflects the fluid, non-linear nature of memory, creating a collage of interconnected experiences and perspectives. The exploration of identity, particularly within the context of the Sri Lankan diaspora, underscores the dynamic interplay between personal and collective memories. Ondaatje's work ultimately invites readers to reconsider the boundaries between history and myth, and to appreciate the complex, evolving nature of identity shaped by the memories we hold.

Chapter Two:

Constructing and Deconstructing

Family Narratives

1.5 Introduction

Family narratives play a pivotal role in shaping our understanding of self and heritage. This chapter delves into the construction and deconstruction of family lore, exploring how these stories influence personal and collective identities. By examining the autobiographical writing of Michael Ondaatje, a renowned author known for blending fact and fiction, we uncover the complexities of memory and imagination in recounting family histories. Through a detailed character analysis, distinguish between real and imagined personas, revealing the nuanced interplay between truth and narrative. This exploration not only highlights the significance of family narratives in identity formation but also critiques the boundaries between autobiography and fiction.

1.6 The Role of Family Lore in Shaping Identity

Narrative identity is a crucial concept in understanding how individuals construct their sense of self. As McAdams explains, “Narrative identity reconstructs the autobiographical past and imagines the future in such a way as to provide a person’s life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning. Thus, a person’s life story synthesizes episodic memories with envisioned goals, creating a coherent account of identity in time. Through narrative identity, people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future” (McAdams 233). This synthesis of past experiences and future aspirations forms a cohesive narrative that guides individuals through their lives. The stories we tell about ourselves not only reflect who we are but also shape our decisions and interactions with others, providing a framework for understanding our place in the world.

Family lore, or the collective narratives passed down through generations, plays a significant role in shaping this narrative identity. Amason notes that “Family members inherit artifacts of ancestors’ experiences, as well as the stories about the acquisition of the artifacts along with those experiences, the individual identities of those who came before, all a part of the family’s collective identity” (Amason 53). These inherited stories and artifacts serve as tangible connections to the past, linking individuals to their ancestors and embedding them within a broader familial context. Through these narratives, family members learn about the values, struggles, and triumphs of those who came before them, which in turn influences their own identities and life choices. This process of inheriting and internalizing family lore is a powerful mechanism for maintaining continuity and a sense of belonging within the family unit.

The impact of family lore extends beyond the individual, contributing to the collective identity of a cultural or ethnic group. Stavrou emphasizes the role of myths, legends, and folk traditions in shaping collective consciousness: “In each civilization, myths, legends and folk traditions characterize the crystallization of the moral and mental heritage that is inherited through the artistic, historic and family tradition, thereby creating and developing the branches of the conscience of the spirit of the Race” (Stavrou 533). These narratives serve as the foundation of cultural identity, encapsulating the shared experiences, values, and beliefs of a community. Through the retelling of these stories, communities reinforce their cultural heritage and ensure the transmission of their collective identity to future generations. This process not only preserves historical continuity but also fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose among members of the group.

The role of family lore in shaping identity is multifaceted, intertwining personal and collective narratives to form a coherent sense of self and community. Narrative identity, as described by McAdams, involves the integration of past experiences and future goals to create a meaningful life story. Family lore, as highlighted by Amason, provides a rich source of inherited stories and artifacts that anchor individuals within their familial and cultural contexts. Stavrou's insights into the role of myths and legends further underscore the importance of these narratives in crystallizing and perpetuating collective identity. Together, these perspectives illustrate the profound influence of family and cultural narratives in shaping who we are and how we understand our place in the world.

1.7 Ondaatje's Approach to Autobiographical Writing

Michael Ondaatje's approach to autobiographical writing is characterized by a blend of confessional and anti-confessional modes, creating a complex narrative dynamic. As Kennedy notes,

In *Running in the Family*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, and *Divisadero*, Ondaatje's narrators deploy confessional, but also anti-confessional, modes. If, as Felski puts forth, confession implies a desire to air 'personal and intimate details,' then I read anti-confession as a mode that holds back those details, signaling an intention to keep them secret. Together, these modes indicate a narrative desire to tell all, but they are also overt signals that total self-revelation has not occurred. Such signals of impending and resisted confession recur throughout Ondaatje's work. (Kennedy 14)

This interplay between revealing and concealing personal details allows Ondaatje to maintain a sense of mystery and complexity in his autobiographical narratives, reflecting the multifaceted nature of identity and memory.

