

## Fluidity in Postmodernist Textual Techniques: A Textual Analysis of the Selected Poems of Ondaatje

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### Abstract

*Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, a model of rupture focused on pluralism, open-endedness and fluidity. Postmodernist fluidity is the hallmark of postmodernism that is reflected in Oeuvre of Lyotard, Hassan, Derrida etc. However, it has not yet been explored from postmodernist textual techniques, i.e., pastiche, open-endedness, disjunction, recombination, aleatory, collage, intertextuality, multi-voiced narrative, and poly-temporal time structure in the selected poems of Ondaatje. There were two findings of the present study; first, postmodernist textual techniques also contained postmodernist fluidity, second, postmodernist techniques were explored in the selected poems of Ondaatje. Findings of the present qualitative study were investigated through textual analysis because 'words and phrases' of the selected poems of Ondaatje were analyzed in the frame of reference to postmodernist textual techniques in order to rank him among postmodern poets. Postmodernist textual techniques were sought out from the selected eight poems of Ondaatje i.e. "The Republic", "Dates", "The Diverse Causes", "Inner Tube", "Proust in the Waters", etc.*

**Keywords:** Postmodernism; Fluidity; Pastiche; Open-endedness; Intertextuality; Parody

### Introduction

In the 1980s with the beginning of postmodernist criticism, the ways of studying and analyzing a piece of literature have radically changed. In that era, focus was shifted from fixity to fluidity. Postmodernism subverts the boundaries between genres, languages, cultures, and races (Cliff, 1985). Postmodernism is a skeptical, nihilistic, and suspicious phenomenon. As per Bishop (1996), 'postmodernists are suspicious of authoritative definitions and singular narratives of any trajectory of events' (p. 993). Concepts of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, etc., were used in literary criticism. Their notions i.e., power, knowledge, panopticon (Foucault), *différance*, trace, deconstruction (Derrida), and Lyotard's incredulity towards metanarratives etc., opened new horizons in a wide range of fields i.e., architecture, literature, music, politics, etc. This study attempts to investigate the presence of fluidity in postmodernist textual techniques i.e., pastiche, open-endedness, disjunction, recombination, aleatory, collage, intertextuality, multi-voiced narrative, and poly-temporal time structure in the selected poems of Ondaatje.

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The present study evaluates the previously unaccomplished research area of the reflection of fluidity in postmodernist textual techniques in the poetry of Sri Lankan-born-Canadian Pulitzer Prize winner novelist and poet Michael Ondaatje in order to rank him among postmodernist poets. In order to bring Ondaatje's poetry under the umbrella of postmodernism, it needs to be analyzed in the perspective of postmodernist textual techniques. The previous researchers discerned Ondaatje's poetry in the frame of reference to the poetics of ambivalence (Solecki, 2000), kinetic literary techniques (Heighton, 1988), subjectivity and social relations (Varga, 1995), psychoanalytic reading in the panorama of Lacan's thought (Bremner, 2004), and his poetic volume *Handwriting* in the perspective of semiotics (Festino, 2006).

As contrasted with the previous researches, the present study argues that fluidity in postmodernist textual techniques is reflected in Ondaatje's poetry. While a few researchers might not view the reflection of fluidity in Ondaatje's textual techniques, they might not think of him as a postmodern poet. However, his poetry might be brought under the umbrella of postmodernism as (Heighton, 1988) evaluated his poetry and fiction in the perspective of kinetic literary techniques (intertextuality, heteroglossia, etc.) that might facilitate the researchers to analyze his poetry in the frame of reference to postmodernism and postmodernist textual techniques. The findings of this study benefit the students and researchers to apprehend postmodernism, its textual techniques, and their application to postmodernist literary oeuvre. This research facilitates the researchers to find out the critical areas of postmodernism and literary theory.

The present research is qualitative in nature and has used method of textual analysis in order to investigate postmodernist fluidity in postmodernist textual techniques and their presence in Ondaatje's poetry. Instead of taking all poems of Ondaatje, the study is limited to his eight poems selected from his different poetic volumes. The objectives of the present study are:

1. To highlight postmodernist fluidity with the help of postmodernist textual techniques.
2. To explore these postmodernist textual techniques in the selected poems of Ondaatje in order to bring his poetry under the umbrella of postmodern poetry.

The following research questions guide the present study:

1. How do postmodernist textual techniques function to show postmodernist fluidity?
2. How postmodernist textual techniques are reflected in Michal Ondaatje's selected poems?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Postmodernism is incredulity towards metanarratives and a deconstructing phenomenon that shifts towards fluidity and flux. Postmodernist fluidity is reflected in postmodernist themes, identity, architecture, music, art, fashion, media, etc. As per Lyotard (1979), postmodernist self is not an island but exists in a fabric of relations and presently is more

mobile than before. Theoretical framework of this research provides a background into postmodernism, which facilitates to investigate the presence of postmodernist textual techniques in the selected poems of Ondaatje.

