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Exploring The Island's History, Cultural Heritage And Aftermaths of Colonialism in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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Abstract

This research paper examines the history and cultural heritage of Sri Lanka, along with the complexities of colonialism as depicted in Michael Ondaatje's novel, Anil's Ghost, which is set during the Sri Lankan civil war. Using a postcolonial theoretical lens, this paper examines how the protagonist, Anil Tissera, navigates her fragmented identity, suspended between her Western education and her Sri Lankan heritage. Anil's Ghost offers a nuanced exploration of the island's tumultuous history, rich cultural heritage, and the enduring legacies of colonialism, illuminating the complex processes of self-construction in a postcolonial context. Against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war, Michael Ondaatje employs Anil as a conduit to reveal not only the West's inability to fully grasp the depth and intricacies of the nation's prolonged conflict, but also to critique the Sri Lankan government's complicity in state-sponsored violence and extrajudicial killings. Through Anil's journey, the novel lays bare the tensions of belonging, identity, and the ethical responsibilities of bearing witness in a fractured, postcolonial society. The novel highlights the connection between testifying and witnessing unspeakable acts of violence. The personal stories of the characters in Ondaatje's novel serve to illustrate their understanding of the conflict and act as an allegorical reflection of the country and its struggles. Hence, this research shall explore how Ondaatje depicts identity formation, the quest to uncover hidden truths (history), complexities and aftermaths of colonialism as well as the cultural heritage of precolonial Sri Lanka through his characters.

Keywords: History, Cultural Heritage, Cultural Identity, Colonial legacies, Civil War.

Background to the Study

During the colonial era, Sri Lanka's previously distinct and culturally unique groups, each with their ideologies and beliefs, were forced

into a homogeneous cultural mass. These groups struggled to maintain their indigenous identities while facing the emergence of a new colonial identity. In a typical



imperialist fashion, a divide-and-conquer strategy was employed to manipulate these groups, pitting them against each other through selective favouritism in both economic and social spheres. Traditionally separate and generally amicable groups started to develop deep-seated animosities toward one another. When the island eventually gained independence, the postmodern condition took centre stage, giving rise to factional groups, each presenting its version of national, social, and cultural identities. The result was a fractured and fragmented South Asian identity. This broken identity is illustrated by Salman Rushdie in "Imaginary Homelands," where he describes:

The fragmentary nature of memories and, the incomplete truths they contain, the partial explanations they offer, that make them particularly evocative for the 'transplanted' writer...these shards of memory [acquire] greater status, greater resonance, because they remained; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities (12).

Rushdie describes the concept of fragmentation using the metaphor of a broken mirror, where each shard reflects different histories and perceptions of the whole. He states:

Human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions." This illustrates that we are "partial beings" and that "meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people we hated, and people we loved" (12).

Rushdie's ideas are echoed by Paul Brians in his work, *Modern South Asian Literature in English*, where he argues that it would be absurd to refer to a "South Asian Reality" because "there is no such thing." He emphasizes that South Asian literature is "a kaleidoscope of fragmented views, coloured by the perceptions of its authors and reflecting myriad realities—and fantasies" (Brian 06).

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* is a seminal postcolonial historical detective novel that explores the complexities of colonialism, the history of the Island and its cultural heritage in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Set in Sri Lanka during the civil war, the novel follows the story of Anil, a forensic anthropologist who returns to her homeland after eighteen years to investigate human rights abuses under the United Nations. Through Anil's journey, Ondaatje masterfully unpacks the fragmented self, her



personal history, and the tensions between the natives, cultural heritage, national identity, and the Island's turbulent history.

The motivation behind writing this paper on *Anil's Ghost* stems from Ondaatje's profound exploration of themes such as historical truth, ethical inquiry, cultural memory, the complexities of colonialism, and artistic expression, all situated within the context of Sri Lanka's civil war. These elements make the novel an engaging subject for critical study and discussion.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts postcolonial theory which generally investigates what happens when two cultures clash and when one of them emerges more powerful and deems itself superior to the other. It highlights the various strategies adopted by the colonised nations in order to resist the domination and to decolonise their lands and minds. Postcolonial literary theory primarily focuses on the analysis of literature and literary texts produced in or influenced by the context of colonialism and its aftermath. It explores how literature can be a site for understanding and critiquing the power dynamics, cultural clashes, and identity struggles associated with colonialism. On the other hand, postcolonial identity theory delves into the construction and representation of identity in postcolonial contexts and it looks at how individuals and communities, especially those who were

colonised or subjected to colonial rule, negotiate, and assert their identities in the wake of colonialism.

Here particularly the work of Homi Bhabha (1994) and Gayatri Spivak (1988), will be used to analyze how colonialism has shaped or ruined the cultural identity of Sri Lanka. This framework will help to explore how Anil's identity is caught between her Western education and her Sri Lankan heritage. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity will be used to examine how Anil's identity is shaped by multiple cultural influences and will help to analyze how Anil navigates her multiple identities and how she resists or conforms to dominant cultural narratives.