Ondaatje's autobiographical works also delve into the psychological adaptations and identity transformations experienced by migrants. Khoma points out that "Ondaatje's literature, including the novels *Running in the Family* (1982), 'Anil's Ghost' (2000), and 'The Cat's Table' (2011), exhibits autobiographical elements that delve into the intricate process of psychological adaptation faced by migrants in their new realities. These works also shed light on the complexities of developing a hybrid identity and the trauma associated with leaving one's homeland behind" (Khoma 67). Through these narratives, Ondaatje explores the emotional and psychological challenges of displacement, as well as the formation of hybrid identities that reconcile past and present selves. His characters often navigate the liminal spaces between cultures, reflecting the tension and richness of their dual heritage.

Sensory experiences play a crucial role in Ondaatje's narrative technique, linking the past to the present and enriching the autobiographical texture of his works. Guven observes that "The sounds, smell, and colors evoke the memories from the narrator's childhood. By establishing this kind of link, he internalizes the sensuous experience and appropriates his past. However, he does not limit himself only to sensuous experience; he listens to and retells stories. Through the very act of retelling tales about his family and country, the narrator becomes a protagonist who participates in the cultural memory of the community. In this respect, he passes through three stages; memory, imagination, which implies imitation and alteration, and invention or a new creation from the old" (Guven 18). Ondaatje's use of sensory details not only enriches the

narrative but also serves as a bridge between the narrator's personal memories and the collective memory of his community, highlighting the transformative power of storytelling.

Michael Ondaatje's autobiographical writing is a rich ground of confessional and anticonfessional modes, reflecting the complexity of personal and collective identity. His exploration of the psychological adaptations of migrants and the formation of hybrid identities adds depth to his narratives, while his use of sensory experiences and storytelling connects individual memories to broader cultural histories. Ondaatje's work exemplifies the intricate interplay between memory, imagination, and invention, offering a nuanced perspective on the construction of autobiographical narratives. Through his unique narrative techniques, Ondaatje not only tells his own story but also engages with the larger questions of identity, memory, and belonging.

1.8 Character Analysis: Real and Imagined Personas

Michael Ondaatje's character analysis often blurs the line between real and imagined personas, reflecting his narrative style that embraces both factual and invented details. As Jacobs notes, "In fact, certain details very important to Ondaatje's interpretation of Bolden are either mistaken or simply and admittedly invented. Yet these inaccuracies do not discredit this book as they would a traditional biographical novel, for the author clearly establishes in the book itself that biographical accuracy is not his goal—and indeed, given the scarcity of information, is not even possible. The enormous gaps in the biographical record grant so much freedom for invention that one might expect Ondaatje to have retained at least the few facts available" (Jacobs 7). Ondaatje's approach to character development allows him to navigate the spaces between historical fact and creative fiction, crafting narratives that are rich in imaginative depth. This

method highlights the interpretive nature of biography and the ways in which storytelling can transcend the limitations of historical documentation.

Ondaatje's characters often embody identities shaped by multiple cultural and national affiliations, reflecting the complexities of contemporary global identities. Lehmann observes that "While all these texts differ greatly in plot and setting they nevertheless depict a set of characters whose identities are equally influenced by multiple affiliations and affinities that cut across national and cultural boundaries. Even though Ondaatje's fiction stresses that such identities are not always easy to live with, especially in conditions where one's environment does not welcome them, there is still almost always some sense of reconciliation in the texts which makes simultaneously taking part in several cultures and nations seem possible. The sense of loss and displacement that all characters at one point feel as a result of their migrations mostly gives way to at least a little hope for a more positive and empowering sense of belonging to several places" (Lehmann 282). Through his nuanced portrayal of characters who navigate diverse cultural landscapes, Ondaatje emphasizes the fluidity of identity and the potential for reconciliation and belonging in a multicultural world.

