

## АКТУАЛЬНІ ПИТАННЯ ЕСТЕТИКИ ТА ПОЕТИКИ ЛІТЕРАТУРНОГО ТВОРУ

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### IDENTITY FORMATION OF THE CHILD MIGRANT IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL "THE CAT'S TABLE"

Стаття присвячена аналізу формування ідентичності дитини-мігранта в автобіографічному романі «Кішкин стіл» канадського письменника шрі-ланкійського походження Майкла Ондатже. Період дитинства та юності, один із найважливіших етапів у житті людини, постає в творі як вирішальна стадія переходу до дорослості, а потреба юнацького самовизначення актуалізує проблематику дослідження з погляду формування особистості та інтеграції в чужий дорослий світ. Відтак метою даної розвідки є відтворення та реконструкція художньої картини ідентичності персонажа-мігранта, який подорожує зі Сходу на Захід, а також оцінка впливу місця перебування та оточення, зовнішніх факторів та обставин, що складають досвід еміграції дитини на шляху до становлення власного «я». Для досягнення зазначеної мети використано низку методів: уважне читання (close-reading), студії ідентичності (identity studies), принципи постколоніальної критики, біографічного і автобіографічного підходів у поєднанні з наратологічним аналізом.

У статті досліджено перехідний етап набуття ідентичності дитиною-мігрантом: центральний персонаж твору, підліток, знаходиться в подорожі зі Шрі-Ланки, колонізованої країни, до Об'єднаного Королівства Великої Британії та Північної Ірландії, найбільшої в ХХ ст. колоніальної держави світу. Стверджується, що письменник вибудовує проєкцію у власне дитинство з погляду дорослого і намагається передати власний досвід підліткової кризи ідентичності. Морська подорож і події на кораблі Оронсей, відтворені у романі, базуються на реальних спогадах автора, який здійснює внутрішню подорож у минуле, намагаючись реконструювати дитячі спогади, враження та переживання. Наголошується, що поняття «криза ідентичності», яка, за Е. Еріксоном, є не катастрофою, а ключовим моментом розвитку, увиразнює складності соціальної самототожності та емоційно-особистісного розвитку персонажа перехідного віку.

Підсумовується, що досвід міграції в період становлення особистісної ідентичності підлітка, який об'єднує автора твору та його персонажів, по-перше, є вирішальним для стратегії адаптації людини до переселення і, по-друге, виступає важливим мотивом постколоніальної літератури, присвяченої долі мігрантів.

*Ключові слова:* М. Ондатже, «Кішкин стіл», ідентичність підлітка, криза ідентичності, постколоніальний наратив, міграція, автобіографізм.

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#### Introduction

In contemporary postcolonial literature, a significant focus revolves around the harrowing experiences of immigration and the subsequent transformation of human identity. Canadian literature, in particular, showcases this theme through the works of renowned novelist Michael Ondaatje, who received the Booker Prize for his novel "The English Patient" in 1992.

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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.

The process of immigration often leads to culture shock, a common experience where individuals find themselves in a foreign environment. This shock stems from the conflict between familiar cultural norms and the new ones encountered, resulting in psychological trauma, nostalgia, memories, and reflections. It can cause disturbances in one's sense of identity, feelings of emptiness, emotional detachment, and disillusionment with the new cultural space. Homi Bhabha, in his influential work *"The Location of Culture"* (1994), proposes the concept of the *"Third Space"*, suggesting that individuals are reborn in this space when they experience culture shock [Bhabha, 1994, p. 86]. The scholar believes that "Identity always presupposes a sense of location and a relationship with others and the representation of identity most often occurs precisely at the point when there has been a displacement" [Bhabha, 1994, p. 185]. As a postcolonial critic, Bhabha highlights "the experience of displacement, relocation makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification" [Bhabha, 1994, p. 172]. In the case of Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan-born writer who migrated to Canada at the age of eighteen after receiving education in England, his own experiences in postcolonial spaces and his understanding of the process of cultural adaptation heavily influenced the formation of his identity. In his novel *"The Cat's Table"*, Ondaatje recalls a memorable sea voyage from his teenage years, which serves as a significant episode in his life. Through recollection and reflection on this voyage, Ondaatje recreates his present identity, connecting his past experiences with his present sense of self.

