



# LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

## **Identity as a Skein of Memory, History and Violence in Micheal Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost***

**Ms. Swetha Antony**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Delhi,  
New Delhi, Delhi, India

### **Abstract**

What if an individual is always in transit, haunted by the ghost called past, becoming an abode of identities created by memories and histories? This is a pertinent question when narratives created by war, colored with aspects of alienation, rootlessness and estrangement, are taken into account. Through the novel *Anil's Ghost* set mostly in Sri Lanka, Michael Ondaatje tries to articulate the ambivalence in the life of an individual who is torn between two cultures, two languages, two lands and who tries to gain a sense of closure in its midst. The narrative revolves around Anil's search for the identity of 'Sailor'- a skeleton she unearths - a powerful metaphor for the search for her self and her roots. This novel about voices and silences dovetails into its narrative issues such as home and homeland, identity and its relation to displacement, rootlessness, history, memory, and myths. This paper looks into these factors

that mark the identity of a diasporic individual and engages with the question whether it is possible to attain closure and if yes at what cost.

### Keywords

Identity; Ambivalence; Displacement; Immigrant; Search for Roots.

---

“It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity.”

- Salman Rushdie

Michael Ondaatje is, in the words of Carol E. Leon, the traveler who embraces his homeland Sri Lanka with a circumspect, tentative grip of a place and its people. He was born in Kegalle, Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, left for England to pursue his studies and in 1962 immigrated to Canada. He came into the limelight when he won Booker Prize for his novel *The English Patient* (1992). He is also a prolific poet, critic and a documentary film maker. Some of his popular works are *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), *Coming through Slaughter* (1976), *Running in the Family* (1982), *In the Skin of the Lion* (1978), *Divisadero* (2007) and *The Cat's Table* (2011). *Anil's Ghost* (2000), the novel in question, “discusses the need to reconcile origins and the immigrant experience so as to discover a sense of self” (Jaina 238).

Through the eyes of Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist Ondaatje captures Sri Lanka in the 1990's, torn by war and ethnic strife. Into this turbulence and chaos enters the protagonist trying to gain a closure to her identity and self. Though she comes on a mission for the Centre for Human Rights in Geneva, she admits towards the end of the novel that “This isn't just “another job”! I decided to come back. I wanted to come back’ (Ondaatje 196). In the novel divided into eight different sections, Ondaatje weaves the past and the present of Sri Lanka, with a complex narrative structure with fragments from many memories trying to spell out the logic of all that was

happening around. The whole point of the novel can be explained by borrowing the words of Salman Rushdie: “The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities” (Rushdie 12).

The turning point of the narrative is when Anil’s Sri Lankan Colleague Sarath Diyasena uncovers three skeletons from the 6<sup>th</sup> century from Banderawela Caves- a government protected zone. The twist comes in when Anil identifies one of them as a recent one, just five years old, even when Sarath argues, “skeletons were interred in natural hollows” where “It’s unlikely you’d find anything from another era.”(17) The third skeleton christened Sailor is declared by her as the hapless victim of planned political murder and they embark upon a journey to uncover its identity. Along the investigation they cross paths with many characters producing a *mélange* of history, memories- past and present, violence and strife. Ironically, obsession with and deliverance from the past, history and memory is the hinge on which the narrative progresses.

All the characters, who inevitably end up as a means to discover the identity of Sailor, come alive or live through memories. The words of Stuart Hall, “identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past”, become a crucial aspect in this novel (112). Apart from the ‘non-existent’ Sailor, there are many characters who find their identity on shaky grounds - Anil Tissera – the privileged immigrant, Sarath Diyasena - the Lankan archeologist who plunges head long into history, Gamini – Sarath’s brother, an overworked doctor by choice, who floats through life on tranquilizers, attempting to deal with the endless murders that is tearing the country apart, Ananda - the artificer who tries to reconcile the loss of his wife Sirissa by capturing her peaceful face in the faces that he carves and Palipana- the blind, disillusioned epigraphist.

Each of them has a tale to tell, a secret to unlock, a memory that they long to forget.

The identity of Anil, which runs parallel to her search for Sailor's identity, oscillates between past and present when she is in Sri Lanka. To the few people who know her in Sri Lanka she is the star swimmer and the girl who won the scholarship to study in England. However "this island no longer held her by the past. She'd spent the fifteen years since ignoring that early celebrity" (7). The narrative navigates through the changing terrains of Anil's relationship with her land of birth. She realized that she had a longing for her land only when she went to England, when she just wanted to hold on to something that was a part of her roots which got sublimated into her marriage with a guy from Sri Lanka, a disaster, ending in divorce. Later she just moves beyond that as is evident from these lines to forensic pathology:

Her last conversation in Sinhala was the distressed chat she'd had with Lalitha that ended with her crying about missing egg rulang and curd with jaggery. She no longer spoke Sinhala to anyone. She turned fully to the place she found herself in... (141)

When she moves to the USA too she does not really miss her roots, but on the other hand there she seems to be running away from it all. However, the nuances of something lost, some memory, held her in its embrace as she says:

In the south – western deserts you needed to look twice at emptiness, you needed to take your time, the air like ether, where things grew only with difficulty. On the island of her childhood she could spit on the ground and a bush would leap up. (144)

She does have this guilt inside her too when at one point in the novel in trying to communicate with Ananda "Anil wished she could trade information with him, but she had long forgotten the subtleties of the language they once shared" (167). Incidentally, Sri Lanka she knew was also not there for her. It

was mutilated by war beyond return. The words from the novel are relevant here:

