

Unveiling the Chiaroscuro- Interrogating the Power Politics in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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An emerald isle in an azure ocean, the land is densely covered with a carpet of lush green vegetation. The island bears witness to a history that is as old as many ancient civilizations in the world. Home to the ancient kingdom of Ravana, the testament to megalithic cultures. The teardrop shaped island at the foot of the Indian peninsula, Sri Lanka is a pristine palace of the natural gods of a forgotten mythology.

(Singh, *South Asian Woman Forum*)

And yet somewhere along the lines, this beautiful land has lost its innocence. Torn by an apocalyptic civil war, Sri Lanka has today become a land that weeps for its children. It is this weeping land that forms the main character of Michael Ondaatje's novel, *Anil's Ghost*. *Anil's Ghost* is essentially a mystery novel which narrates a national calamity. The novel evokes the historical era of the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, when the nation was devastated by a political crisis, an ethnic war ruthlessly ravaging the island. Significance is attributed more to the effects of the historical events on the lives of the characters than to the historical reality. The dark historical truth is overshadowed by the author's preoccupation with life and its multitudinous aspects. Therefore the novel is clearly an attempt to procure posthumous justice for the dead.

For Ondaatje the two-decade old history of civil war of his native land, Sri Lanka, serves as an apt historical backdrop to satisfy the urge of 'what happened'. In the process of laying bare the dark truth, his terse narrative also points toward the undisclosed facts of how it happened and how one reacted in that situation. Ondaatje is essentially inviting his readers to behold his characters, as children of wartime years, to come to terms with their decisions, their mistakes, their small triumphs and large disasters and their ordinary flawed human nature.

The word "chiaroscuro" in the title, as per the Oxford dictionary, refers to the distribution of light and shade in a picture. On extending the meaning of the word, the readers can see how Ondaatje has delineated a world of reality and fantasy, characteristically entwining the two strains together. The journey undertaken in the novel is more emotional than physical and helps in composing both the fragments of life. Ondaatje probes the ambiguous relation between truth and history, events which defy dates and alphabets turned into hieroglyphs.

Anil's Ghost uninhibitedly reveals the bond that Ondaatje has for his homeland. Therefore the reminiscences become that of an 'Outsider', and Sri Lanka becomes more than a geographical and metaphorical space. It seems that writing provides a negotiating space to contend between his memories of the past that is now at a distance in time and space and the displacement of it in the form of relocation by re-writing it.

A novel that is intensely human, *Anil's Ghost* deals with the insanity of war and violence, using the civil war in Sri Lanka as a backdrop. Ondaatje deeply explores human reactions ordinary people have when thrust in the midst of madness. Deeply distressing, the readers can almost smell blood on every page. Unlike *The English*

Patient, which was completely based on fiction, *Anil's Ghost* is based on real-life political incidents in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka in 1980s and 1990s involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the South and the separatist guerrillas in the North. Against this gruesome backdrop is depicted the tale of Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan native educated in U.S.A. A forensic anthropologist by profession, she is sent to Sri Lanka by a Geneva based international human rights group, to investigate in collaboration with local government representative, Sarath Diasena, the true facts about the mass genocide. The novel, a product of the consciousness of great historical convulsions of the author's nation is an ethnic narrative that historicizes the macabre incidents of civil war in Sri Lanka and the organized campaigns of genocide engulfing the island.

Throughout the novel the gruesome reality of the era is depicted by the absence of dates or numbers. There are no numbers to even introduce chapters. Instead of numbering the sections, only the section titles are provided. The elimination of chapter numbers and the use of section titles in addition to the lack of concrete dates emphasize the anonymity of war-time victims as well as the ambiguity of the history of Sri Lanka. Contrary to the popularly held belief, it is not only victims who remain unidentified but the enemy or assailants also remain unknown, similar to the lack of numerical information. The gloomy and claustrophobic aspect of the society represented by the lack of information proved to be a greater torture for the victims and their families. The sense of imprisonment and desperation is an accurate evocation of the feeling pertaining to the period. Ondaatje resorts to the device of satire to convey the abysmal depth of sorrow and how certain things acquire more meanings for us than they actually possess:

They held on to just the coloured and patterned sarong a missing relative last slept in, which in normal times would have become a household rag but now was sacred (Ondaatje 56).

