

The Stories of Men in *In the Skin of a Lion* Overshadow Class Struggle and Leave the Stories
and Work of Women Invisible

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The perspective of Michael Ondaatje's novel *In the Skin of a Lion* begins with a boy's story, develops into a man's story, and breaks off into multiple men's stories, and all are set against the backdrop of Canadian immigrant labour and oppression. The immigrant men's experiences of physical, social, and economic struggle are vivid and meaningful, but they are backgrounded to the singularly humanistic and male-centric viewpoint of the protagonist Patrick and secondary male characters, Nicholas Temelcoff and Caravaggio. The novel's almost exclusively male perspective is initially formed in the absence of women while simultaneously focused on women: on the empty bright kitchen as symbolic of the absence of Patrick's mother; and on the magical, mobile, and fragile moths as symbolic of the women, Clara and Alice, who are just out of his reach and understanding. This individualistic male viewpoint of longing and journey continues through the story, forming the central narrative of a man's search for his purpose and place in the male hierarchy and a connection to women. However, the female characters are portrayed as male fantasies or exotic creatures and are primarily used as witnesses to the men's stories while their own stories are never told. In focusing only on the stories of men and the struggles of male immigrant workers, Ondaatje overlooks the stories and struggles of half of the oppressed immigrant workers of that place and period. Toronto was not built from men's work on bridges and buildings alone, but by the hard labour of women too.

The novel's point of view begins through an anonymous boy's perspective. He has no sense of self yet as he watches the silent toil of faceless immigrant labourers: he is only the "boy who witnesses" (Ondaatje 8). However, the stories and Patrick's shared perspective becomes individualistic as his boyhood identity is shaped in a void between his silent father and his absent mother. Symbolic of his mother's absence is the empty, "long" (20), "bright" kitchen (9). Her vacancy and untold story are portrayed as a luminous vacuum, an empty space of light that draws the ethereal moths that Patrick is captivated by as he watches them through the kitchen window. His attraction to the moths and separation from them reflects Patrick's later relationship with women, his unattainable desires or the uncrossable distance between himself and them. As a boy, he wonders if "perhaps he can haunt these creatures" (10). One night he follows a rare blue winter moth "scuffing along the snow" (20) and witnesses immigrant labourers through the trees, laughing and skating on the frozen river by firelight, as a rare exhilarating scene of freedom and camaraderie. This early experience of following something magical to discover something joyful compels his later following of the women, Clara, and Alice, toward emotional connection, fulfillment, and freedom. Mobility, as being active and connective, is a deeply desirable quality to Patrick. He views women, like the moths, as "essentially" mobile, but he admires and follows the mobility of the labouring men too.

The "central narrative is the story of Patrick's experience" (Huebener), of finding his way and position in his male-centric world and reveals his profound insecurity as an individual. Patrick observes his silent and immobile father, Hazen Lewis, who has found a way to replace heavy labour with higher skill and risk as a dynamiter. He learns from his stony father a tradable skill, acceptance of a dangerous world (Huebener), and a deep sense of alienation. He describes "a wall" within himself that "no one reached," born from "a tiny stone swallowed years back that

had grown in him” (Ondaatje 71). As Patrick arrives in Toronto on the verge of manhood, he feels as alone and random as the picked up “piece of feldspar in his pocket” (53). The separation between himself and his father is later reflected in the separation between the mobile workers and the immobile men of authority like Ambrose and Harris, but Patrick senses a distance even between himself and the immigrant labourers he works with. In comparing himself to others he feels lacking or “hollow”: “he himself was nothing but a prism that refracted [other people’s] lives” (Ondaatje 157). This emptiness, hardness, and aloneness is what drives Patrick to seek his place among men, belonging in the immigrant community, and to desperately pursue a connection with women.