Sri Lankan Literature In English

There is a long tradition of oral literature, and few of the most famous works such as *Siyabaslakara*, have survived to modern times. Based on its richness, Siriweera asserts; "this comprehensive treatise on the art of poetry suggests that poetics had been studied in Sri Lanka for a considerable length of time" (267). Overall, there had existed rich literary forms in Sinhalese, Pali, Sanskrit, and Tamil, all reflecting the kind of plausibility whose tone was largely formed by Buddhism. For instance, according to Siriweera, "the two main Sri Lankan chronicles and some literary works start with a



description of the Buddha's three visits to the island (274-6).

Unlike many other former British colonies, Sri Lankan literature in English has had a significantly delayed maturation due to the political and cultural crisis that engulfed the nation almost immediately after independence. Sri Lankan literature has undergone significant evolution since the country's independence, which often addresses themes of political and ethnic violence. The focus on conflict has garnered unprecedented critical attention for Sri Lankan Writing in English, enhancing its visibility on the global literary stage. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the linguistic diversity within Sri Lankan literature, which encompasses three languages: Sinhala, Tamil, and English. During and immediately after independence, writing in English was not widely embraced.

The literary landscape has since shifted, reflecting the complex interplay of historical and cultural factors that continue to influence writers today. Sri Lankan literature exists in three primary languages: Sinhala, Tamil, and English, with limited connections between them. The 20th century saw a significant revival of Sinhala literature, particularly with Martin Wickramasinghe's novel *Gamperaliya* (Uprooted), which symbolized this resurgence. In the last three decades of the 20th century, a substantial portion of Sri Lankan literature emerged from

English fiction, often addressing the effects of political and ethnic violence on the indigenous population. To fully understand the representation of contemporary realities in Sri Lankan literature, it is essential to examine the historical context of Sri Lankan fiction throughout the 20th century.

Hence, as Minoli Salgado states, it was basically in the past thirty years or so that the literature witnessed an upsurge as a result of "the international acclaim granted to writers such as Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Gunasekera" (9). As she adds, the delayed maturity of the literature is a mere example of the general slow shaping of the national consciousness as a result of the communal divisions that led to a bloody civil war that lasted decades. In terms of subject, style, and motifs, it is near impossible, again this is caused by the nation's cultural divide, to say if a writer is a patriot or a traitor, for it ultimately depends on one's point of view and sympathies. Soon after independence, things lost shape.

Wilfrid Jayasuriya captured this as:

Yet the outburst of post-independence literary activity was very short. Rapid political, economic and social changes took place in the fifties and sixties and the audience and enthusiasm for English writing decreased because English ceased to be the official language of



administration and of education. (05)

The literature that emerged was one highly shaped by territoriality, whether by writers resident back home or in the Diaspora. Cultural extraction and loyalty became the most consistent shaper of mood. On the other hand, Sepali Bamunusinghe and Chamindi Dilkushi Senaratne's paper titled "Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature as a Mode for Dialogue and Reconciliation in the Portrayal of War in Sri Lanka (1983-2009)" provides a critical examination of how literature from Sri Lanka, particularly in English, reflects and responds to the country's civil conflict. Beyond the profound political, cultural, and economic repercussions of the Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009), this paper underscores the period's significance in shaping the narratives found across a range of literary forms, including fiction, poetry, drama, and film. The authors contend that Sri Lankan Anglophone literature emerges as a vital platform for dialogue and reconciliation, offering a space to examine war experiences and the complexities of identity, memory, and trauma. Such literature enables the exploration of contested histories and facilitates greater understanding among the diverse communities affected by the conflict. Despite ongoing criticisms, the paper concludes that Sri Lankan Anglophone literary works

play a crucial role in promoting dialogue and reconciliation.

The search today in Sri Lankan literature, as visible in the emergent canon, is for a tone deconstructed of cultural voice and loyalty, in search of a singular Sri Lankan literature. Sri Lankan Literature in English has journeyed from a perspective centred on village life, as seen in the works of J. Vijayatunga, Martin Wickremesinghe and P. B. Rambukwelle. Later, the trend shifted to an attempt to harmonise traditional and colonial cultures, with visible superiority granted to the colonisers, as in the works of Lucian de Zilwa. (Jayasuriya, 137). Voices then became celebratory of cultural disparities with the famous contemporary diasporic writers. Now, the search is for a literature of harmony.