Ondaatje uses a common enough leitmotif: an emigrant returning home; the prodigal offspring returning to the fold. Anil Tissera, a thirty-three years old forensic scientist, used to working in conflict-torn places around the world, returns to a country that is ripped apart by factional wars and clashes. On returning to Sri Lanka, Anil interprets her native land with a long distance gaze and finds "the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeleton dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale" (11). Anil's arrival in Sri Lanka signals a conflict which accompanies dislocation. The pervasive violence erupting everywhere, the shootings, crucifixions, tortures exclude her from the world of opera and happiness and foreground the role of power structures that hold human life to ransom. The sense of estrangement, the constant intervention of the past into the present, the denial of freedom and the constraints on the self stimulate a need to seek verifiability in a world where almost everything is unverifiable. "It was a Hundred Year's War with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun and drug runners... 'The reason for war was war'" (43).

An identity involves a continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual and mutable recognition (or representation) of cultural

identity. (Bhowmick, 75). Anil tries to feel settled and assumes some kind of role to fit into the image of a forensic expert trying to uncover the dirty secrets of the government. Consciously she tries to act out the role of a forensic expert but fails, as is evident from the constant reference to her stay abroad and her American scholarship. Ondaatje does not underplay the message that Anil will always be an outsider to a society, which leaves no opportunity to remind her of her cultural alienation. The disjunction and the starkness brought about by cultural dislocation puts Anil in two different worlds: the world of ideas and the world of practical reason, both of which seem to be wide apart and in perpetual conflict. Anil's existence in Sri Lanka can be attributed to Sartrean existential conflict.

In his three part model of the self Jean Paul Sartre delineates the nature of such conflict resulting out of a disconnect between/among Being-for-itself which incorporates the self's action, will and idea; Being-for-others where the self constructs an image of itself as an object, as it is observed by everybody; and Being-in-the world which derives from the consciousness of the world as a sum total of possibilities (qtd in Bhowmick 76).

Anil's past does not integrate into her present, which ultimately renders her an outsider in the midst of her own native country, distanced from her native culture and tradition, from ties that bind- family, friends, history and myths of the land. Her reminiscences about her past are often tinted with the sepia-tones of nostalgia, often darkened by the shades of grief. But in each case it is fundamentally a search for meaning, for explanation and reasons, for the elusive formal and causal logic that will allow Anil's search and equally the national biography that is interwoven with it to cohere, to make sense. Anil is essentially returning both in memory and also by means of a physical journey to the places of childhood to examine, and understand better, the sources of personal unhappiness. She is haunted by memories of a father whom she could not meet before his death and a mother who is remote in her memories. Her years aboard have turned her to assess her childhood from a distance. As the narrator of *Shame* muses:

What is the best thing about migrant people...? I think it is their hopefulness...And what's the worst thing? It is the emptiness of one's luggage...We have come unstuck from more than land. We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from time." (Rushdie 87)

The need for Anil is to journey home not only to satisfy a nostalgic impulse but to reclaim the past and to recreate a collective history and myth of the people. Often Anil is taken to be the 'Other', alienated by racial and cultural differences, as is implied by the number of times she is referred as a swimmer. This results in a resistance and protest which leaves an insidious impact on the complacent conformity of the nation. Even her reminiscences about the struggle she has to go through for her name, for that was her brother's second name, constructs an identity for her, which is based on fierce internal promptings often at odds with her parents' wishes. For Anil, it is important to be located in a self whose identity and existence is not at odds with her idea of her own self. Her defiance to have a feminine name, followed by the subsequent struggle she has to go through for a masculine name puts her in a category of an individual whose self-sustained idea of self does not follow the norms of the society and has zero

tolerance for the world divided into narrow gender hierarchies. Anil in all her childhood innocence is breaking out from the stereotyping of the world by choosing a name which has a touch of masculinity in it.