Furthering Patrick’s refractive perspective, the story’s narrative point of view breaks intermittently into secondary characters’ perspectives in an endeavor to tell more than one story (Huebener). However, the perspectives of Nicholas Temelcoff and Caravaggio, men from two of the most marginalized ethnic groups in Canada at the time, Macedonians, and Italians, seem to share almost the exact same individualistic “humanist” (Lundgren 17) perspective as Patrick. Lundgren argues that the “importance of ethnicity, and implicitly of whiteness...undermines the humanist rhetoric advanced at times by the protagonist, Patrick Lewis” (Lundgren 17-18), but I would argue that the story’s race and class struggles are significantly backgrounded to Patrick’s, Nicholas’, and Caravaggio’s singularly male-centric and individualistic perspective. The three men highly value their own work, purposes, and political community while viewing women as desirous, non-struggling creatures. This individualistic male-centric focus may explain “the novel’s self-subversions, its lacunae and ambivalences, [that] make it impossible to assign clear meaning to the political violence that it describes” (Beddoes). Patrick places himself in the social, physical, and economic hierarchy of men: below his father Hazen, his enemy Ambrose,

and his boss Harris; between Nicholas the hero and Caravaggio the thief; and just above the labouring immigrant masses due to his specialized skill. Patrick labours along with the other men, but he also knows how to 'blow things up'. In his effort to fit in, he places himself just below Nicholas, a hero who can fly and saves a woman in the sky, and just above Caravaggio, an injured and sometimes bungling thief who is saved by a woman. Both Nicholas and Caravaggio are intelligent hardworking men, mobile and connected to their communities, and Patrick admires and relates to them more than he does his father. The immigrant labourers toil in the most extreme conditions, but more than their oppression it is a symbolic mobility and emotional struggle for place and connection that the novel focuses on. Patrick, Nicholas, Caravaggio, and the other workers all face serious danger and brutal labour while millionaire Ambrose hides from public accountability and Commissioner Harris hires impoverished workers to realize his visions. The two latter men have enormous social and economic power but neither do the dangerous physical work of Patrick and his fellow labourers. These two men, positioned at the top of the male hierarchy, are separate from the group of oppressed, mobile, and connected workers just as Patrick's father is above, immobile, and separate from him. More than being about class struggle though, the story emphasizes an individualistic male perspective, a man's view of his challenging conflicted world, and it is one that does not recognize, even at the bottom of the dominant group, the oppression below itself.

The irony of author Ondaatje's discovery that the "armies of immigrants who built the city...were unspoken of" and his attempt to "redress this historical imbalance" (Lundgren 17) is that his novel's male-centric view of hierarchy and class struggle overlooks the oppression, work, and invisibility of women. As a story of a man or about men, this might be overlooked if women weren't portrayed as an unknowable Other, as mysterious, magical, frail creatures not

seemingly burdened by hard labour or human struggle. Nicholas' first impression of Alice is as a "black-garbed bird" (Ondaatje 32), Patrick describes Clara as a "damsel fly" (61), and Caravaggio sees Anne as "mothlike" (198). Men are portrayed as complicated and humanistic whereas women are portrayed as simple and exotic as nature's unconflicted creatures (birds, moths, and fish) and as magical as goddesses, and their work is as invisible behind the scenes of the toiling men in the novel as it has been throughout history. Clara and Alice are both actresses who never seem to struggle emotionally, physically, or economically, not even single-mother Alice nor elderly Anne, and Giannetta is more Caravaggio's nightingale than a hard-working woman, an industrial mushroom picker (192). Women are repeatedly described as weak and frail, or even insubstantial: "the frailness of [Anne's] back" (188), "the fragility of [Alice's] breasts" (160), Giannetta's "delicate ribs" (194) and "pieces of Clara float around [Patrick]" (83). The only realistic struggle and work of women highlighted in the story is that of the waitress in the diner. Patrick watches her closely as she pours coffee and "flips eggs" with "a permanent grimace in her eye from the smoke" and "oil burns on her wrists" (111), but then he fixates erotically on her arm "muscles stiffening up" from her "tough hand" swabbing the counters, to a hidden tattoo on her upper arm that he sees "through a tear in the seam": "His eyes wanted to glimpse nothing else" (112). He looks *through* her work-worn clothes to decipher who or what she is through her eroticized body instead of recognizing her as a fellow human, a struggling labourer like himself. He sees her as something strangely "self-sufficient, something underwater" (111) and imbues her with the supernatural "powers of a goddess who could condemn or bless" and the "[ability] to transform" (112). This eroticized mysticism of women is also reflected in the moon-worship ritualism of Clara's and Alice's fevered "spirit paintings" of Patrick while he sleeps (75-76). Patrick's vivid experience of lying-in bed with both women and

