

Michael Ondaatje's *Coming through Slaughter: a Satire* against the Multiculturalism Policy of Canada

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Abstract:

*This article depicts how people make rules to break, make policies but failed to honour its own declared intentions in the constitution. The multiculturalism policy of Canada is really ignored and violated knowingly or unknowingly. Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* stands as a satire of the purposed policy. It only strengthens the Constitution of Canada, but practically the policies are not worked out in the true sense.*

Key words: *Multiculturalism, Unhomeliness, Multiculturalism policy of Canada.*

Michael Ondaatje, a Ceylonese writer moved to England in 1954 before immigrating to Canada in 1962. Author of several books like *The Dainty Monster* (1967), *The Man with seven Toes* (1969), *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid :Left Handed Poems* (1970), *Rat Jelly* (1973), *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), *Running in the Family* (1982), *Secular Love* (1985), *The English Patient* and *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), Michael Ondaatje is considered to be one of the most celebrated writers of Contemporary Canadian Literature.

Even though Michael Ondaatje is writing on real people in his works *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, he wraps them with a vision of his own. As he says in his interview with Linda Hutcheon, "... there really was a Billy the Kid; there really was a Buddy Bolden. What I had to do there was a version of "Buddy Bolden" (Hutcheon and Richmond 201).

The novel *Coming Through Slaughter* could be a veiled satire against the "Multiculturalism policy of Canada" which has come into force as a part of Canadian Multiculturalism Act, accented to the constitution on 21st July 1988. The novel implicitly shows to what extent Canada has failed to honour its own declared intentions of the constitution as laid out in section three which are as follows:

3(i) It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to...

(d) recognize the existence of communities whose members share a common origin and their historic contribution to Canadian society, and enhance their development;

(e) ensure that all individuals receive equal treatment and equal protection under the Law, while respecting and valuing their diversity;

(f) encourage and assist the social, cultural, economic and political institutions of Canada to be both respectful and inclusive of Canada's multicultural character;

(h) foster the recognition and appreciation of the diverse cultures of the Canadian Society and promote the reflection and the evolving expressions of those cultures

(Hutcheon and Richmond, 371)

The Dutch Canadian novelist Aritha Van Herk says in the context of multiculturalism which is a byproduct of displacement of people from different places:

Imagine a country as this country is, peopled by characters who have abandoned their Setting and who seek to plot their own story in a new way...

some people could say that It is only a matter of adapting to a new

environment or adjusting to custom, of learning a language. I maintain that it is much more profound a displacement of so far reaching that only vanishes after several generations. At least it was for me, I learned that the world was fiction and fiction was refuse. (Peterson and Rutherford, 156)

According to James Baldwin who vehemently criticizes Richard Wright's *Native Son* for its too much concentration on the "lack" of the blacks in the black diaspora, comments on the novel with the words: "A definite dimension has been cut away from the novel." (Baldwin 93) By the definite dimension he means the cultural specificities which the black culture possesses in a unique way, what distinguishes Buddy Bolden, the hero of Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* from Big Boy Thomas, the protagonist of Richard Wright's novel is that the former is quite conscious of the civil war in the black culture. The openness, irrationality, the freedom and the liberation which mark the black life are very much used by Bolden in his life. Hence despite the shortcomings of his life. A jazz player, he sucks much of his life not from the openness of the jazz music which is based on manipulation improvisation.

Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* is an autobiographical fiction in which Ondaatje sketched his own portrait through the character of Buddy Bolden. The critics find many things identical of Buddy Bolden with the writer. Ondaatje takes the assistance of his character Bolden for his self-autobiography. When a writer finds something odd in his life he does not describe it directly, but certainly takes the assistance of a fictional character to reveal himself. The diasporic writers like Ondaatje reveal themselves accurately describing all the secrecy of his life including pre-marital and extra-marital sex, family dispute, his marriage and divorce and the relationship with a prostitute, passion for Jazz music and desire for wild sex etc. are the controversial issues in the life of a writer who has earned name and fame. The memory of the bygone days of the writer have been narrated in the form of the fiction. But in true sense of term these are not fictional but real. The realistic matter of the writer's life has been fictionalized. As a post-modern writer has achieved mystery making fact in fiction and vice-versa.

