



Volume 11, Issue 6, November 2024, p. 189-196

Article Information

Article Type: Research Article

This article was checked by iThenticate.

Doi Number: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17121/ressjournal.3608>

ArticleHistory:

Received

13/10/2024

Accept

14/11/2024

Available

online

15/11/2024

‘HISTORY FROM BELOW’: A STUDY OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S IN THE SKIN OF A LION

Hussein Ali Abbas¹

Abstract

Realizing the fact that the stories of the Canadians who are neither English nor French in origin locally called immigrants are shown to be untold in Canadian official record, Michael Ondaatje tries in his novel *In the Skin of a Lion* to historicize the experience of a group of immigrants who are engaged in building a huge bridge in Toronto. It is an experience of hard work, low-payment, and long working hours. This paper tries to examine the novel from what is known as ‘history from below.’ It is a version of history that seeks to unearth the role and contribution of lower-class people in local and global events. The main objective of this paper is to establish a link between the principles of history from below and the thematic ideas of Ondaatje’s novel.

Keywords: Canadian, history, immigrants, lower-class, marginalization

¹ Al-Mansour University College. Hussein.ali@muc.edu.iq

Introduction

Big deeds have always been ascribed to the ruling class, political or else, ignoring those who have been actually involved in the act itself. This trend of historical reading is well depicted by Bertolt Brecht, a playwright, who is quoted to have said on the construction of 'Thebes,' an old Egyptian town that was constructed with huge gates built of big heavy stones:

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?

The books are filled with names of kings.

Was it the kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone? (Quoted by Rediker.)

Brecht's poetical lines come as a reaction to the ideology appeared in the sixties of the last century calling for looking at history from below in the eyes of those who really passed in the experience.

Indeed, the above quotation presents a vision that the huge achievement in the world is officially attributed to the kings and other ruling leaders, whereas, the workers who have physically engaged in making that achievement are left anonymous. The quotation, moreover, suggests that a new version of history writings capable of documenting the role of common people in making great events is necessarily required, that is what is here known as 'history from below.'

It is an anti-colonial version of history that demands rewriting local and global events of the past to give representation to the normal people who have played a vital role in making those events. It suggests that colonial history writers have excluded large sections of lower-class people, including ethnic minorities in Western countries, defined as immigrants (Sharma, 2022). Indeed, it stands against the common belief that history is written by the victors.

Until the second half of the 19th century the books that document the events of the past were purely official. They were written under the sponsorship of the ruling groups to serve their own interests. WWII and the collapse of colonial European empires afterwards, the British in particular, brought a challenge to the principles on which historiography is based. While the books that were published on that war, for example, have been stuffed with names of leaders like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, the story of the soldiers who have fought and sacrificed in that war are hardly mentioned. Since then, the call for a history that gives representation for the ignored in official records is strongly realized. E. P. Thomson (1924-1993) is among the first to articulate that need by providing the ideas for what is now called 'History from Below.'

Thompson was born and grown up in anti-colonial family. His father has served in the colonial institutions in India, and witnessed how the traditional history was unfairly written on the people of both England and the colonies. However, Thompson's ideas are well illustrated in his book *The Making in the English working class* first published in 1963. Thompson's new version of history originated after an argument with traditional history writers as he declares: "my quarrel with [them] is that they tend to obscure the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed, by conscious efforts, to the making of history" (Thompson, 12). The book, however, is received as: "foundational to the historical and intellectual movement which became characterized as history from below" (Featherstone and Griffin 2015, 375).

Some critics establish a link between Marxist history and 'History from Below', saying that the second is, indeed, an extension to the first. They argue that E. P.

Thompson and his colleagues, like Eric Hobsbawm, who lay the foundation for 'history from below' were members in a history group that was established by the British Communist Party after the end of WWII. They add that both versions of history address the pains of the lower class. Despite these similarities, this research looks at 'history from below' as something more inclusive. While Marxist history addresses people in terms of class distinction, 'history from below' transcends class issues to include other marginalized groups. More clearly, the colored people, for example, are oppressed and treated as a minor race.