his grasping, impermanent connection with them— “his mind remains against them, like the impress of his hand on their sleeping flesh” (78)—symbolizes a sexual transference where the mystical essence of Woman is passed from Clara to Alice. They are not individuals but a singular species and connection he desires: “Hungry for Clara, he thinks about Alice as if he has not focused on her before, as if Alice being touched by Clara has grown magically, fully formed” (78). These fragile, magical, erotic, and exotic women are male fantasies, and their own complicated characters, struggles, and stories are left untold.

The stories that are told are the men’s stories: Patrick’s, Nicholas’, Caravaggio’s, Hazen’s, Cato’s, Ambrose’s, Harris’, and the male immigrant workers. The men in the novel also share a need to tell their stories directly to the women. Nicholas tells Alice about his many scars, “he talked on...he talked on...he talked about himself. . .[her] blue eyes stayed on him” (37-38). Caravaggio tells “moth-like” Anne all about his life of burglary and escape from prison (198). Ambrose, near his end, “talked and muttered towards Clara. . .words fell from his mouth and shocked her” as she “crouched in front” of him on the floor (213-14). And the entire novel is a story Patrick is telling about himself to young Hana as revealed in the prologue and the final two pages. The rare stories that the women tell are about the men: Anne tells Caravaggio about her uncle (202); Clara tells Patrick about her intimate relations with Ambrose (70-71); Alice and Hana tell Patrick about Cato the revolutionary (127, 139); and Clara’s mother tells Patrick not about her daughter but about her daughter’s ex, Stump Jones, and that Clara “told [her] a great deal” about Patrick himself (90). Patrick also writes numerous letters to both Clara and Alice about his self-centric thoughts and dreams; “I lie by the window...I keep waking...I woke...I thought...I turned” (84-86), “I write...I learned” (154). There is a persistent theme in the novel of

men's stories needing to be told, and to be heard and/or validated by women while the women's stories are never told or heard.

In the end, Patrick's and the novel's shared perspective is optimistic toward fulfilling a man's place in the world and connection with women as he looks through the night into a "long green garden" (243) that now replaces his absent mother's long, bright, empty kitchen. He finds "it most beautiful" and feels "most comfortable at this hour" on his way to "guide Clara back" while telling Hana "the whole story" (244). Ondaatje's novel importantly serves to restore the stories of overlooked and oppressed immigrant workers to Canadian history, but foremost his story is told through an individualistic male viewpoint that continually seeks recognition from women while simultaneously failing to recognize them as individuals. It focuses on only half of the real story by portraying women as not quite human, as exotic moth-like, bird-like, or fish-like creatures that flit, fly, or swish seductively below the glass floor of a male-centric world.

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The Triumph of Arjie's Coming Out/of Age Story in *Funny Boy*

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In Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy*, the protagonist Arjie is a gender non-conforming ethnic-minority character whose individualistic identity and desires manage to prevail as he navigates his adolescence in an extremely restrictive, authoritarian, and heteropatriarchal society. One argument for this is that the fundamental nature of self-identity and sexual orientation has an underlying power or advantage of humanistic essentialism that defies the social constructions of authority, racism, and heteropatriarchy. Selvadurai's story offers the hopeful notion that, despite the pervasive, oppressive, and destructive powers of hegemonic authority, it is ultimately effective and even heroic to follow one's own identity and sexuality as much as possible, even in the most restricted of societies.