### Literature review

Anthropologist Van Gennep emphasized the significance of transitions in societies, particularly he developed the concept of "rites of passage" that mark a person's moment of transitioning from one status to another. Rites of passage often encompass ceremonies that surround significant events, including international emigration during childhood. A rite of passage is a ritual that signifies the transition from a "childhood" phase to inclusion in a social group: "...As individuals pass through different stages of life, they experience rites of passage... These consist of three stages – separation from the old role, a liminal period between roles, and then the assumption of the new role – has" [Gennep, 1960, p. 7]. The emigration of a child can be seen as a rite of passage, shared by individuals who have experienced international mobility during their childhood. It symbolizes a change in status and has a lasting impact on their future life and the formation of their personality. In the case of Michael Ondaatje, the movement from Sri Lanka to England had a profound influence on his life. Therefore, it is no coincidence that in Ondaatje's novel *"The Cat's Table"*, the pivotal moment in the life of the main character, Michael, mirrors the author's own experience. The journey by ship from Colombo to England serves as a marker of this transition, highlighting the transformation of social status and the shaping of identity.

When examining personal identity from psychological, psychoanalytic, social, and societal perspectives, the works of psychologist Erik Erikson offer valuable insights. Erikson, an American-German psychologist, focused on studying human development during adolescence and youth. The scholar delves into the concept of the adolescent identity crisis in his influential book *"Identity: Youth and Crisis"*. In this work, Erikson analyzes various aspects of the identity crisis experienced during youth, highlighting that this period is particularly prone to intense identity crises.

According to Erikson, significant life changes can expedite and intensify the onset of the crisis. Drawing from his own experience as an immigrant, he suggests that the formation of identity often occurs during such crisis periods. Adolescence, characterized by the state of crisis, involves the search for opportunities for independent decision-making. Immigrant children, who are uprooted from their original residences without choice, undergo particularly turbulent periods in their lives.

Erikson is credited with coining the term "identity crisis" and conducting studies on World War II veterans who experienced severe emotional trauma. During his research, he also focused

on observing teenagers and young people, noting similar psychological symptoms such as anxiety, trauma, emotional conflict, and issues of identity. From his observations, Erikson concluded that the identity crisis is a normal part of youth development. He proposed that individuals experience various psychological crises throughout their lives, and it is natural for personal growth to occur through conflicts, both internal and external, which a healthy personality can withstand. Therefore, for E. Erikson identity crisis – is not an “impending catastrophe”, but “a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation” [Erikson, 1968, p. 16].

The third chapter of Erik Erikson’s book *“Identity: Youth and Crisis”* titled *“The life cycle: Epigenesis of identity”* holds significance concerning the portrayal of identity formation in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *“The Cat’s Table”*. In this chapter, Erikson presents and examines the stages of the personality crisis, particularly the crisis experienced during youth, which is crucial for understanding the formation of identity. Erikson borrows the concept of epigenesis from biology and applies it to the realm of human psychology, specifically focusing on individual identity and the identity crisis. Epigenesis refers to the process of development in an organism, and Erikson extends this principle to explain the formation of identity in human beings. He utilizes an epigenetic diagram and describes the progression of identity development through eight stages, similar to what he had previously outlined in his book *“Childhood and Society”* published in 1950 [Erikson, 1963, p. 269].

By drawing upon the stages of the personality crisis and the concept of epigenesis, Erikson provides a framework for understanding the complex process of identity formation. This framework can be employed to analyze and interpret the journey of identity formation depicted in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *“The Cat’s Table”*.

According to Erik Erikson’s concept of psychosocial development, each stage in a person’s life involves a choice between two alternative approaches to addressing age-related and situational challenges. Erikson proposed that the ego qualities associated with each stage of development can only develop and mature through experiences within social institutions and interactions with various groups of people. The formation and validation of an individual’s identity are shaped through interactions with the surrounding environment, particularly peers. Erikson’s perspective expands upon psychoanalytic theory by considering the development of a child or adolescent within the broader context of social relations and influences. Erikson then develops his definition of personality as follows: “Personality, therefore, can be said to develop according to steps predetermined in the human organism’s readiness to be driven toward, to be aware of, and to interact with a widening radius of significant individuals and institutions” [Erikson, 1968, p. 93], meaning that personality develops through inclusion in various social communities (nation, social class, professional group, etc.) and experiencing one’s connection with them.

