

“THIS SWEET TOUCH”: ALIENATION AND PHYSICAL CONNECTION IN THE
WORKS OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE, SHYAM SELVADURAI, AND SALMAN
RUSHDIE

Scott Mitchell

Dr. Karen Piper, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, and Rushdie in their fiction present experiencing moments of mutual recognition instigated by physical connection as a possible means of ameliorating the alienating and Othering effects of Western colonialist discourse as profligated through labeling. The works studied—Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* and *The English Patient*, Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*, and Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* and *Midnight’s Children*—suggest that, despite the demise of colonialism, Western colonialist discourse still alienates nonwestern people from themselves and their communities, often through the process of naming. The writers discussed depict the mutual recognition of each other’s subjectivity by two characters as a means of lessening this alienation.

Together, these authors force us to question the prevalent focus on the verbal and the pessimism prevalent in much of postcolonial literature and theory. True, Western discourse continues to alienate and Other. But despite the negative influence of colonialist and neocolonialist discourses, Ondaatje, Selvadurai, and Rushdie illustrate in their fiction the possibility that individuals still retain some agency and avenues for ethic relationships with others and that these avenues are rooted in reciprocal recognition and physical connection.