In the early pages of the novel, Ondaatje gives a warning as a foreword to the readers: "'Nothing lasts,' ... 'Art burns, dissolves. And to be loved with the irony of history-that isn't much.'" (12). Here the stated nature of the problem revolves around the reversal of roles. Statues of Buddha which have been destroyed by religious fanatics, their parts ruined, implies the transience of history. The civil war with its self-destroying fervour has turned human corpses very much like the ruined statues of Buddha with "[h]eads separated from bodies. Hands broken off. None of the bodies remained..." (12) human. There is indeed a contour of likeliness in the possible exchange of roles, but the threatening question which the readers avoid asking is who has become whom? Whether human corpses have been turned into Buddhist relics, or the sanctity of Buddhist teaching, with its inviolable principles of non-violence and universal peace, has been beheaded like the human corpses. The answer, though complex, is not unapproachable. The meaninglessness embedded in each historical epoch and the utter chaotic conditions have effaced difference between a human corpse and fragmentary statue of a deity. The marred statue of Buddha and the maimed human corpses are contrastive opposites on the surface but both symbolises the mindless onslaught of the outer world. Both become martyrs to the idea of civilization.

Sarath, who in many ways is like the National Atlas of Sri Lanka which abounds in varied description of the island's bird life, mountain ranges, mines, monsoon system, isobars and altitudes, completely evades any mention of human life and its settlements. It seems as if an important component of human civilization has been deliberately left out of the record of the history, or history in its linear progression has encountered an impasse. The novel completely effaces any information about Sarath's ethnic affiliations as Ondaatje is moving away from the tradition of assigning bigotry religious categories to individuals and therefore completely obliterating the practice of stereotyping. An emotionally controlled Sarath has nothing to do with stirring up trouble. Since his wife's suicide he has withdrawn into his work, attempting to buffer himself against the horrors being perpetrated all round him. As he puts it: "The bodies turn up weekly now. The height of terror was eighty-eight and eighty-nine, but of course it was going long before that. Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. Every side...What we've got here is unknown extrajudicial executions mostly. Perhaps by the insurgents, or by the guerrilla separatists. Murders committed by all sides" (17-18). Woven into this gruesome narrative is the story of Sarath, who on the first contact appears to be taciturn and unresponsive. The secret of his metamorphosis is a direct consequence of the current political set up, in which he is invariably trapped. The seemingly cold Sarath moves away from the implicatory position of involved participation to a postured position of apparent neutrality. The insanity unleashed by the war and the humiliation he experiences as a member of the defeated nation instils in him a rejection of a world order, to the extent that principles of natural justice and truth become shards of meaningless rhetoric.

Ironically, for Anil, the moment is the sole reality and she decides to investigate the graves of Bandarawela, a sacred, historical government protected site accessible only

to the higher officials, where she has found the skeletons of four bodies that she had named Tinker, Tailor, Soldier and Sailor. The one named Sailor is supposedly decades old, though from the remains it is proven that it is burned and buried recently. Sailor's skeleton is the only real evidence Anil has which can implicate the government's role in the murder after years of genocide and this could "...be a clear case against the government." (176). Therefore Sailor serves as a symbol for all the nameless victims of the civil war whose remains are often burned beyond recognition. His remains are the only clue that Anil and Sarath have to bring justice to the victims. It is in the wake of this knowledge that Anil sets out to search for the identity and the history of Sailor. To shed light on the identity of Sailor would be to peel layers of government engineered genocide and lay bare the stark truth. In this melee, where one skeleton is not in any way different from a recent dead person, Sailor becomes "[a] representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest" (56). Sailor, as a representative of millions, would give voice to the history of millions who are now dead, and whose pain, suffering, trauma went unrecorded. However Sarath and Anil differ initially on what to do with this piece of evidence. Anil's profession, as well as her time in the West gives her a perspective different from Sarath, as she subscribes to the belief that "[t]he truth shall set you free", but Sarath wonders "...what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol" (156).