Although Thompson is widely recognized as a 'historian truth-teller', the theorist of 'history from below' is seen to have mixed in writing between history and literature. Ann Curthoys makes a significant point as she traces the effect of literature on Thompson and his writings. As he was a university student, "Thompson had intellectual training in both history and literature" (Curthoys 2015, 3). While working later as a teacher, "he [Thompson] was teaching both literature and history to adult education classes at the University of Leeds" (Ibid). He was writing under the influence of Frantz Fanon's Post-colonial writings. According to Priya Satia, "E. P. [Thompson] addressed the judgment of Frantz Fanon's *The wretched of the Earth* which...cautioned forcefully against 'mimicry' of a West house whose culture and institutions were manifestly morally and practically bankrupt" (Satia 2020). Therefore, Thompson derives some of his ideas on history from outstanding novels. For example, while talking about 'factory system,' as a system that obliges workers to give up a part of their culture so as to be "adapted to the discipline of machine" (1963, 362), Thompson turns to *The Rainbow* by D. H. Lawrence: "They [workers] believe that they must alter themselves to fit the pits and the place, rather than alter the pits and the place to fit themselves. It is easier" (quoted in Thompson, 362).

For Curthoys, this effect of literature on Thompson's writings is clearly felt in the book that is in question, *The Making of the Working Class*. She notes that Thompson's book was received as "a work of history with a literary sensibility" (2015, 3). Thus, 'history from below' realizes history from a literary perspective. It has consequently attracted the attention of many novelists who need to explore untold stories of those who are almost forgotten in traditional history.

'History from below' is not a fresh version in historiography, it has initially appeared in post-WWII years. Yet, the interest in re-writing 'history from below' increased in the recent decades. This is seemingly due to the increasing number of the marginalized people as millions of people from ex-colonies emigrated and settled in the colonial Western countries during the 20th century. These immigrants find themselves at the bottom of social hierarchy.

'History from below' stands in contrast to the tradition history that is described as 'history from above.' The two ideologically unparalleled trends reflect different positions over some global and local issues. This dispute could be realized, for example, in the Canadian experience of war. Canadian troops were involved in the two World Wars. Since then, this issue has become a matter of dispute between the two versions of history. While the traditional view of history dignifies those wars, claiming that the contribution has given Canada a chance to appear on the international scene as an independent nation, the 'history from below' supporters argue that the Canadians' contribution and the heavy casualties in the battlefields were 'unnecessary' because they fought in Europe, defending their mother countries, England and France, rather than Canadian territories.

Unlike the traditional history, 'history from below', as shown earlier, is a history of inclusion. Those who have been excluded from traditional history writings are

widely found in this new version of history. Thus, the stories of women, ethnic groups and immigrants, for example, are found in 'history from below'. Some authors who write on such groups are keen to turn to 'history from below' to explore the stories of these marginalized people.

Canadian novelist Rudy Wiebe lashes out at those who classify the working class as 'little people' and take that as a justification for ignoring their stories in national record. Wiebe argues that those 'little people' are indeed the real makers of great history and that "History is the biography of all kinds of little people, what we call little people, who are just as great, and perhaps greater than the great men that we know [in history books]" (Wyile 2002, 66). 'Little People' is a term that refers to the ordinary people who live on the margin. Thus, power is the only category that has been adopted to classify people and introduce them into history books.

Herb Wyile, a Canadian critic, supports the initiative that has been undertaken by fiction writers to give voice to those marginalized in traditional history. Wyile attributes that initiative to the marginalizing power of official history saying that "the historical record...tends to be preoccupied with the activities of white, upper-class English males" (2002, 5). Thus, the experience of non-English minority called immigrants in Canada becomes a substance to fiction by writer like Michael Ondaatje.

Michael Ondaatje belongs to a group of Canadian authors who write fiction to include untold stories of those who have been forgotten for long decades. Joy Kogawa, for example, uses her novel *Obasan* to tell the story of the Canadians of Japanese origin who were arrested and kept in detention camps in isolated areas during WWII, a story that has never been addressed by history writers.

This paper is based on the assumption that the main reason that motivated Ondaatje to write *In the Skin of a Lion* is the desire to unearth the story of immigrants and their experience in Canadian society, a story that is not documented in official history books. This assumption is strongly consolidated as one listens to what Ondaatje says in an interview:

Toronto is a city of immigrants...but there is very little official history about who they were, what their lives were like. I didn't want to talk about politicians or historical figures. I want to talk about the people who were unhistorical—all those invisible professions that lay behind history. (Kizer 1987)

Thus, when Ondaatje decides to use his novel to create a history of immigrants' community in Toronto, he chooses his characters from the lower class, namely construction workers. Therefore, Ondaatje's fiction and 'history from below' are in resemblance on the ground that both address the human experience through those who happens to be at the bottom.