The tension between the artist and his audience is another significant theme in Ondaatje's fiction, providing a rich field for analysis through Lacanian theory. Paulos suggests that "A great deal of what has been written about Ondaatje's fiction touches upon the tension between the artist and his audience, and Lacanian theory provides an opportunity to probe the nature of that tension, as well as its origins" (Paulos 2). This tension can be seen in the way Ondaatje's characters grapple with their self-perception and the perceptions imposed upon them by others. By exploring these dynamics, Ondaatje delves into the psychological intricacies of his characters,

revealing the complexities of their inner lives and their struggles with identity and representation. Lacanian theory, with its focus on the formation of the self and the role of the ‘Other,’ offers a compelling framework for understanding these tensions and the ways in which Ondaatje’s characters negotiate their identities.

Michael Ondaatje’s approach to character analysis merges real and imagined elements, creating rich, multifaceted personas that reflect the complexities of identity. His narratives embrace both factual and invented details, as highlighted by Jacobs, allowing for a creative exploration of historical figures and fictional characters alike. Lehmann’s observation of the multicultural dimensions of Ondaatje’s characters underscores the fluidity and potential for reconciliation within diverse cultural identities. Furthermore, the tension between the artist and his audience, as discussed by Paulos, adds a layer of psychological depth to Ondaatje’s character portrayals. Together, these perspectives illustrate the nuanced and innovative ways in which Ondaatje constructs and deconstructs character identities, offering a profound commentary on the nature of self and narrative.

1.9 Conclusion

The exploration of family narratives in shaping identity reveals the intricate interplay between personal and collective histories. Through the lens of narrative identity, we understand how individuals construct a cohesive sense of self by synthesizing past experiences and future aspirations. Family lore, with its rich tapestry of inherited stories and artifacts, anchors individuals within a broader familial and cultural context, reinforcing a sense of belonging and continuity. Michael Ondaatje’s autobiographical writing exemplifies the creative blending of

factual and fictional elements, challenging traditional notions of biographical accuracy and emphasizing the interpretive nature of storytelling.

Ondaatje's nuanced approach to character analysis further underscores the complexity of identity formation. His characters, shaped by multiple cultural and national affiliations, navigate the challenges of displacement and hybrid identity, ultimately finding a sense of reconciliation and belonging. The tension between the artist and his audience, explored through Lacanian theory, adds depth to our understanding of the psychological intricacies in Ondaatje's work. By engaging with these themes, Ondaatje not only tells compelling stories but also offers a profound commentary on the fluid and dynamic nature of identity.

This chapter has highlighted the significance of narrative in constructing and deconstructing family histories, illustrating how stories serve as bridges between the past and present, the individual and the collective. Ondaatje's work, with its rich interplay of memory, imagination, and invention, provides a powerful testament to the enduring power of storytelling in shaping our understanding of self and heritage. As we move forward, the insights gained from this exploration will continue to inform our appreciation of the role of narrative in the ongoing construction of identity.

Chapter Three:

Postcolonial Perspectives and

Cultural Reflections

1.10 Introduction

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* weaves the author's personal history with the broader cultural and postcolonial landscape of Sri Lanka. This work is not merely a recounting of familial tales but a profound exploration of identity, memory, and the lingering impacts of colonialism. Ondaatje's narrative delves into the complexities of a postcolonial society, reflecting on how colonial legacies shape personal and collective identities. Through a tapestry of vivid anecdotes, lyrical prose, and historical insights, *Running in the Family* offers a perspective on the interplay between personal narratives and cultural history, inviting readers to reconsider the lasting effects of colonialism on contemporary life and literature.

1.11 Historical Context of Sri Lanka in Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* provides a rich tapestry of Sri Lanka's historical context, highlighting the island's allure and the consequent invasions it faced from various European powers. The description of Sri Lanka as

the wife of many marriages” encapsulates the island's continuous seduction and subjugation by foreign powers—namely the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the English. Each wave of invaders brought not only their swords but also their religious texts, imposing their own cultural and linguistic influences on the island. The numerous name changes—Serendip, Ratnapida, Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceylon, and finally Ceylon—reflect the successive layers of colonial dominance and the island's evolving identity through these tumultuous interactions (Ondaatje 80).