In Rahul Gairola's article on "Violence, Masculinity, and Queer Sexuality in *Funny Boy*," he "reads" Selvadurai's novel as "a 'counter-bildungsroman' narrative," a "coming out/of age story" where Arjie is shaped in the negative "domestic and institutional spaces that articulate exclusive identity formations and heteronormative ideals" (475). Gairola proposes that the novel's narrative is a reverse form of a "European *bildungsroman*" that "de-centers hegemonic traditions" (477), that Arjie is shaped in a strictly heteronormative space while simultaneously shaping himself through nonconformity. Gairola also links "political violence on the public level to domestic strife within the private home" (475) as intersectional forces, as a dangerous environment that is doubly oppressive of Arjie's family's Tamil ethnicity in the public sphere and Arjie's own gender-nonconformity in the private sphere. Next, Gairola briefly points to a

notion of considerable importance, that “sexual desire undercuts normative masculinity/heteropatriarchy” and “complicates [the] notion of ‘fictive ethnicity’” (476).

Furthering this intriguing assertion, it could be argued that gender identity and sexual orientation can not only undercut but overcome, even while hidden, the complications and constraints of heteropatriarchy and “fictive ethnicity” as flawed in their very constructionism. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not physically or externally determined, but inherently individualistic in a way that collective social constructions of racial and heteropatriarchal hierarchy and authority are not.

As a construction of power to enforce hegemonic conformity, authority can be subjective (perceived) on an individual level and dangerously objective (actual) on a communal or national level. At the highest level, the heteropatriarchal nationalist government and majority “ultra-Right Sinhalese” (475) have the true and terrible authority to punish homosexuality and diminish, if not destroy, the Tamil minority through legislated exclusionary language (477) and politically sanctioned violence (476). At the lowest level, Arjie’s cousin Tanuja, nicknamed “Her Fatness” (Selvadurai 5), holds authoritative power over Arjie as a female despite his dominant male status because of his nonconforming gender performance. Tanuja has the power to ‘tell on’ him, to expose his sexually “transgressive” performance as the “bride-bride” (Selvadurai 4), and she passes this power to her mother, Kanthi Aunty, to wield over Arjie’s parents in publicly mocking and shaming them for their failure to maintain heteronormative conformity in their family unit. Another example of the irrational subjectivity of heteropatriarchal constructions of authority and hierarchy is the leader position of Arjie’s cousin, Meena, who is equally gender nonconforming as Arjie, playing in the front yard with the boys instead of the backyard with the girls. Like Arjie in the girl group, she has earned high social status in her chosen group despite her assigned

gender through skillful cross-gender performance. Argie is the “leader” of the girl’s group as the most “imaginati[ve]” in their games, and Meena is the leader of one of the two front-yard male cricket “factions struggl[ing] for power” (3) as a physically strong player. She not only has power over Arjie due to her “superior” masculine performance, but she holds equal power to his highly gender-conforming brother Digger despite being a girl. The complex subjectivity of gendered authority and hierarchy is unreliable, and the powerful objectivity of political and governmental authority is both divisive and destructive. Through social ranking and political division, boys are set against girls, parents against children, and citizens against citizens. Socially constructed power is dispensed erratically and harmfully, but true subjectivity lies in the power of personal agency, in the choice to resist such unreliable, constructed, and dangerous authority. Arjie exemplifies this individualistic power as he realizes his emotional and sexual feelings toward Shehan (256) and determinedly pursues them despite being wholly surrounded by the strict heteronormative conformity and expectations of his family, community, and society.

What is predominantly subjective in the story is the powerfully individualistic first-person point of view of Arjie. The reader views the racist heteropatriarchal society from Arjie’s innocent child eyes to see how utterly confusing, restrictive, shaming, and unjust it is. His individual subjectivity—his observant, honest, and endearing self that is shared with the reader—renders the ideologically flawed world as the Other, the one that’s not real, not right. In discussing the “efficacy of queerness, Lee Edelman locates its value in ‘its resistance to a symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself’” (qtd. in Bell 273). Those like Arjie, with nonconforming identities, imagination, and desires, who resist such restrictive

environments, challenge the symbolic order of language, authority, and hegemonic ideology by their very existence and persistence.