Ondaatje's attempts to re-write history keeping in mind the thousands of victims who went missing forever. To make his description more authentic and realistic, he provides a list of persons taken from Amnesty International who were reported missing and whose whereabouts cannot be traced. The inclusion of a list of the missing victims, in an italicized form that contains names, dates, time and place of disappearance, serves as a foreshadow of the future identification of Sailor and also parallels the awareness about the Sri Lankan civil war, foregrounded by the text.

Sailor as a victim of war does not merely symbolize the brutality of war, but the silently aligned diptych structure of the history, where, on one hand, historical and government documents record the deaths under the garb of crushing anti-insurgency operations and rebel-activities, while on the other, millions die because of a war they have nothing to do with. As Ondaatje puts it: "The most precisely recorded moment of history lay adjacent to the extreme actions of nature or civilization" (55). The narrative frames the contrast between a world of faith and one bereft of faith. God, if he is not dead, is a distant presence, no longer reachable. Yet, there has been a murder (Sailor), but it is just one of many more important examples of the nerve-shattering terror and the complex political situation in which it is ridiculous to expect any kind of justice even if the details of the truth could be determined and proven with any confidence. The cynically realistic story of Sailor puts the local political situation into an international context- it is just one more instance of massive government and rebel engineered disappearance as happened in Argentina and Latin America. The element of absurdity is reinforced by the skeleton of Sailor, which consequently explores the possible meaning of verisimilitude. The connection that the novel makes between 'justice' and mutilated skeleton of Sailor highlights the preposterous nature of the world order. Justice for the victims of civil war seems to be a paradox, given the sociopolitical conditions and yet Sarath and Anil's efforts to seek the truth by virtually

bringing into existence a skeleton, complete the vicious circle of absurdity. The living individuals who have suffered the horrors of the civil war become inconsequential and devoid of value as compared to the skeleton of Sailor. The skeleton of Sailor would reverentially speak for all the dead and silenced.

The section called “The Grove of Ascetics” extensively deals with the knowledge and character of Palipana, who is an epigraphist and Sarath’s one-time teacher. Living like a hermit in the ruins of Anuradhapura, an ancient capital city of Sri Lanka, with his niece, he has been Sarath’s most challenging instructor. Palipana in all his remote existence and obscurity extends the meaning of the novel’s exploration of history.

He lived in the forest grove with his books and writing tablets. But for him now, all history was filled with sunlight, every hollow was filled with rain. Though as he worked he was conscious that the paper itself that held these histories was ageing fast. It was insect-bitten, sun-faded, and wind-scattered. And there was his old, thin body. Palipana too now was governed only by the elements. (84)

Palipana’s ascetic existence represents a fractured arm of history which is rendered dysfunctional. Palipana, himself, an exponent of archaeology, retreats into the jungle of Anuradhapura because of his failure to draw a line between history and reality, past and present. While his senses were enamored of discovering histories in stones and carvings, graffiti of a bygone era, while another kind of history was being written. Well aware of the fact that history gets faded too, as is revealed in his teachings to his niece Lakma, he remains unaffected by the ongoing war and its disastrous effects, thinking it to be his conscious decision. However, this assumption gets undermined and the futility of his beliefs soars when Palipana’s brother is shot dead by his assistant while sleeping. His sister and her husband are also killed in the midst of the fury of the war. The reason for their death is not stated but the readers can well conclude before Palipana blurts out:

Even if you are a monk, like my brother, passion or slaughter will meet you someday. For you cannot survive as a monk if society does not exist. You renounce society, but to do so you must first be a part of it, learn your decisions from it. This is the paradox of retreat. My brother entered temple life. He escaped the world and the world came after him...(103).