Indeed, exploring the formation of the identity of a migrant child in Michael Ondaatje’s novel can be further elucidated by examining the field of travel literature through a scientific lens. In recent decades, travel literature has garnered significant attention and generated extensive discussions, unveiling new contexts and perspectives, particularly concerning journeys from colonial to post-colonial spaces [Carey, 2017, pp. 131–137]. Examining the autobiographical elements within travel literature offers a valid and justified approach to investigating an author’s quest to understand their own identity and cultural belonging. Scholars like Edward Said and Tsvetan Todorov have made significant contributions in this field, shedding light on the formation of identity through the exploration of cultural movements within autobiographical works. Authors often turn to autobiography as a means of expressing their experiences in colonial or post-colonial contexts, providing insights into their search for self and the development of a hybrid identity in new cultural spaces. By analyzing these autobiographical accounts, researchers gain valuable insights into the complexities of identity formation, including the challenges of cultural assimilation, the negotiation of multiple identities, and the impact of displacement.

Approaching travel literature from an autobiographical perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the intimate connection between personal narratives and broader sociocultural contexts. This approach enables researchers to explore the intricate dynamics involved in the formation of identity, particularly in the context of colonial and post-colonial encounters. Autobiographical lenses offer writers a platform to reflect on their journeys, investigate their iden-

tities, and navigate the transformative experiences that arise when traversing between cultural spaces. According to the American scholar Benaouda Lebdaï, on the one hand, “postcolonial writings participate in the very rehabilitation of the autobiographical texts as literary”, and on the other hand, “autobiography ponders broader social and psychological issues in postcoloniality” [Lebdaï, 2015, pp. 1–2], as postcolonial writers express themselves, outline cultural contexts and the formation of a hybrid human identity.

Margaret Atwood’s ideas serve as a significant point of reference for comprehending the novel *“The Cat’s Table”*. In her literary analysis *“Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature”*, Atwood explores the central questions of “Who am I?” and the importance of one’s place of residence, asking “Where is Here?” These inquiries are crucial for the characters’ self-awareness in the novel [Atwood, 2004]. Atwood asserts that belonging to a specific territory or place is essential for an individual’s sense of identity. This theme resonates in M. Ondaatje’s novel and holds broader significance in Canadian literature as a whole.

### Methodology

The object of this study is the fictional work *“The Cat’s Table”* (2011) by M. Ondaatje, which vividly depicts the adolescent experience of the author’s immigration journey. The main objective of this research is to thoroughly explore the artistic portrayal of the complex and multifaceted identity of the migrant protagonist as he travels between the East and the West. This investigation entails three main approaches: firstly, analyzing the work’s unique style, thematic depth, and genre characteristics; secondly, examining the fusion of autobiographical elements and motifs from postcolonial travel literature, which are integral to contemporary understandings of identity; and thirdly, unravelling the processual nature of the identity formation of both the author-narrator-migrant and the fictional adolescent-migrant, who find themselves suspended between two worlds in the conceptual framework of H. Bhabha’s the *“Third Space”*. To accomplish these research objectives, various methods are employed, including close reading, biographical and autobiographical analysis, identity studies, and narrative studies.

### Results

The motif of travel in fiction encompasses a range of genres, from travel notes to travelogues, each with varying degrees of artistic and documentary elements. Tsvetan Todorov asserts the inseparability of journey and narrative, stating that “Journey and narrative imply one another” [Todorov, 1996, p. 287]. He emphasizes the significance of travel in world literature, where literary works often revolve around the theme of travel, influencing the plot, structure, and character development. Travel serves as a means to explore and encounter different cultures and people, leading to the discovery of “otherness”. Simultaneously, it becomes a search for a deeper understanding of one’s own identity while journeying alongside the “Other”. Consequently, it is common for writers to draw upon their own travel experiences, using them as a vehicle for artistic self-discovery. This process, in turn, captures the essence of the human “I” within a particular cultural context.