In Skin of a Lion is a story of working people who are employed in the construction project on a bridge and a tunnel across a river in Toronto. These workers are ready to accept a high-risk job in return for modest payments. The unhealthy conditions and long working hours are among the disturbing images shown in Ondaatje's novel. The central theme that is narratively rendered reveals the suffering of these exploited individuals who sacrifice a lot in this work and whose dilemma is neglected in the official writings.

'History from below' in Ondaatje's *In Skin of a Lion*

In the Skin of a Lion enacts 'history from below' by addressing the stories of underprivileged characters, who are exploited and denied the rights of

acknowledging their contributions. Ann Curthoys opines that 'history from below' "asserts the primacy of human action...in specific political, economic, and cultural contexts..." (Curthoys 2015, 10). She further adds:

As reader, we want to know who these historical actors were, and get a sense of their individuality and aspirations, their quirks and passions. (Ibid)

By choosing to write about the life of marginalized characters, Ondaatje provides another piece of evidence that his novel is not far from the main principles of 'history from below'. His immigrant characters come from Eastern European countries and are unable to tell their story not only because they are unable to speak English, but also because they are disallowed to use their native languages; they are threatened with imprisonment "if they speak in public in any language other than English" (Ondaatje 1987, 139).

As for the major character, the author says that Temelcoff is Macedonian by origin. When he was 25 years old, the WWII erupts. When his village burned, he decided to leave along with three friends. They reach Athens by train, and have to bribe the captain of a boat to carry them to Trieste, Italy. They have to stay for seven days in a basement of a deserted factory waiting for a boat to pick them to France where they have to take an old filthy boat, usually used to carry animals, to Canada. Consequently, two of his friends died in this long, unhealthy trip.

The context that Ondaatje sets his characters within implies that Temelcoff comes to Canada with no passport. He could not speak even a word in English. He has to take train to Toronto where many of his countrymen live. He starts working in a bakery for seven dollars a month with food and a place to sleep in at night. Whether before or after arriving Canada, this miserable life forces him to accept to take a risky job, working for 'Dominion Bridge Company':

Nicholas Temelcoff is famous on the bridge, a daredevil. He is given all the difficult jobs and takes them. He descends into the air with no fear...He assembles ropes, brushes the tackle and pulley at his waist, and falls off the bridge like a driver over the edge of a boat. (Ondaatje 1987, 36)

It is quite clear that the world has driven him to this fateful end. Temelcoff's story, thus, helps to imply that Canada is not an option but a shelter for immigrants.

Ondaatje follows a certain narrative strategy to construct the central theme of marginalization concerning the working class in official history. He chooses his characters from various classes and engage them together in one project. Then, he goes through the experience of each group, giving the readers a chance to decide which group deserves to be acknowledged as the real builders of the project.

Under this strategy, Ondaatje categorizes his characters into two groups; the governmental supervisors as a high class and workers as a lower class. The first group is represented by Rowland Harris, Commissioner of Public Works, whereas, Nicholas Temelcoff, a worker with no experience, represents the second group. Through this strategy, the author is able to uncover the hard conditions the working class endure in terms of the time spent in the work place, the risks they are exposed to and the payment that is given and the difference between their experience and that of the privileged supervisors.

When it comes to the hours that each group has to spend daily in the work sight, Nicholas Temelcoff and his colleagues have to get up before the sunrise so as to be early in the work place. They have to work hard until they leave at six o'clock in

the evening. In comparison, Harris, the supervisor, comes at night just to examine what has been built during the day hours.

In an attempt to show the difference between the two groups, namely supervisors and workers, the author distinguishes both groups via their different work dress. The workers have unclean clothes, so dirty that “the tar seeps through the porous body of their clothes” (Ondaatje 1987, 29). In comparison, Harris appears with “his expensive tweed coat” (Ibid, 46).

As for the risks that the supervisors and workers are exposed to in that project, the two groups are at odds as well. The risk is narratively shown as deadly on the workers, unlike the supervisors who monitor the work from safe distances. More clearly, while the supervisor looks at the construction from afar through the glass of his office, workers are dangerously working on the top of that construction, swinging in the air. Temelcoff, who has originally been hired to replace a worker who died in work, counts the injuries he has got during the period of employment. This is how he demonstrates the painful reality of his situation:

I got about twenty scars...all over me. One on my ear here...Also this under my chin, that also broke my jaw. A coiling wire did that. Nearly kill me, broke my jaw. Lots more. (Ibid, 39)

Quite terribly, workers are seen toiling atop in groups because they are afraid of a huge bird which once came and lifted one of their colleagues. It is another type of risk that workers have to face.