Even within the rigidly enforced heteropatriarchal society that is determined to define and discipline him, Arjie's developing gender identity and sexual orientation cut through the unreality of constructed gender norms. The more restriction and danger Arjie encounters, the more tightly the reader is bound to his side, resisting along with him against those "exclusive identity formations and heteronormative ideals" (Gairola 475). Despite Arjie's harsh expulsion from "the girls' world"—the back yard, his favorite game bride-ride, and his mother's room—his irrepressible self-identity and desires lead him into a deeper sanctum, Radha Aunty's room, the realm of grown-up romance and femininity (Selvadurai 39). Arjie triumphs in Tanuja's jealousy of his painted nails and his more mature perspective (53), and a series of increasing disappointments, dangers, and triumphs follow. There is no denying that Arjie suffers greatly: punished, excluded, forbidden, horrified, heartbroken, and even losing his home. However, he successfully develops his true identity, values, and sexuality, and often navigates adversity on his own terms. His first sexual encounter, despite the awkwardness, inner conflict, and serious risk, is with someone Arjie is attracted to and cares for deeply, and who also cares deeply for him. He has an ideal first sexual encounter when compared with alternative scenarios he might have been subjected to in such a strictly heterosexual society, or even the often unbalanced and unideal scenarios of heterosexual first encounters. In this way Arjie's counter-bildungsroman, his coming out/of age story, is a success. The reader is more reaffirmed than surprised when Arjie courageously defies the expectations of all levels of authority of school, family, politics, and even language when he "mangled those poems, reducing them to disjointed nonsense" (281).

Arjie follows his own purposes and publicly demonstrates his private loyalty to Shehan along with his personal power to enact his own sense of justice.

On a compelling level, the story protects Arjie and his allied reader from an exceedingly restrictive and dangerous world and the many less fortunate fates of those around him while also demonstrating how the imbalanced power dynamics of racism and heteropatriarchy punish almost everyone. Radha Aunty's, Aunty Doris', and Amma's heterosexual relationships are all severely punished for their 'fictive ethnic' transgressions whereas Arjie and Shehan's sexual and ethnic "transgressions" go undiscovered. Even Appa, who idealistically complies with the capitalist heteropatriarchal system, loses everything: his social position, his successful business, and his family's home. The ones who are most brutally impacted by the failing system are the two most adherently traditional heteropatriarchal characters, Arjie's grandparents Ammachi and Appachi, who are burned alive in their car (306). The underlying political narrative of the story demonstrates how a nation which rigidly enforces the severely flawed social constructionism of racism and heteropatriarchy ends up reducing its rationale to barbaric mob violence and genocide, tearing itself apart from the government level down to the community level, neighbour against neighbour, and disregarding its foremost responsibility and well-being in protecting its own citizens.

Gairola connects homosexuality and ethnic subjugation as both undergo exclusion, oppression, and violence inflicted on a minority by a racial and heteropatriarchal majority (Gairola 475), but in this particular story, the heterosexually and ethnically transgressive character of Arjie prevails in his successful counter-bildungsroman and ultimately in his family's exile/escape to Canada from Sri Lanka and the terrifying violence of Black July. *Funny Boy* is a bittersweet story that purposefully tips the scale between collective oppression and self-

determination in favour of its endearing protagonist. The story sweetly, strongly, and a bit sadly encourages the notion that following one's individualistic identity and sexuality like Arjie does stands a worthwhile chance of being realized despite the most powerful socially constructed and oppressive forces. In the end, Arjie escapes to a somewhat safer and more open society – one which Selvadurai contributes to by telling such a truthful and hopeful story.

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