M. Ondaatje’s novel *“The Cat’s Table”* is based on his autobiographical recollection of a journey from Sri Lanka to Great Britain. The story revolves around the author’s personal experience of a three-week voyage by ship from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to England in 1954 when he was eleven years old. Ondaatje emphasizes that despite the resemblance to a memoir or autobiography “All the characters in the story and all the adventures in fact are fictional” [Brown, 2011]. However, the novel accurately captures the temporal and spatial dimensions of the author’s actual journey. The protagonist, an 11-year-old Tamil boy named Michael, shares similarities with the author himself, reflecting elements of Ondaatje’s own identity. The narrator, also named Michael, originates from Sri Lanka, attends Dulwich College, and becomes a writer – paralleling Ondaatje’s life trajectory, including his residence in Canada. According to F. Lejeune, who established the main principles of his theory of the “autobiographical pact”, *“The Cat’s Table”* qualifies as an autobiographical novel due to the correspondence of “The identity of name between author and narrator” and “narrator and protagonist”, as well as the use of “retrospective prose narrative” [Lejeune, 1975, pp. 15–16].

The novel *“The Cat’s Table”*, consisting of 29 chapters, begins with the chapter titled “Departure”. In this chapter, the central character, knowing nothing about the world, boards his

first and only ship from the shores of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The novel concludes with the chapter titled "Arrival", as the ship docks in Tilbury, England, where "*Farther upriver, deeper inland from this eastern cut of the Thames, were Greenwich, Richmond, and Henley*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 209].

Thus, the events of the novel unfold on the *Oronsay*, which becomes a unique school of life for the adolescent migrant. The young protagonist-narrator recounts his first sea voyage and the adventures aboard the *Oronsay*, where he finds himself alongside two other boys, Cassius and Ramadhin. This is a story that explores the transition into adulthood, unfolding aboard a ship, and most importantly, at the "cat's table", the least privileged place [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 14].

The corresponding title of the novel "*The Cat's Table*" is extremely significant as it emphasizes the status of child migrants and underscores their insignificance in society. However, M. Ondaatje draws attention to the positive aspect of such invisibility, and that is freedom. "It's, you know, if you are at some big banquet and you are by the kitchens or something like that, you are sitting at the cat's table. And it's the insignificance. I think there's a lot of freedom in being unofficial. There is a lot of freedom in being not on stage all the time, so you can be a heckler, you can be kind of – and for a boy of 11 years old that is at this table, he's almost completely invisible, so he can go to places that others can't go to", says the writer [Brown, 2011].

Equally important is the epigraph to M. Ondaatje's novel: "And this is how I see the East... I see it always from a small boat – not a light, not a stir, not a sound. We conversed in low whispers, as if afraid to wake up the land... It is all in that moment when I opened my young eyes on it. I came upon it from a tussle with the sea" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 9]. This epigraph is borrowed from the autobiographical work of short fiction "*Youth*" by Joseph Conrad, which reveals a pivotal moment in the formation of one's identity, during the transition from childhood to youth. In "*Youth*", the narrator Marlow says that some voyages "seem ordered for the illustration of life", serving as "a symbol for existence" [Conrad, 1959, p. 3]. Similarly, Michael's sea voyage initially appears to both the character and the reader as a kind of interlude. However, the novel's author shows that the journey is constantly reborn in the memory of his protagonist and thus becomes, like in Marlow's case, "a symbol for existence". M. Ondaatje confirms that he projects his own work of memory onto his character: "*The three weeks of the sea journey, as I originally remembered it, were placid. It is only now, years later, having been prompted by my children to describe the voyage, that it becomes an adventure, when seen through their eyes, even something significant in a life. A rite of passage*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 47].

The theme of exploring youth and childhood is not uncommon in world literature, and the writer notes that "If Tolstoy, Conrad, and J.M. Coetzee had not preempted me, I would have called my novel *Youth*" [McCrum, 2011]. In the context of the previously mentioned convergence of author and protagonist in autobiographical prose, the concept of "youth" takes on special significance in understanding the work. It is evident that childhood memories are traumatic for the writer. From the autobiographical memoir novel "*Running in the Family*", which tells the story of the author's search for his roots, we know about Michael Ondaatje's family, the complex relationship with his father, and the protagonist's acute experience of his absence during his adolescence. It is through the lens of this traumatic memory of childhood that he returns to his early years and transforms his traumatic memory into an artistic narrative in order to retrospectively review the events of life, analyze the actions of adults, and compensate for their absence in his own life. Notably, in the novel "*The Cat's Table*", the adult Michael even appears on a BBC program with the same title, "*Youth*", and at the end of the work he summarizes: "Over the years, confusing fragments, lost corners of stories, have a clearer meaning when seen in a new light, a different place" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 201].