The personal account of Robert Knox, who was held captive on the island in the 17th century, adds a poignant layer to the historical narrative. Knox's recollection, “Thus was I left Desolate, Sick and in Captivity, having no earthly comforter, none but only He who looks down from Heaven to hear the groaning of the prisoners,” reveals the harsh realities of colonial encounters from a European perspective (Ondaatje 63). This quote underscores the suffering and

isolation experienced by those who were entangled in the island's colonial conflicts. Knox's ordeal exemplifies the broader experience of foreign captives and their struggle for survival and solace in an unfamiliar land, contributing to the historical memory of colonial exploitation and resistance.

The economic motivations behind these colonial endeavors are vividly depicted in Ondaatje's enumeration of the island's resources: "Every conceivable thing was collected and shipped back to Europe: cardamons, pepper, silk, ginger, sandalwood, mustard oil, palmyra root, tamarind, wild indigo, deers' horns, elephant tusks, hog lard, calamander, coral, seven kinds of cinnamon, pearl and cochineal" (Ondaatje 63). This exhaustive list highlights the rich natural bounty of Sri Lanka and the consequent exploitation by colonial powers. The systematic extraction and export of these goods transformed the island into a crucial node in the global trade networks of the time, further entrenching its subjugation and economic dependency.

Through these narratives, Ondaatje intricately connects the personal and the historical, illustrating how the island's complex colonial past continues to shape its present. The layers of colonial impact, from cultural impositions to economic exploitation, reveal a landscape that has been continuously molded and remolded by foreign influences. The historical context provided in *Running in the Family* not only illuminates the island's past but also prompts reflections on the enduring legacies of colonialism in shaping national identities and cultural memories.

1.12 Postcolonial Identity and Displacement in Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* intricately explores themes of postcolonial identity and displacement, shedding light on the complex relationship between the island's inhabitants and the myriad of foreigners who have traversed its landscapes. The metaphor of the

'Karapothas'—beetles with white spots—aptly captures the transient presence of colonial powers in Ceylon. These foreigners, who admired the picturesque scenery yet harbored disdain for the local populace, epitomize the superficial engagement of colonizers with the colonized land and people. Their brief sojourns left indelible marks on the cultural and social fabric of the island, contributing to a sense of alienation and dislocation among its inhabitants (Ondaatje 63).

The notion of belonging and ownership of the land is central to the postcolonial discourse in Ondaatje's work. The reflection, "We own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens and invaders," encapsulates the dichotomy faced by those living in a postcolonial society (Ondaatje 63). This duality resonates with the experiences of many who feel a profound connection to their homeland yet grapple with the imposed identities and narratives of colonial rulers. The reference to Othello's "decorated sleeve" symbolizes the allure and exoticization of the colonized by the colonizers, reducing rich and complex cultures to mere objects of fascination. This reductionist view underscores the tragedy of colonization, where the intrinsic value of the land and its people is overshadowed by the colonial agenda of conquest and exploitation.

The quest for identity is further complicated by the legacy of colonial classifications and divisions. Ondaatje's father's assertion of being a Ceylon Tamil, despite the historical inaccuracy, highlights the struggle for a coherent and authentic identity in a postcolonial context. The character Emil Daniels' response to a British governor's inquiry about his nationality—"God alone knows, your excellency"—reflects the profound ambiguity and confusion wrought by colonial rule (Ondaatje 92). This statement underscores the arbitrary and often absurd nature of colonial categorizations, which have left enduring ambiguities regarding identity. The multiplicity of influences—Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British—further complicates the formation

of a unified national or personal identity, resulting in a perpetual state of displacement and search for belonging.

Ondaatje's narrative reveals the ongoing impact of colonialism on contemporary identities, emphasizing the persistent struggle to reconcile the past with the present. The displacement experienced by the characters in *Running in the Family* is not merely physical but deeply psychological and cultural. The colonial history of Ceylon has left its people in a liminal space, navigating the remnants of colonial ideologies while forging new identities in a postcolonial world. This journey of self-discovery and assertion of identity is fraught with challenges, as the echoes of colonialism continue to influence perceptions of self and other. Through his evocative prose, Ondaatje captures the essence of postcolonial identity and displacement, offering a poignant reflection on the enduring legacies of colonialism.