It is a short novel which may be called Novella. In this edition the pages are strangely laid out looking cramped with narrow margins and text starting unusually close to the top of the page. There are no conventional chapters; instead the book consists of segments of narrative divided into sections, with new sections starting on a new page. Some of the

segments are line of dialogue written without speech mark. Some sections simply contain the lyric to a song. Some segments are written in third person, some in first person.

Buddy Bolden the black American lives in New Orleans at the beginning of 20th Century. Buddy is famous for his corneto playing and for being one of the yearly pioneers of Jazz music. Ondaatje also lives in New Orleans and at the same time he is also one of the pioneers of the jazz music. Unfortunately Bolden does not have any recording through he is an ace player of jazz.

Ondaatje describes the real life of black man in America. His opinions about blackman have been expressed through Buddy Bolden. According to Bolden, the black man need not to be lost on the wilderness of the white system. Whatever it stands for in real life, Ondaatje understands the social system properly and is aware of the consequence of adopting the white culture in the foreign land. Bolden compares himself with a dog who plumbs the depth of water to get away from the waste material while coming home, never bring the external things along with his tail.

I go outside and piss in your garden. When I get back onto the porch the dog is licking at the water bowl trying to avoid the yellow leaves floating in it. With all the time in the world he moves his body into perfect maneuvering position so he can get his tongue curls and captures it. He enters the house with me, the last mouthful pouring out of his jaws. Once inside he rushes around so the cold night air caught in his hair falls off his body.(P-90)

Ondaatje faced a tough situation both in England and Canada. It was very much difficult on part of him to survive; the time was very hard which he took as a challenge. He expresses his personal experience through Buddy Bolden. Bolden is the spokesperson of Ondaatje in *Coming Through Slaughter*. The strategy of survival which Bolden adopts to get away from the environment is of mutuality on which he has a lot of trust. Mutual caring and mutual trust is what Bolden aspires for in his life to ward off unhomeliness. To put his vision of life in proper perspective, Bolden cites the behavior current in the hound civilization which he values very highly. The following passage brings out the point in its proper focus.

The dog follows me whenever I go now. If I am slow walking he runs ahead and waits looking back. If I piss outside he comes to the area, investigates, and pisses in the same place, then scratches earth over it.

Once he even came over to the wet spot and covered it up without doing anything himself. Today I watched him carefully and returned the compliment. After he had leaked against a tree I went over, pissed there too, and scuffed my shoes against the earth so he would know I had his system. He was delighted. He must have felt there had been a major breakthrough in the spread of hound civilization and who knows he may be right.(P-90)

As against the sure but limited world of the blacks, Buddy Bolden's world is uncertain, and unlimited. Death chasing him everywhere, Bolden chooses the life of a picaro who lived on virtual dirt and squalor of the Shell Beach District where he spent his life. His miserable condition forced him to choose the path of the picaro who lived on the undertaking of a series of adventures, often most unpleasant to live through. The following passage tells us about Bolden's destitute condition.

He sat frozen. Then when his money was finished he went down to the shore and slept. Tried to sleep anyway, listening to the others there talk-where to hustle, the weather in Gretna. He took it in and locked it. In the morning he stole some fruit and walked the roads. Went into a crowded barber shop and sat there comfortable but didn't allow himself to be shaved walking out when it was his turn. Always listening, listening to the wet fluid speech with no order, unfinished stories, badly told jokes that he sober as a spider perfected in silence.(P-40)