Therefore, it can be argued that the central intention of the author in the novel is the reconstruction of the identity of the migrant teenager, taking into account his own memories. To achieve this goal, the author employs a complex narrative system, with the first-person narration of the protagonist-narrator at its core. The events on the ship are presented to the reader in "real" time through the storytelling of the young boy named Michael, also known as Mynah. Another significant dimension is the perspective of the adult Michael, who evaluates the events of the past, his state, and his behaviour as a teenager from a temporal distance. Thus, there is a splitting of the narrative "I" of the character: Michael, the adolescent on the ship *Oronsay*, who

tells the story of his own transformation with a certain degree of emotionality, and Michael, the adult whose detachment through temporal distance gives him the function of reception and interpretation. According to the narrator typology proposed by L. Matsevko-Bekerska, the narrative mode of the novel can be described as a combination of a character narrative of the second and first level – a homodiegetic narrator in an intradiegetic situation and a character narrative in an extra-diegetic situation [Matsevko-Bekerska, 2011].

Thus, the narrative is non-linear and combines immediate storytelling of events with the memory of them, creating a retrospective plan. In the first chapter, "Departure", Mynah recounts how he learned about his journey: "*It was explained to me that after I'd crossed the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, and gone through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean, I would arrive one morning on a small pier in England and my mother would meet me there. It was not the magic or the scale of the journey that was of concern to me, but that detail of how my mother could know when exactly I would arrive in that other country*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 13]. The voice of the adult Michael appears almost immediately at the beginning: "I try to imagine who the boy on the ship was. Perhaps a sense of self is not even there in his nervous stillness in the narrow bunk..." [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 11]. Thus, in this chapter, as defined by A. van Genneep, the "rite of passage" begins, and its interpretation concludes in the final chapter, "Arrival", where the adult Michael once again attempts to imagine his teenage self at the end of the journey: "*It is only now I try to imagine that morning in Tilbury from my mother's perspective, searching for the son she had left in Colombo four or five years earlier, trying to imagine what he looked like...*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 210].

According to E. Erikson, the formation of identity occurs through inclusion in a social group, and in the novel, Michael's process of socialization takes place immediately when he takes a seat at "the cat's table" on the ship. Among the characters surrounding the protagonist are children and adults. This is also a condition for the "rite of passage", as the teenager's identity is formed through interactions with peers and adults. Along with Michael, two boys, Cassius and Ramadhin, who become his friends, are travelling from Colombo to England.

Cassius, who is a year older than Michael and attended the same college of St. Thomas in Mount Lavinia, "became even more of an icon for the junior school" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 36]. He was mischievous, enjoyed adventures, often told lies, and his character was "*a mix of stubbornness and kindness*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 36]. It was Cassius who introduced Michael to a different perspective on life and the people around them, and this was an important lesson in his formation: "*I suppose he changed me during those twenty-one days, persuading me to interpret anything that took place around us with his quizzical or upside-down perspective. Twenty-one days is a very brief period in a life, but I would never unlearn the whisper of Cassius*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 37].

The author delves into the life trajectories of Michael and Cassius while also delineating Michael's fate, as he becomes a renowned artist in England. Michael, as the adult narrator, shares that he attended an exhibition featuring his former friend's artwork and realized that all the paintings were interconnected with their adventures during the journey on the *Oronsay*. The inscription left in the exhibition's guest book, stating "*The Oronsay tribe – irresponsible and violent*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 73], underscores the significance of the travel experience for Cassius' personal development.

Ramadhin, Michael's other companion, who was asthmatic with a weak heart, also had a significant impact on his identity formation. In the novel, his sensible character contrasts with Cassius' personality, creating a variable space in which understanding and attitudes toward people with different temperaments and characters are formed. While Cassius was self-sufficient and reluctant to maintain contact after the journey, Ramadhin, being calmer and more compassionate, remained in friendly relations with Michael. Michael even believed that he "*could have helped Ramadhin in a difficult situation*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 106]. Due to his illnesses, Ramadhin dies at a young age, and at his funeral, his sister sums up his life in England: "*She said she did not believe her brother's existence in England had been happy; she felt he would have been more content with a career and a home in Colombo*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 110]. The narrator, Michael, draws a more general conclusion that the adaptation of many immigrants to a new cultural environment is not always successful: "*Every immigrant family, it seems, has someone who does not belong in the new country they have come to*" [Ondaatje, 2011, pp. 110–111].