### Understanding Postmodernism

The representative theorists of postmodernism have defined postmodernism in different ways. Postmodernism is not devoid of pluralism. According to Jenks (1986), “most visible shift in the post-modern world is towards pluralism and cultural eclecticism” (p. 50). Hassan discusses ever changing nature of postmodernism as: “certainly, I know less about postmodernism today than I did thirty years ago, when I began to write about it. This may be because postmodernism has changed, I have changed, the world has changed” (Hassan, n.d.). Postmodernism is a term in which truth is interpretive, human self is not fixed and facts are mere constructs of discourse (Eagleton, 1998). As per Hutcheon (1988), postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon - one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts - used in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, video, dance, film, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics or historiography. Appignanesi and Garrat (1995) make distinction between ‘Modernity’ and ‘Postmodern’. The origin of ‘Modernity’ is a Latin word- ‘modo’, which means ‘just now’. The literal meaning of ‘Postmodern’ is ‘after just now’. The origin of postmodernism in the field of philosophy and criticism lies in the assertions of Nietzsche and Foucault. They opened the door for postmodern critiques. Kuznar (2008) seeks the origin of postmodern thinking in Nietzsche’s statements about truth, language, and society, which paved the way for all later postmodern and late modern critiques about the foundations of knowledge.

The shift from modernism to postmodernism in 1960s and 1970s has been described in Kuhn’s (1996) words as a ‘paradigm shift’. The emphasis of modernism is on the individual genius, alienation from society, the autonomy of the subject and auto-referentiality of the work of art. On the other hand, postmodernism adopts a ‘model of rupture’ (Hutcheon), ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ and ‘delegitimation’ (Lyotard). Different critics of postmodernism define it in different ways. For Hutcheon, it is a ‘dedoxification’ and a break with the transcendent beliefs of Enlightenment; for Derrida/Hassan, it is a ‘decreation’/ deconstruction; and for Hayles, it is a ‘denaturing’ phenomenon. The modernists are advocates of order: Eliot classicist, Joyce creator, Stevens maker, and Ezra Pound ‘factive personality’ (1938, p. 194). On the contrary, postmodern writers are *connoisseur of chaos*. The modernists mourn over chaos, while the postmodernists playfully treat it. Conte discusses the relationship of a postmodern text with the world. According to him, a text and a world occupied with nonstop process of invention and disruption, make ever shifting of meaning and interpretation and free floating of signifiers (Conte, 2008).

### Tenets of Postmodernism

1. Rejection of meta-narratives: skepticism towards 'transcendent and universal truth' (Lyotard, 1979, p. xxiv).
2. Postmodernist fluidity in identity: 'a self does not amount to much, but no self is an island, each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before (Lyotard, 1984, 15).
3. Meaning and truth constructed by society; no objective construction of them: the Mediated concept of Truth ...is no such thing as absolute, pure Truth. There is a reality, which may be abstract or sensual ... One can only 'know' it within the socially constructed (or species-constructed) 'mediative-habits' of one's particular society/species/whatever (Taborsky).
4. Cultural determinism: cultural forces shape individuals. Particularly, language determines what we can think, trapping us in a prison- house of language.
5. Rejection of autonomy of the Subject: According to Derrida, *différance* has been derived, has happened, is to be mastered and governed on the basis of the point of a present being as a *Subject a who*' (1991, p. 65). However, for Derrida, difference or *différance*, comes before the Subject. Without difference, the Subject cannot be assumed a unitary whole but rather must be deconstructed (Heartfield, 2002).
6. Rejection of transcendent: there are no absolutes; knowledge is bound to our culture that is relative and fallible rather than absolute or certain (McDowell, 1999).
7. Parody and irony are used to criticize modern literature: Postmodernist parody is used for 'de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representation' (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 94).
8. Fragmentation and distortion are used to reject linear time and space of modernism. As per Firat (1992), the omnipresence of fragmentation in discourse, experience and self-constitutes makes a postmodern narrative difficult to identify.
9. Story - telling as a method is used to reject authorial narrative in postmodern texts.