The ultimate expression of the predicament can be found in Palipana’s words: “[w]e are, and I was formed by history” (105). The unspoken message is: in a war-torn country, there is no exit except through death. No one has a choice either to be a participant or a spectator. Inability to handle atrocities and further opting for an easier alternative cannot guarantee a safe haven. Even if one forms an invisibility cloak, it is rendered ineffective against external aggression. The sham of an ascetic existence does not obliterate the uncertainty of events. Living a secluded life, like Palipana, and altogether alienating oneself does not symbolize one’s retreat from the war but an escape mechanism where one turns blind and deaf to war, merely hoping for peace.

In Ondaatje’s literary universe, it is through loving that we define ourselves. His characters reveal their essential nature by how they do and do not love. With pain and suffering woven into his work, he gives life to Sailor’s skull. This becomes a direct example of how Ondaatje imparts meaning to the chaotic world. His search for a

plausible world of meaning and reconciliation ends with the reconstruction of Sailor's identity. Earlier the bleak narrative had portrayed the society on the verge of collapsing, but this act by Ananda gives hopes to an inverse world order. He is piecing together shards of the histories and uniting them. He is weaving together unofficial histories of families, individuals and victims because: "[O]ne village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims" (176). Ananda sculpts Sailor's head into a peaceful expression, Symbolic of the peace that Ananda wishes for his missing wife and for the rest of his country. The juxtaposition between the tranquil looking head and its decapitated state is symbolic of the chaos and death that surrounds Sri Lanka: "There was serenity in the face she [Anil] did not see too often these days. There was no tension. A face comfortable with itself" (184).

The final chapter does not deal with solving the crime or bringing the perpetrators to justice. It does not deal at all with Anil and the history she invariably becomes part of. Rather, it tells of Ananda's reconstruction of one huge old statue of Buddha and his painting the eyes. The act of painting Buddha's eye "where Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of twentieth century" (300), acquires grave importance in the aesthetic context. The knowledge of future political events and even of the characters is deliberately withheld by the author and he ends the novel on an aesthetic note, (essentially Ondaatje is a poet) which speaks of a coming world order with the principles of Lord Buddha ingrained in it. The novel ends not with truth, but with beauty as seen through the eyes of Ananda sitting high above the fields as he paints the Buddha's eyes and completes the Netra Mangala ceremony wearing Sarath's cotton shirt with veneration.

Ondaatje has re-written the history of Sri Lanka with a specific aim. Keeping in mind the sacrifice made by Sarath and many more real personages like him, he does not want them to be dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence. Ondaatje does not read the history of Sri Lanka within the ideological frame of Western liberalism; therefore he does not want to impose any Western solution to his native country. He ends the novel with Ananda painting the eyes of Buddha, thus giving Lord Buddha the gift of sight which also means opening of fresh vistas and avenues.

Ondaatje has managed to distress and disturb with each page invoking a fresh assault of history. The violence is more emotional than physical; the absence of knowledge proves a greater torture than the worst instrument known to the inquisitors. Ondaatje asks very human questions: what cause could be worth the kind of pain that is unleashed on a hapless and innocent populace? And at the end of it all, is there really any side that has won? What is the price of war anyway? Who is to blame for it, the one at the top, or the man at the bottom? Ondaatje has cleverly achieved a literary feat. He makes a statement on a political issue without taking sides. He ensures that no side emerges unstained, neither the government nor the Tamil separatists not even the insurgents in the south. No party to the conflict is as innocent as their supporters have made them out to be. Each side is tarred with the same brush. Ondaatje makes a very strong case against violence and uses his pen with ease in doing so. He shows how the strength of human emotion is capable of surmounting the worst barriers. Pain is natural, love is supreme; humanism can always triumph.

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