The representation of the coming-of-age process in the novel *"The Cat's Table"* extends beyond the portrayal of the three male friends. The author introduces female characters whose encounters contribute to the protagonists' understanding of the surrounding world, their acquisition of important experiences of sexual intimacy, and their knowledge of feminine character, behaviour, and the psycho-emotional realm of girls and women. It is not merely about sexual contact but primarily about forming emotional closeness, the desire to be near and the initial touches of the female body. In other words, for M. Ondaatje, it is crucial to depict all aspects of identity formation, which is why he pays attention to the development of gender identity among his characters, a process that occurs during socialization.

Indeed, Emily de Saram, a distant relative of Michael, has been a part of Michael's life since childhood. Being older, intelligent, and beautiful, Emily had a significant influence on Michael's coming-of-age; Michael calls her "machang", which in Sri Lanka means "closest friend" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 16]. It was a revelation for Michael to encounter Emily on the *Oronsay*. His friend had changed, and matured, becoming a lovely and graceful girl with a more composed character. Despite the social distance between them, as Emily travels first class, her friendship with Michael remains the same. A significant moment in terms of gender identity formation is the story of Michael and Emily's friendly encounter in her cabin one morning, where Michael sees, for the first time, the partially dressed body of a girl who has just woken up: "*Suddenly there was a wide gulf between Emily's existence and mine?... If there was a desire of sorts in me, then where did it come from? Did it belong to another? Or was it a part of me?*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 91].

The author successfully portrays the initial emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction towards a girl, and it can be argued that the eleven-year-old protagonist was not fully conscious of it. Hence, the author presents this experience through the perspective of an older narrator who reflects on all the aspects of the encounter aboard the ship. It is worth noting that this is not the only episode in the development of the characters' gender and sexual identity. In the chapter titled "The Girl", Michael Ondaatje demonstrates how Cassius's perception of himself as a man changes his behaviour, as he had previously treated people with disdain. However, towards Asuntha, a delicate, fearful, and extremely lonely girl whose mother went mad after her father was imprisoned for theft, leaving the family penniless, Cassius, the troublemaker, shows mercy and forbids others from mistreating her. He "*began to watch over her shyly from that point on*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 64].

In the novel *"Cat's Table"*, M. Ondaatje pays special attention to the adults who surround the teenagers during their three-week journey. While the children (Michael, Cassius, Ramadhin and Emily) share a common background as they were all born in Ceylon and experience their first emigrant adventure together, the adults they encounter represent a diverse range of social classes, wealth, poverty, races, nations, professions, ages, genders, and character types. By getting to know these adults through their stories, behaviour, and thoughts, as well as engaging in interactions with them, Michael and his friends, who are separated from their parents and older relatives, have the opportunity to shape their personal and social identities. According to M. Ondaatje, this process involves complex psychological dynamics of self-discovery and the formation of moral values through encounters with strangers: "*We were learning about adults simply by being in their midst*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 62].

As a kind of transnational institution, the ocean liner *Oronsay* introduces a diverse cast of individuals aboard a cruise ship, each with their own hobbies, secrets, and circumstances. Each character possesses a unique calling or hobby that adds depth to their personality: Miss Lasqueti, who keeps pigeons and wears a vest adorned with pockets for them, Asuntha, a reclusive woman with a hidden secret, and Sir Hector de Silva, who is dying from a curse. Other characters include Mr Fonseka, a secluded teacher engrossed in books, Mr Daniels with a garden of medicinal and poisonous plants, Max Mazappa, a jazz musician in decline, and an athletic Australian girl who both fascinates and intimidates the boys. The Jankla Troupe and their headliner, the Hyderabad Mind, provide entertainment, while Mynah unintentionally assists a sneak thief named Baron C. Mr Hastie, the Head Kennel Keeper, faces disgrace and is replaced by his assistant, Mr Invierno. However, the most intriguing character is a bound prisoner exercising at night, whose story connects with several passengers on the ship.

The process of forming one's identity is intertwined with the moral education that teenagers receive as they go through psychological development and engage with other individuals. According to E. Erikson, the moral resolution to each crisis also helps to create an individual's developing personality, and M. Ondaatje outlines the resources of moral development for the characters, primarily the protagonist Michael.