1.13 Cultural and Geographical Influence

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* profoundly illustrates the cultural and geographical influences that shape Sri Lanka's identity. The depiction of historical maps that "reveal rumours of topography, the routes for invasion and trade, and the dark mad mind of travellers' tales" underscores the island's long-standing allure and strategic significance (Ondaatje 80). These maps, created by various travelers and invaders, reflect the fragmented and mythical understanding of the island's geography. The speculative and often fantastical nature of these early cartographic representations highlights the imaginative and sometimes distorted perceptions that foreign powers held of Sri Lanka, thereby influencing its historical narrative and cultural identity.

The lush and diverse natural environment of Sri Lanka is another critical aspect that Ondaatje explores, emphasizing its profound impact on the island's cultural heritage. The vivid description of "majestic palms with their towering stems and graceful foliage, the shoe flower, the eatable passion flower, [and] the water lily [that] swims the rivers with expanded leaves—a prince of aquatic plants!" paints a picture of a verdant paradise teeming with life and beauty (Ondaatje 66). These botanical elements are not merely decorative; they are integral to the island's ecosystem and cultural practices. The flora of Sri Lanka, with its rich variety, symbolizes the island's natural wealth and its role in shaping the daily lives, traditions, and artistic expressions of its people.

Ondaatje's reflection on the ubiquitous presence of greenery around him, particularly the "most regal green being the tea bush which is regal also in its symmetrical efficient planting," highlights the transformation of the landscape through agricultural practices (Ondaatje 136). The cultivation of tea, introduced during the British colonial period, has become synonymous with Sri Lanka's identity. The meticulously maintained tea plantations exemplify the interplay between nature and human intervention, where precision and order imposed on the landscape contrast with the untamed jungle that would emerge if left to its own devices. This transformation underscores the lasting impact of colonial agricultural practices on the island's geography and economy, contributing to its global reputation as a leading tea producer.

The cultural and geographical influences in *Running in the Family* also reflect the intimate connection between the island's natural environment and its inhabitants' way of life. Ondaatje's narrative reveals how the landscape shapes cultural practices, social structures, and individual identities. The descriptions of the natural environment, from the dense jungles to the orderly tea

plantations, serve as a metaphor for the island's history of colonization and the enduring influence of its diverse cultural heritage. The intricate relationship between Sri Lanka's geography and its cultural identity is a central theme in Ondaatje's memoir, illustrating how the island's natural beauty and historical experiences intertwine to create a unique and resilient cultural tapestry. Through his evocative prose, Ondaatje captures the essence of Sri Lanka's cultural and geographical influences, offering a profound reflection on the island's enduring legacy.

1.14 Conclusion

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* interweaves personal memoir with the broader historical and cultural narratives of Sri Lanka, creating a rich tapestry that captures the complexities of identity, memory, and belonging. The historical context of Sri Lanka, with its succession of colonial rulers, provides a backdrop against which personal and collective identities are shaped and reshaped. The enduring legacy of colonialism is evident in the displacement and ambiguity experienced by the island's inhabitants, reflecting the ongoing struggle to reconcile past and present. Through vivid descriptions of the island's lush landscapes and the intricate relationships between its natural environment and cultural practices, Ondaatje highlights the profound influence of geography on identity and heritage. Ultimately, *Running in the Family* is a poignant exploration of the interconnections between history, culture, and personal memory, offering a nuanced perspective on the enduring impact of colonialism and the resilience of cultural identity. Through his evocative prose, Ondaatje invites readers to reflect on their own connections to place and history, and to consider the ways in which our past continues to shape our present and future.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

The delicate balance between personal memory and historical truth is explored. Ondaatje's novel blurs the lines between myth and reality, revealing the ways in which family stories are often a blend of both. Through a lyrical and evocative narrative, Ondaatje delves into his family history, uncovering the rich tapestry of anecdotes, legends, and half-remembered events that define his heritage. These familial myths, while sometimes exaggerated or romanticized, provide a profound insight into the cultural and personal identity of the author and his ancestors.