Anil had read documents and news reports full, full of tragedy, and she has now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long distance –gaze. But here it was a more complicated world morally. The streets were still streets, the citizens remained citizens. They shopped, changed jobs, laughed. Yet the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale. At university Anil has translated lines from Archilochus – *In the hospitality of the war we left them their dead to remember us by*. But there was no such gesture to the families of the dead, not even the information of who the enemy was. (7)

Maybe the fifteen year distance is what makes the decision for her. The pursuit of truth, hidden beyond history and memory is found in the novel. We find her thinking:

But in the midst of such events, she realized, there could never be any logic to the human violence without the distance of time. For now it would be reported, filed in Geneva, but no one could ever give meaning to it. She used to believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear. But she saw that those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection for the self. They held on to just the colored and patterned sarong a missing relative had slept in, which in normal times would have become a household rag but now was sacred. Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest. (51-52)

Would it really name the rest is the question that comes up and it is in a way answered by the narrative too.

The identity of Sailor is discerned - at the third plumbago village as Ruwan Kumara. At the end of the novel we find Anil defending the identity and existence of Sailor and indirectly asserting an identity to her. When Sarath who had gone to look into the lists that might contain the same name does not turn up, she contacts Dr. Perera her father's acquaintance and asks for help. However she is lured into the traps of bureaucracy and corrupt officials and in the Armoury auditorium she stood in front of the officials, "Then he heard her say, 'I think you murdered hundreds of us.' *hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*" (269). What we find in the tone of Sarath is a very poignant concern as to what gives her the right to use the word "us". Fifteen years away from all of this mayhem does not makes her a part of "us" as this part is not a part of the memory of Sri Lanka she holds inside. It is now the land filled with violence and death. She is not a part of it and she can never be. This seems to be the powerful statement that Sarath makes. This incident powerfully questions the notion of belonging of an individual who chose a voluntary exile. Is he/ she allowed to turn back to his/her past?

However, he does help her get out of all the traps of the red tape but at a price; she is made to lose all the evidence that pointed to Sailor's identity. Again, Sailor is reduced to one among the many. The undertone here is that even Anil Tissera cannot claim her identity. She is an exile. The memory that she has of herself and the memory that gives her the identity is replaced by violence, she with the gaze from the distance no longer belongs to Sri Lanka. We do not know for sure what happens to Anil in the end. It is open ended and she is last described to be in the ship listening to Sarath's instructions on how to escape. Did she escape or did she have a fate similar to Sarath who ended up as one among the photos the worker from the civil rights organization left in

Gamini's care? Did Anil's identity, which was determined by memories of her homeland, coalesce with that of a vast group of Saraths and Sailors whose identities were determined by violence?

The situation here is highly ambivalent as Ashis Gupta notes in the essay "The Extraordinary Composition of the Expatriate Writer":

But what if the past becomes unrecognizable and the present only causes us distress?" It says in the novel "If she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be a part of her life? (282)

This aspect is highlighted by the titles of the eight sections - 'Sarath', 'The Grove of Ascetics', 'A Brother', 'Ananda', 'The Mouse', 'Between Heartbeats', 'The Life Wheel', and 'Distance'. Though all the sections dovetail into its narrative the dialectics of history, past, memory and violence the last two sections stand out poignantly and literally sum up, albeit on multiple levels, the motif of journey central to the characters in the novel.

'The Life Wheel' is literally the life wheel for Sarath, Anil and Sailor, who is identified in this section. However, Anil fails at her attempt, losing Sailor again and Sarath too, to the violence and/ or to history. Final section, 'Distance' in a way tries to wrap up all their stories and histories. We find Ananda recreating the Bodhisattvas negating the words of Palipana in the beginning of the novel. 'Nothing lasts,' Palipana told them. 'It is an old dream. Art burns, dissolves. And to be loved with the irony of history – that isn't much' (8). Ananda, the artificer enlivens the Buddha statues even performing the mythical netra mandala ceremony which in the words of Palipana, "Without the eyes there is not just blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence. The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence." (95). However, Ananda brings to the eyes of the Buddha the presence and memory of his wife Sirissa. At that moment in the gaze of mirror he remembers Sarath and he holds him

closer by wearing the shirt that he got as a gift from Sarath. Interestingly the gaze of the mirror coincides with the gaze of the outsider that Anil refers to in the narrative. “He thinks that he and the woman, Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena” (301).

Clearly, many characters in the novel, as Rushdie puts it, “tires to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (11). Rushdie also asks this poignant question as to whether they can do no more than describe from a distance the world that they have left and whether the distance open any other doors. Here in the case of Ananda it has opened the door.

This is what he felt. As an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, specters of retaliation. (300)

In the case of Anil it did not open any doors she was condemned to exile, perhaps a permanent one. In *Anil's Ghost* the roles of memory, history and violence play with each other on many planes. At times, it is not just the memory of violence, but also holding onto a memory itself turns into violence so much so that even holding onto it becomes impossibility. It could also be a novel that historicizes memory and violence, much beyond memorizing history and violence.

### **Works Cited**

- E. Leon, Carol. “Entry on Micheal Ondaatje.” *South Asian Literatures in English: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Sanga Jaina. London: Greenwood, 2004. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Williams, Patrick & Laura Chrisman. Wheatsheaf: Harvester, 1993. Print.



Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil's Ghost*. London: Vintage Books, 2000. Print.

Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991*.  
London: Granta Books 1992. Print.

**MLA (7th Edition) Citation:**

Antony, Swetha. "Identity as a Skein of Memory, History and Violence in  
Micheal Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*." *Literary Quest* 1.11 (2015): 84-92. Web.  
DoA.

**DoA – Date of Access**

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.