### An Overview of Postmodernism

Although several research articles and theses have been conducted on postmodernism, postmodernist textual techniques and Michael Ondaatje in the framework of post-colonialism but fluidity in postmodernist textual techniques and their presence in Ondaatje's poetry have not yet been explored. Different researchers and theorists accomplished works on postmodernism. For Lyotard (1979), postmodernism is 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (p. xxiv) and preferring 'little narratives'. According to Baudrillard (2002), postmodernism is a tension between the real and the imitation, reality and hyper-reality or simulacra. According to McHale (2007), modernism is what we know and how we know, while postmodernism asked what we 'can' know. For Nicol (2009), focus of postmodernist art is on bricolage or pastiche, mixing of genres and styles and juxtaposition of low with high culture, playfulness, and irony.

Several researches have been accomplished on Ondaatje's novels and poetry. Heighton (1988) explored Ondaatje's interest in kinetic literary techniques in his work. Varga (1995) investigated human subject as a product of both socialization and self-construction and Billy's erotic madness on instinctual level from Ondaatje's novels. Solecki (2000) analyzed Ondaatje's poems; 'Notes For the Legend of Salad Woman', 'Billboard', and 'Dates' in the perspective of ambivalence. Cook (2004) analyzed Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* in the frame of reference to post-colonial dislocation. Bremner (2004) did a psychoanalytic analysis of Ondaatje's poetry in the perspective of Lacan's thought. Rothgerber (2013) explored Ondaatje's dissolving the boundaries between fiction and reality in his memoir *Running in the Family*. But these researches contain the gaps and lapses because they did not study Ondaatje's selected poems in perspective of postmodernist textual techniques which the present study attempts to fulfill.

The present study is related to the previous studies as Ondaatje's novels like *The English Patient* and *In the Skin of a Lion* have been studied in the perspective of postmodernism and its textual techniques by Kharbe (2016) and McInnis (2016). Kharbe explored postmodernist themes and textual techniques i.e. arbitrary actions, surface and superficiality, self-consciousness, skepticism, irony, multiple perspectives, meta-fiction and fragmentation from Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and McInnis investigated the struggle of postmodernism and postcolonialism from his *In the Skin of a Lion*. However, these researchers did not investigate the postmodernist fluidity in postmodernist textual techniques and their presence in Ondaatje's poetry. Therefore, the present research is justifiably conducted in order to fulfill the mentioned research gap.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study is a qualitative research in nature because 'words and phrases' of the selected poems of Ondaatje are analyzed. Non-empirical approach is used in it because data is collected from published books, articles, and theses. Paradigm of the present research is postmodernism, especially postmodernist fluidity and the research method is textual analysis. Through that method, Ondaatje's poems are analyzed in the perspective of postmodernist textual techniques. In order to collect his poems, eclectic approach is used because the selected eight poems are extracted from his different poetic volumes.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Salient postmodernist textual techniques are intertextuality, collage, pastiche, poly-temporal time structure, irony, open-endedness, recombination, multi-voiced narrative, and aleatory. Postmodernist fluidity or flux is the hallmark of postmodernism. The same fluidity is reflected in postmodernist textual techniques. There are two findings of the present study; first, postmodernist textual techniques also contain postmodernist fluidity, and second, these postmodernist techniques are sought out from the selected eight poems of Ondaatje. Intertextuality is one of the postmodernist textual techniques. Julia Kristeva

first used intertextuality as a term. As per Kristeva (1980), a text is a mosaic of quotations and the absorption and transformation of the author. It includes quotations, references and images from other texts in order to serve some intended purposes (Mishra, 2012). Intertextuality leads towards fluidity because it does not keep fixity. A text in intertextuality does not remain stick to one writer or epoch but it blurs the borders and flows towards another text, because it acknowledges previous literary works in the form of references to other texts.

Another postmodernist textual technique is *pastiche* that reflects postmodernist fluidity. *Pastiche* as a literary genre is not devoid of the imitation of another popular literary work. It is different from parody because it does not keep mockery but honours the literary piece it imitates. It is not devoid of light-heartedness and respect in imitation. Its aim is to show that the other writers imitate their style and content for showing it that their work is a monument of their era. In this way, in *pastiche* also one text moves towards another text and does not remain fixed.

Like other postmodernist textual techniques, parody also is not devoid of fluidity. Parody being a genre of comedy is used to satirize or mock at a piece of work. For some critics, it is an ordinary form of comedy because it emphasizes imitation. It attempts to match or surpass over a piece of writing by imitation. It contains fluidity because it keeps imitation of other writers or their works. According to Hutcheon (1988), parody is a postmodern form that incorporates as well as challenges, which it parodies. Poly-temporal time structure also reflects postmodernist fluidity because in this type of time structure, time does not adhere to one temporal period but different temporal times. Collage is a technique used in visual arts that encompass fluidity because it is the assemblage of different forms i.e., magazine and newspaper clippings, painting, photographs and handmade papers for creating a new whole. Aleatory and recombination reflect fluidity because both are paradoxical constituents that have dearth of their own place and identity. Open-endedness demonstrates postmodernist fluidity because there is no authorial authority in the construction of the meaning but it glides from one reader to another. The readers construct meaning. Currie (1998) states that in the construction of meaning, poststructuralists believe in the active role of the reader. The above mentioned findings show that postmodernist textual techniques are not devoid of postmodernist fluidity that are reflected in the selected poems of Ondaatje.