It illustrates that the act of remembering is inherently subjective, shaped by personal biases, emotions, and the passage of time. Ondaatje's journey into his past is not just a search for factual accuracy but an attempt to understand the essence of his family's experiences and the cultural context in which they lived. The interplay between myth and reality in his narrative highlights the complexities of memory and the ways in which our personal histories are constructed. By embracing both the factual and the fantastical elements of his family lore, Ondaatje creates a narrative that is rich in depth and meaning.

Moreover, *Running in the Family* reflects the broader themes of postcolonial identity and displacement. The family stories are set against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's turbulent history, marked by colonialism and cultural upheaval. This context adds layers of meaning to the personal recollections, emphasizing the ways in which individual lives are intertwined with larger historical forces. Ondaatje's exploration of his family history thus becomes a meditation on the nature of identity, belonging, and the enduring impact of colonialism on personal and collective memory.

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* masterfully interweaves myth and reality to construct a rich tapestry of family lore. Through a narrative technique that combines factual historical accounts with imaginative, often fantastical elements, Ondaatje creates a memoir that reflects both objective truths and the subjective experiences that shape personal and collective memory. The non-linear structure, poetic language, and fragmented storytelling style allow Ondaatje to capture the essence of family stories, revealing how they are both influenced by and transcend historical reality. This intricate blending of myth and reality not only constructs a compelling narrative but also deepens the reader's understanding of the complex dynamics of memory and identity.

Ondaatje employs several literary techniques to blur the lines between myth and reality. The non-linear narrative structure mirrors the fragmented nature of memory, allowing past and present to coexist within the same narrative space. His use of poetic language imbues the memoir with a dreamlike quality, enhancing the mythical aspects of the story. Vivid imagery and symbolism are employed to evoke a sense of wonder and mystery, while intertextual references to literature, history, and cultural texts add layers of meaning. These techniques collectively create a narrative that transcends simple factual recounting, transforming family history into a rich, multi-layered myth.

The myths and family lore depicted in the memoir significantly influence the characters' perceptions of their personal and collective identities. Characters are often defined by the stories told about them, which shape their self-perception and the way they are perceived by others. For instance, the larger-than-life tales about Ondaatje's father contribute to his enigmatic and

complex persona. On a collective level, the family's shared memories and stories create a sense of belonging and continuity, connecting them to their past and providing a framework for understanding the present. These narratives, though sometimes exaggerated or fictionalized, become a form of truth for the characters, reflecting emotional and psychological realities that are as significant as factual accuracy.

The historical and cultural context of Sri Lanka profoundly shapes the interplay of myth and reality in *Running in the Family*. The island's colonial past and its blend of Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, and British influences provide a rich backdrop for the family's stories. This cultural diversity is mirrored in the eclectic and multi-faceted family lore. The vibrant landscape of Sri Lanka, with its natural beauty and exotic flora and fauna, enhances the mythical quality of the narrative, imbuing descriptions of the environment with a sense of enchantment. Additionally, the political and social upheavals in Sri Lanka add layers of complexity to the family's stories, reflecting the impact of these changes on the characters' experiences and the evolution of their narratives. Through these elements, Ondaatje captures the profound influence of historical and cultural contexts on the construction of family myths and identities.

Between Myth and Reality: Unraveling Family Lore in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*" underscores the importance of storytelling in shaping our understanding of the past. Ondaatje's memoir is a testament to the power of narrative to capture the complexities of human experience, blending myth and reality to reveal deeper truths about identity and heritage. Through his poetic and reflective prose, Ondaatje invites readers to contemplate the nature of memory, the construction of personal and cultural identities, and the enduring influence of history on our lives. The memoir stands as a poignant reminder that our stories, whether rooted in fact or embellished by imagination, are vital to understanding who we are and where we come from.