The main character is on good terms with many passengers on the ship, taking lessons in ethics and even aesthetics. Mr Fonseka, for example, a teacher who gets a boy acquainted with the world of literature has a positive influence on the writer to be: "*I knew scarcely a thing about the world of literature, but he welcomed me with unusual and interesting stories, stopping abruptly in mid-tale and saying that someday I should find out what happened after that*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 50]. Mr Fonseka's fate is also a demonstrative model of the immigrant teacher in England, which he considers "*the center of culture*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 52]. Mr Fonseka "*must have believed it would be a humble but good life for an Asian living in England...*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 51]. But the typical fate of an immigrant awaits him: "*the same slights and insults and embarrassments*", "*the difficulty of entrance*" and as a better result "*perhaps a modest acceptance and ease in some similar cabinlike flat*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 52].

In contrast to the positive influence of Mr Fonseka, his literary lessons of good and evil, another character, Baron C., introduced to Michael a crime world. The eleven-year-old boy was convinced that "he may have convinced me that the breaking and entering that followed was a private game between him and some friends. For what he was doing seemed relaxed and good-natured" [Ondaatje, 2011, pp. 69–70]. As a teenager, the protagonist acted spontaneously in different situations without fully understanding that his everyday actions shaped his morality. One particular incident highlighted by the author is when Baron C. treated him to delicious tea from Colombo in the first-class cabin, complimented him on his athleticism, and behaved friendly towards him. This made Michael feel a sense of importance that he believed his friends would envy. Consequently, he felt motivated to climb into the cabins through a small window and open the door. The author suggests that the teenage protagonist did not experience moral discomfort and was unaware that he was participating in criminal activities. To him, it was simply an adventure and form of entertainment. However, years later, when Michael had already made his own moral choices, he reflects on this episode as one of his earliest lessons about theft. "*...Whenever I am in a country where they put up the faces of criminals in post offices, I look for him*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 71].

It is worth noting that despite Baron C's immoral behaviour, he inadvertently provided Michael with another significant lesson in growing up – the first reflection or self-portrait that he remembers. As Michael walked into a bathroom adorned with mirrors, he had a sudden realization or epiphany. Looking back on this moment, he recalls "*...a wild boy in there, somebody from one of the Jungle Book stories whose eyes watched me, white as lamps. This was, I think, the first reflection or portrait that I remember of myself. It was the image of my youth that I would hold on to for years – someone startled, half-formed, who had not become anyone or anything yet*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 70].

The image of the teenager resembling Mowgli brings to the forefront the central issue of the novel – the complexities and process of identity formation in the "Third Space", which involves gradual integration into the social community. This process of adaptation occurs not only through interactions with peers and adults but also through the actions and deeds of teenagers themselves. In "*The Cat's Table*", the writer depicts the daily adventures of the boys on the ship, where they explore every part of the vessel, spy on passengers, and venture into forbidden areas of this microcosm, including the engine room and the hold. They break age barriers by waking up at dawn, swimming in the pool, and having breakfast on the first-class deck. They also encounter a life-threatening situation when they are tied up on deck during a storm.

Growing up also occurs through direct observation of events that lead to emotional trauma. For instance, when the girl Asuntha, who is trying to save her convicted criminal father, ends up underwater, the teenagers experience the fear of losing someone close to them. As Michael recalls much later, Cassius immediately matures upon witnessing this accident. "*Is this what has left us, still uncertain, at a Cat's Table, looking back, looking back, searching out those we journeyed with or were formed by, even now, at our age?*" – asks the narrator, revealing the psychological fact that childhood traumas affect a person's adult life [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 204].



*"The Cat's Table"* is a novel that explores how an adult remembers or imagines his childhood and how a teenage migrant develops ideas about his social status. The ocean in the novel symbolizes the struggle against the fears of the unknown that a young immigrant must confront. Through the characters' experiences, the writer examines different ways of adapting to a new cultural environment, as well as the sometimes impossible nature of such adaptation. All of them are searching for an answer to the question posed by M. Atwood, "Who am I?", and they undergo their own traumatic journeys. Location plays a crucial role in finding this answer.

In the chapter titled "The Breaker's Yard", Emily, who has grown into an adult, meets Michael in the Canadian province of British Columbia and confesses, "*But I don't even belong there anymore. I'm like you. We don't belong anywhere, I guess*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 199]. This statement highlights the sense of displacement and the struggle to find a sense of belonging experienced by the characters in the novel.