Ondaatje's poetry reflects postmodernism and postmodernist textual techniques that comprise fluidity. In his poem "The Republic," recombination, aleatory, collage and disjunctions are reflected. In this poem, the house is an embodiment of different modes: 'A different heaven here' (Ondaatje, 1967, p. 20). There is a contrast between the movements and positions of the plants at day and night. Too much Apollonian reason in the plants is found at daytime: 'no dancing with the wind here' (ibid.) and Dionysian frenzy at night 'the plants in frenzy heave floors apart' (ibid.). In this poem, the position and condition of the plants is aleatory because they are still 'like footmen' at day and in frenzy at night. Recombination and disjunction are also found because two distinct

alternatives of passion at night and reasoning at day are yoked with the cord of disjunction. Disjunction is reflected even in a single line: 'air even is remade in the basement' (ibid.). Traits of collage are reflected in the same poem because it is the combination of the contrastive conditions of the plants at day and at night. Another postmodernist textual technique parody is also reflected in Ondaatje's poems. In "Dates". Ondaatje writes about his mother's pregnancy as well as the process of Wallace's writing a poem. At the outset of the poem, the poet says that his birth was heralded by the anniversary of Churchill's marriage. It was a seasonal insignificance. In the second stanza, he says about visiting of her few friends to pacify her shape. In the second half of this stanza, he tells about Stevens' sitting in Connecticut in summer and writing "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard." In the third stanza, he tells about her mother's sleeping because the bedroom fan was cooling her significant belly. On the other hand, Stevens was putting words together to grow the sentences. Stevens' hand was writing: 'the mind is never finished, no, never'. Ondaatje says that he was growing in his 'mother's stomach / as were the flowers outside the Connecticut windows' (p.22).

In "Dates" (1973), Ondaatje parodies Wallace Stevens because he does not take past as it is but describes it in his own way. He parodies Stevens because he misquotes his line, 'it can never be satisfied, the mind, never' as 'the mind is never finished, no, never' (p. 22). In the poem "King Kong meets Wallace Stevens," Ondaatje parodies both King Kong and a modern poet Wallace Stevens. He treats both with his double-edged weapon of parody. Kong is a giant-like gorilla. Like Kong, Stevens is a strange poet. The poet parodically compares this fictional character with an American poet Stevens.

Postmodernist open-endedness is reflected in Ondaatje's poetry. He believes in the participation of reader in the production of meaning of the text. He makes his poems as well as novels complicated both in form and content in order to involve reader in the meaning. He makes a text complicated and open-ended in structure in the form of complicated and open-ended narrative, collage and intertextuality. He makes a text open-ended in content in the form of fragmentation and run-on-images. In addition, he does not make a text fixed as fate but makes it flux and *process*. He also believes in Barthes terms a 'scriptible' as opposed to 'lisible' text. Like Barthes, he too believes that reader should not be a passive *consumer* but a *producer* of meaning.

Furthermore, Ondaatje makes his poetry open-ended because his focus is on language and reader, not on author. He believes in the liberation of poetry from the tyranny of author as he is an admirer of anti-authoritarian and democratic ideology. Hence, he confesses: 'The stories within the poem do not matter, the grand themes do not matter, but the movement of the mind and language is what is important' (1979, p.14). In Ondaatje's poem "Inner Tube", postmodernist open-endedness is found because its last line has different meaning for different readers. For some readers, this line 'one of us is wrong' (Ondaatje, p. 22) does not give answer to the events described in this poem. Also, for some readers, the speaker may be wrong, for some the heron and for some readers the dog may be wrong. Polydimensionality leads it towards open-endedness and unfixed

notion of meaning. Postmodernist absence of authorial voice is also reflected in this poem like his several poems of open-endedness. Thompson (2007) in his newspaper article quotes Ondaatje in which he confesses the presence of creative process and open-endedness in his work: "I *should* read them someday, and learn something; I'd probably want to rewrite them". Ondaatje's poem "Proust in the Waters" keeps open-endedness because its meaning also varies from reader to reader. For some readers, this poem deals with futility of discourse. They investigate this meaning from the fragmental part of loon's syllables: "'to know the syllables/ in a loon's sentence/ intricate/ shift of preposition/ that signals meridian/ west south west" (Ondaatje, 1984, p. 122). For some readers, this poem deals with surrealistic elements because of having distorted fragments i.e., 'sleeping/ arm of moon' (ibid.). It is a dreamy poem for some readers.