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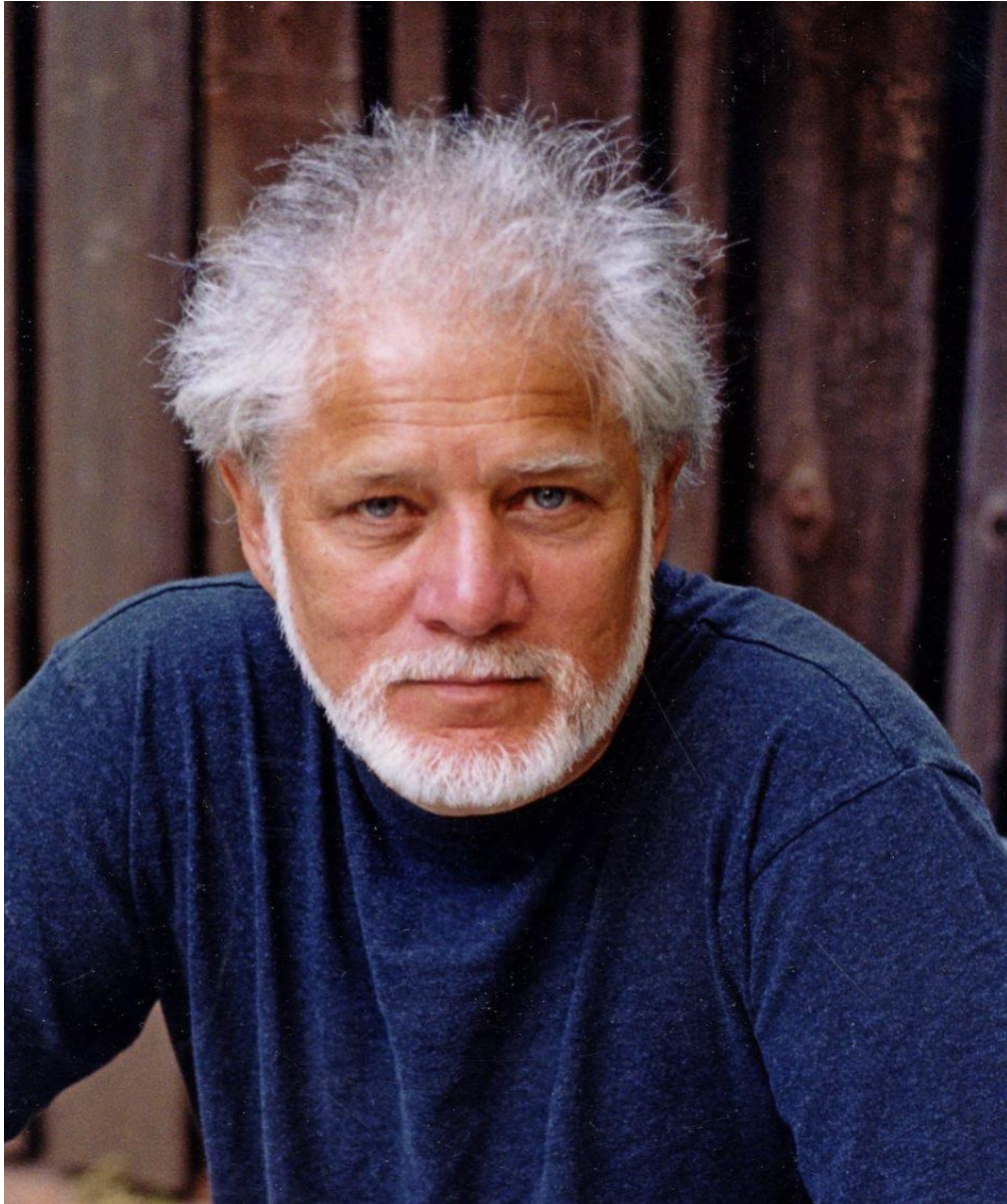
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Appendices