The gap between the two groups are obvious when it comes to payment. The novel shows that those who are sitting in office are paid much more than those who spend the whole day in the work place doing a risky job. This unfair payment could be realized in the conversation between Patrick, a worker and Harris, a governmental supervisor. After the project has been completed, Patrick is glimpsed in Harris’ office, blaming him for low payments they have been given. This is how he lashes at him:

Patrick: Your goddamn herringbone tiles in the toilets cost more than half our salaries put together.

Harris: Yes, that’s true.

Patrick: Aren’t you ashamed of that. (Ondaatje 1987, 248)

While the quotation makes it clear that wealth is not coming from the real work that one is doing, it comes from the position that one occupies. As a reward for his position, Harris becomes wealthy, whereas workers, like Patrick and Temelcoff, remain poor. At the end, it is the wealthy Harris who has entered the official record as a major contributor to that construction.

Ondaatje takes the readers to a stand to decide that it is unfair to have a history that includes the names of those who have just made speech at the closing ceremonies for a certain project whereas it excludes the names of those who have worked hard for years to get that project accomplished. This vision becomes clear as Ondaatje vivifies this destabilizing vision:

Official histories and news stories were always soft as rhetoric, like of a politician making a speech after a bridge is built, a man who does not even cut the grass on his own lawn. (Ondaatje 1987, 151)

Again Ondaatje sustains the idea that there should be, beside the official history, a new version of history writings that can address the pains and accomplishments of workers who stand behind every national project.

Several years after the construction of the bridge is completed, the narrator Patrick Lewis enters a public library, hoping to see his name and those of his colleagues' in books and magazines that remind people of the project of that construction. He is disappointed as

[t]he articles and illustrations he found in the Riverdale Library depicted every details about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge.
(Ibid)

Thus, while the official history is proudly talking of the accomplishment of the material value of the construction, it fails to acknowledge the human cost of that construction.

Whether alive or dead, working people are hardly mentioned in official history. That is why they are ignored. At best, they are mentioned as numbers. For instance, when Patrick asks Harris about the numbers of the workers who died while working on that project under the latter's management, he is shocked when Harris tells him that he does not know simply because "there was no record kept [on that]" (Ibid, 248).

To keep a record on the dead becomes an insignificant issue when it comes to the working people. In another instance, while reading publications on the construction of the bridge in the library, Patrick notes that "the death of workers [is] fleetingly mentioned" (Ibid, 150). This act of only mentioning the number of the dead workers show disrespect to these people. He also finds out that "even in archive photographs it is difficult to find [Temelcoff]" (Ibid, 36). This highlights the idea that people, like Temelcoff, are unrecognized in the pages of the official history of the nation, despite their invaluable contributions as they died working on national projects.

In a positive sense, *In the Skin of a Lion* makes it easy for readers to distinguish between two versions of history, traditional history and 'history from below.' It enables the readers to examine what kind of history the author wants to make when s/he narrates the story.

Conclusion

In The Skin of a Lion addresses the pain of the working-class people who have contributed so well as in building of a huge bridge, yet are poorly recognized in official records. Ondaatje's novel has narratively shown to be an embodiment of the principles of 'history from below,' a version of history that focuses on people who have been belittled and ignored by local and global history. The fiction has significantly brought into attention the idea that history and literature should be re-written in the light of this new historical version.

References

- Curthoys, Ann. 2015. "History as a form of Literature: EP Thompson's *The Making of English Working Class*". *Text Special Issue* 28. pp. 1-14.
- Featherstone, David and Paul Griffin. 2016. "Spatial Relations, Histories from Below and the Makings of Agency: Reflections on *The Making of the English Working Class* at 50." *Progress in Human geography*, 40 (3). pp. 375-393.

- Kizer, Carolyn. 1987. "Mr. Small Isn't Here, Have an Iguana." *The New York Times*. Sept. 27.
- Ondaatje, Michael. 1987. *In the Skin of a Lion*. Picador.
- Rediker, Marcus. 2022. "Reflections on History from Below." *Trashumnte: Revista Americana de Historia Social* 20, pp. 285-321.
- Satia, Priya. "History From Below," *AEON*, Dec. 2020.
- Sharma, Dev Kant. 2022. "History From Below: A Revisionist Approach of Writing History". *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR)*, 9 (1). pp. 66-72.
- Thompson, E. P. 1963. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Vintage Books.
- Wyle, Herb. 2002. *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and Writing of History*. Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press.