In intertextuality, one text glides towards another text. The relationship between the Greek chorus and Ondaatje's "The Diverse Causes" is reflected. In this poem, he dissolves the boundaries between present and past through postmodernist textual technique intertextuality that encompasses fluidity: "three clouds and a tree/ reflect themselves on a toaster/ the kitchen window hangs scarred/ shattered by winter hunters" (Ondaatje, 1967, p.8). According to Clarke (1991), the phrases of this poem i.e., 'winter hunters', 'window hangs' reflect the glimpses of chorus of Greek classical drama.

Another postmodernist technique multi-voiced narrative or heterodiegetic narrator is evident in Ondaatje's poems i.e., "Last Ink", "Proust in the Waters", etc. Heterodiegetic narrator keeps himself or herself aloof from the narrated or reported action. He or she is not a character of a story. Likewise, Ondaatje's narration rejects authorization and prescribing. He is in favour of a counter-narrative, which is not based on central position but multiple positions. Vigurs (2001) states: "resisting the one authoritative voice, Ondaatje's text presents a range of voices" (p.3). In these poems, there is not any authorial self. In "Last Ink", authorial self is diffused. 'I' of the author is mingled with 'you' of the audience. We find the appearance of audience or heterodiegetic narrative in the phrases i.e., 'you met the plum blossom', 'in your heart', 'circling your winter boat', 'you shared it', 'your rain-swollen gate', 'you first saw it', 'you could speak of it' (Ondaatje, 1998, pp. 65-66). In "Proust in the Waters", authorial voice is not found because 'I' is not used. In this poem, the narrator is addressing his friend, Proust: 'releasing the air/ out of your mouth/ the under your arm/ tick of the brain/ submerged' (Ondaatje, 1984, p.122).

A poly-temporal time structure is reflected from Ondaatje's "Notes For the Legend of Salad Woman." In this poem, Ondaatje, playfully, says that since his wife was born, she must have swallowed the salad equal to two-thirds of Eden. She would have wiped out whole gardens of salad of Eden. All the herbs are churning in her mouth. The speaker saw his wife sucking spongy tissues of grass and flowers. She made the garden a dust bowl by sucking its plants. She bit the leaves on her breast during their walk in Eden. In this poem, several time frames run at once. The narrator and his wife are seen wandering in the Eden. A poly-temporal time structure is reflected because the narrator



and his wife are seen wandering in the Eden: “on our last day in Eden as we walked out” (1973, p.18).

Pastiche is another postmodernist textual technique reflected in “Dates”. As per Jewinski, this poem contains *pastiche*. He notes Ondaatje’s interview with Solecki in which he is not ready though, to accept Auden’s influence on him but meekly admits it as well. Jewinski notes that in the same interview Ondaatje admits that the line “no instruments/ agreed on a specific weather” (from the poem ‘Dates’) is his ‘most conscious borrowing from anyone’ (p. 13).

## Conclusion

As it has been stated earlier, the present study is qualitative in nature and employs method of textual analysis. Ondaatje’s eight poems from different volumes i.e., “The Republic”, “Dates”, “The Diverse Causes”, “Inner Tube”, “Proust in the Waters”, “Last Ink”, “King Kong meets Wallace Stevens”, and “Notes For the Legend of Salad Woman” have been studied in the perspective of postmodernist textual techniques that contain postmodernist fluidity. None of the previous studies have analyzed postmodernist textual techniques i.e., intertextuality, open-endedness, disjunction, recombination, aleatory, collage, pastiche, multi-voiced narrative, and poly-temporal time structure, in the light of postmodernist fluidity and their presence in Ondaatje’s poetry.

The present research is an initiative for opening new realms of research on Ondaatje’s oeuvre in the perspective of postmodernist textual techniques. Hence, further research may be needed to add integrity and credibility to the results of this initiative. Some new ideas or questions might appear because of the argument in this study. The following areas are yet to be explored in the realm of research on Michael Ondaatje: Presence of postmodernist textual techniques in Ondaatje’s poetry might open new horizons of research for the students. For example, the students might work on: Ondaatje’s novels in the perspective of postmodern flux. They might investigate Linda Hutcheon’s the ex-centric from the selected poems of Ondaatje. lastly, open-endedness in Ondaatje’s novels also might open new disciplines of research.

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