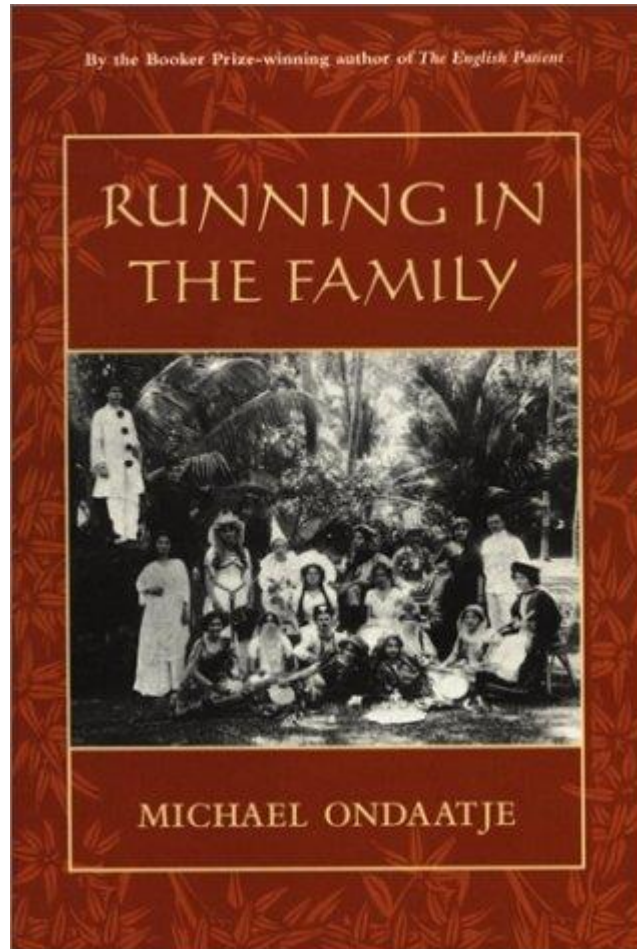
Appendices

Appendix A: Michael Ondaatje



<https://www.stlmag.com/culture/Literature/a-conversation-with-michael-ondaatje/>

Appendix B: Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* Book Cover



<https://www.abebooks.co.uk/9780771068836/Running-Family-Ondaatje-Michael->

0771068832/plp

Glossary

Glossary

Cultural Context: The social, historical, and cultural environment in which a narrative is set.

The cultural context of Sri Lanka, with its rich blend of Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, and British influences, shapes the myths and realities depicted in Ondaatje's memoir.

Family Lore: The collection of stories, legends, and anecdotes passed down through generations within a family. These narratives often contain a mix of truth and embellishment, serving to preserve the family's heritage and identity.

Intertextuality: The relationship between texts and how they reference or echo each other. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje incorporates references to literature, history, and cultural texts, adding depth and complexity to his narrative.

Myth: A traditional or legendary story, often involving supernatural beings or events, that explains a cultural belief or practice. In the context of Ondaatje's work, myths are narratives that blend reality with imagination, shaping the collective memory and identity of his family.

Non-linear Narrative: A storytelling technique in which events are presented out of chronological order. This method reflects the fragmented nature of memory and is used by Ondaatje to weave together past and present in his memoir.

Poetic Language: A literary style characterized by the use of metaphor, simile, and other figurative language to create a lyrical and evocative effect. Ondaatje's use of poetic language enhances the mythical quality of his family's stories.

Postcolonial Identity: The sense of self and community that emerges in societies that have experienced colonization. This identity is often marked by a blend of indigenous and colonial influences. Ondaatje's exploration of his family's history reflects the complexities of postcolonial identity in Sri Lanka.

Reality: The state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them. In *Running in the Family*, reality refers to the factual and historical elements that Ondaatje intertwines with myth to construct his narrative.

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف موضوعات الأسطورة والواقع في رواية مايكل أونداتجي "الهروب في العائلة". تركز الدراسة على كيفية تشكيل التراث العائلي للذاكرة الشخصية والجماعية. يتناول عمل أونداتجي في المقام الأول شذرات من الحكايات العائلية، والأحداث التاريخية، والتأملات الشخصية، ويتحدى الأفكار التقليدية عن الحقيقة والخيال. توفر رواية "الهروب في العائلة" أساسًا لفحص التوتر بين العناصر العائلية والطبيعة المجزأة للتجارب الشخصية. باستخدام نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار، تستكشف هذه الرسالة موضوعات الهوية، والذاكرة، والانتماء. تبرز النتائج القوة التحويلية للسرد في تشكيل فهمنا للماضي. كما تشير إلى أن التراث العائلي، على الرغم من انحرافاته العرضية عن الدقة الواقعية، يلعب دورًا حيويًا في بناء الهويات الفردية والثقافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العائلة، الهوية، الذاكرة، الأسطورة، الواقع.