The black man's condition could never be worse than what happens to Bolden when he finds himself thingified in the streets of Shell Beach District. As the narrator so graphically describes his pathetic condition: "For two days picking up the dirt the grime from the local buses before he was thrown off, dirt off banisters, the wet slime from toilets, gray rub of phones, the alley shit on his shoewhen he crouched where others had crouched, tea leaves, beer stains off tables, piano sweat, trombone spit, someone's smell of a towel, the air of the train station sticking to him, the dream of the wheel over his hand, legs beginning to twitch from the tried walking when he lay down."(emphasis mine)(P-40)

In such a given circumstance, no home proper is feasible to Bolden. He was full of dirt and squalor in every part of his being."Nicotine from the small smokes he found burning

into his nails, the socks thick with dry sweat, the node blowing out the day's dirt into a newspaper.”(41) What keeps him alive is not food proper, but an alibi for food. He “pours in the free ketchup” in a glass of water and makes a cup of soup. He basically depends on the effect of the smell which passes from different houses nearby. Sarcastically, the narrator says: “And then finding home (emphasis mine) in the warm gust of soup smells that came through pavements grids from the subterranean kitchen which kept him in their heat, so he travelled from one to another and slept over them at night drunk with the smell of vegetables, saved from the storms that came purple over the lake while he sat in the rain.”(P-41) The only saving grace is that “shady head” notwithstanding the grim situation of his personal life, is often “playing with the perfect band.”(P-41)

As with the music, so with his life. Buddy Bolden hardly concentrates on a fixed home. With the environment of unhomeliness, Bolden prefers the life of a Picaro rather than being a stable household man. There is no household as such. Nora, his official wife is picked up from an area which is known for its ill-repute. She is a prostitute herself and comes from such notorious communities like “The Swamp” and “Smoky Row,” which is a part of the brothel district of Storyville. Bolden is more or less obsessed with the subject of death, both in his magazine *The Cricket* which he publishes from time to time and also in his personal life however fictional it might be. He is haunted by the “amateur maps” of death whenever a celebrated murder takes place in his area. The fantasy holds on to him which as described by the narrator is as follows:

There were his dreams of his children dying. There were his dreams of his children dying. There were his dreams of his children dying.(P-24)

Bolden is broad, open and unlimited. He is hardly troubled by the questions of morality in his life. He equates life with music which is flux and ever flowing. He does not want to arrest the growth of life by withdrawing himself from life itself. Like a black man, Bolden is all for life. He is a Dionysian by temperament. Webb, Bolden's police friend who was in search of him “pulled” him “back” but there is nothing on his part to fall back upon. With emptiness all around him, he was getting bored and felt like a bull terrier under a leash. He says: “All you've done is cut me in half, pointing me here. Where I don't want these answers.”(P-89)

Bolden is crazy for relationships without which life is unbearable to him. There must be persons around him to whom to make love and converse with, both physically and spiritually. Bolden is not the person to believe in the binary opposition of black/white, poor/rich, animal/human, so on and so forth. It is but natural on his part to transcend the binaries. In his music, for example, he could play on tunes which know no boundaries, no splitting between the Divine and the Hellish. Bolden is conscious of his father's "who put their bodies over barbed wire" in order "to slide over into the region of hell." He is also aware that "Through their sacrifice they seduced...(him) into the game," the game which Bolden refuses to play at the moment. His game is completely different from thesis in the fact that it does not touch upon the binary opposites.

If Bolden becomes mad at the end, it is due to the discontentment of his own life, from his familiar grounds, especially the people and objects which he loved most. In the East Louisiana State Hospital, it is reported that he "Never speaks, goes round touching things." (P-149) Bolden's madness is no doubt because of his loss of physical and emotional relationship with his friends and fiancés with whom he was deeply involved and touched them every moment. His death on November 4th, 1931 at the hospital is the acme of his unhomeliness which is the failure of multiculturalism policy in Canada, he becomes a victim. He actually suffers a great deal throughout his life and meets a fatal end. Policies are set apart but these are not actually carried out for the welfare of the beings. It is clearly visualized in the life and sufferings of Buddy Bolden. Thus *Coming Through Slaughter* of Michael Ondaatje's satirises multiculturalism policies of Canada through the character of Bolden in a true sense.

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