In the concluding chapter of the novel, titled "Arrival", the author depicts the poignant meeting between the lonely Mynah, who reached the foot of the gangplank and lost sight of his companions Cassius and Ramadhin, and his mother. This scene blends elements of autobiographical memory with fiction, as Ondaatje admits that he does not remember the day he arrived in London as an unaccompanied minor in 1954. Therefore, in the novel, he imagines the protagonist Michael being met by his mother, uncertain whether he will recognize her face. Michael states, "*I was trying to find who my mother was*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 210]. Ondaatje accurately captures the immense psychological trauma of this moment. He is wearing his first pair of long trousers, socks and a thin cotton shirt, but his mother puts her hand on his shoulder and asks: "*You must be cold, Michael?*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 210]. Up to that moment, Michael had been consumed with worries – "*of being lost forever*" [Ondaatje, 2011, p. 210], and now he is just getting cold. In his mother's arms, he could see part of the world to the side of her, the figures rushing past, and the borrowed suitcase. For the protagonist, his mother, who left him five years ago, becomes a symbol of safety and security in a new country. The mere presence and embrace of his mother bring solace to the boy.

The final scene of the novel, marking the resolution of the crisis and the traumatic episode in Michael's life, takes on the meaning of catharsis. It provides the protagonist, as well as the reader, with a sense of grounding to overcome feelings of anxiety. It serves as an emotional release, allowing for the discharge of pent-up emotions and the infusion of positive emotional energy.

## Conclusion

Experiences and values established during adolescence have a lasting impact on a person's life. That is why the environment in which teenagers gain their experiences and form their life principles, as well as the people surrounding them, is crucial. In the novel *"The Cat's Table"*, the teenage characters go through the various stages of self-awareness and self-identity formation. On one hand, the author portrays how Michael and his friends strive for independence and autonomy from adults, making their own decisions and demonstrating their maturity and awareness. On the other hand, adults remain significant influences in shaping their values and overall personal identity. The identity traits of teenagers are influenced by whom they choose as their role models.

The combination of the author's autobiographical experiences and the motif of an intercontinental journey allows for the reconstruction of the migrant child's identity-building process. It explores the period of acquiring initial life knowledge and skills, encountering new people and unfamiliar circumstances. The journey in M. Ondaatje's novel represents a model of adolescent personality development and takes on the significance of a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, emphasizing the importance of transcultural knowledge during the journey from East to West.

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#### IDENTITY FORMATION OF THE CHILD MIGRANT IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL "THE CAT'S TABLE"

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The current article examines the process of identity formation in the autobiographical novel "The Cat's Table" by Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer. The novel focuses on the childhood and youth stages, which are critical periods for transitioning into adulthood. The research *aims* to reconstruct the artistic depiction of the migrant character's identity as they travel from East to West, taking into account the influence of location, environment, external factors, the experience of emigration and survival on the way to the formation of one's own self. *Research methods* are subordinate to the aim of the study and tasks. The study employs literary analysis techniques such as close-reading, biographical and autobiographical analysis, narratology, postcolonial criticism, and identity studies. *The objectives* of the research include analyzing the novel's poetics, thematic complexity, and genre specificity, examining the synthesis of autobiographical elements and motifs from postcolonial travel literature in relation to modern conceptualizations of identity, and exploring the processual nature of the identity formation of the author-narrator-migrant and the literary character-teen-migrant who exists in the "Third Space" according to H. Bhabha. The emigration of a child is seen as "rites of passage" proposed by Van Gennep, shared by the characters who have undergone international mobility in their early years. The article focuses on the transitional stage of identity acquisition by a child migrant, emphasizing that the writer draws from his own childhood experiences and attempts to convey his teenage identity crisis. The central character of the novel, an eleven-year-old boy, occurs on board a ship that travels from Sri Lanka, a colonized country, to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the largest colonial state in the world in the 20th century. The sea voyage and events on the *Oronsay*, the ocean liner depicted in the novel, are based on the author's real memories and serve as a means to delve into the inner journey of the past and reconstruct childhood memories. The concept of "identity crisis", as described by E. Erikson, is viewed not as a catastrophic event but as a pivotal moment of development that reflects the complexities of social identity and personal growth during the transitional age. The article concludes that the experience of migration during the formative years of personal identity, shared by the author and the characters, is crucial for the adaptation strategies of individuals undergoing resettlement and serves as a significant motif in postcolonial literature focused on the lives of migrants.

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