Biography of Michael Ondaatje

Philip Michael Ondaatje is a prominent Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer, born on September 12, 1943, in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). He moved to England at the age of eleven and after finishing his ordinary-level exam he immigrated to Canada in 1962. Ondaatje gained international recognition after winning the Booker Prize for his acclaimed novel *The English Patient* in 1992, which was also adapted into an Academy Award-winning film. He is a versatile writer, known not only for his novels but also as a prolific poet, critic, and documentary filmmaker. Some of



his notable works include *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), *Running in the Family* (1982), *Anil's Ghost* (2000), *Divisadero* (2007), and *The Cat's Table* (2011). (Antony, 2015 02)

He is the author of several acclaimed poetry collections, including *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1989) and *Handwriting* (1998). His poetry often blends elements of myth, history, and personal experience, showcasing his unique literary style. In addition to his poetry, Ondaatje has written notable non-fiction works, such as "The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film" (2002), reflecting his passion for both literature and filmmaking. Ondaatje is also recognized as a filmmaker, having directed three documentary films in the 1970s. These include "The Clinton Special: A Film about the Farm Show" (1974), which explores the creation of a play in an Ontario farming community; *Sons of Captain Poetry* (1970), focused on the poet George Bowering; and *Carry On Crime and Punishment* (1970), a whimsical docudrama about poets. His literary achievements have earned him numerous prestigious awards, including the Booker Prize for his novel *The English Patient* (1992), which was later adapted into an Academy Award-winning film. Other accolades include the Giller Prize, the Governor General's Award, and the Prix Medicis. Ondaatje's work continues to

resonate with readers and critics alike, marking him as a significant figure in contemporary literature.

Ondaatje's early experiences in Sri Lanka provided him with a rich tapestry of cultural influences that permeate his work. His writings often reflect a hybrid identity rooted in his multicultural background, as he navigates the tensions between Eastern and Western perspectives. This cultural interplay has enabled him to explore themes of identity, memory, and belonging in a nuanced manner. In works such as *Running in the Family*, he skillfully blends fact and fiction to reconstruct his family's history while also addressing broader social issues within Sri Lanka, particularly the effects of colonialism and ethnic conflict (Brown 2000). Throughout his career, Ondaatje has made significant contributions to literature and continues to influence both readers and writers.

Brief Synopsis of *Anil's Ghost*

Anil's Ghost is a story about Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan-born forensic anthropologist; who educated, trained, and worked in the West. After 15 years abroad, both in England and the United States, she volunteers to be part of a fact-finding investigatory mission as part of a human rights group sent to Sri Lanka on behalf of the United Nations. Due to an increasing number of reports detailing possible human rights abuses, she is charged with uncovering and investigating the possibility that the Sri Lankan government may be



committing various human rights abuses involving its citizenry. The suspicions of the U.N. are found to be accurate when she and her colleague, Sarath Diyasena, a government-appointed archaeologist, are uncovering remains at an ancient burial ground. After days of recording and removing ancient debris near the Bandarawela region, near caves and rock shelters, they come across ancient skeletons. Ondaatje writes "Three almost complete skeletons had been found. But a few days later, while excavating in the far reaches of a cave, Anil discovered a fourth skeleton, whose bones were still held together by dried ligaments, partially burned. Something not prehistoric" (*Anil's Ghost* 50).

The fact that this fresher skeleton is found within a government-protected archaeological preserve, is enough evidence for Anil to believe that the remains were that of a victim of an extrajudicial government murder. Her assumptions are further validated when she puts her forensic skills to use, deducing that the skeleton, later nicknamed "Sailor", was "barely dead...when they tried to bury him. Or worse, they tried to burn him alive" (*Anil's Ghost* 51). What would follow is essentially a "typical murder mystery tale", with Anil trying to find the true identity of Sailor as well as his murderer(s), while questioning the loyalty of those around her and trying to do all of this in a most secretive manner. Her travels will introduce

her to Sarath's former teacher, Palipana, a now blind epigraphist; Gamini, a medical doctor and surgeon, who also is Sarath's drug-addicted younger brother; and Ananda, a once celebrated artist, now a drunkard. All of whom help Anil in one way or another to solve this mystery and help her discover not only her true Sri Lankan identity, but the true identity of the island and its people as well. This mission is a dangerous undertaking and Anil needs to be secretive and selective with the information she shares. Sarath informs her when they first meet at the Archaeological Offices. With an unknown enemy that could be lurking anywhere and foreign powers that have a vested monetary and economic interest in both the war and the welfare of the island, Anil is full of distrust. Eventually, it is this inability to trust those around her which leads her to trust the wrong people, which will eventually come to haunt her.

Literature Review

In her paper titled "Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*," Victoria Cook (2004) analyzes the concept of transnational identity as depicted by the protagonist, Anil Tissera. Cook argues that Tissera's identity is influenced by his multicultural background, which includes Dutch, English, Sinhala, and Tamil elements. This background illustrates a complex interplay of colonial and postcolonial narratives. (02)



Cook asserts:

His family ancestry has been described as a polyglot mixture of Dutch, English, Sinhalese, and Tamil; ... [and] as a product of this somewhat "colonial" background, Ondaatje's position enables him to explore, in-depth, the conflicts and contradictions of the type of identity that incorporates a colonial past and a post-colonial present. Complex cultural backgrounds such as that of Ondaatje may be seen frequently to instigate literature of dislocation and displacement. His latest novel, *Anil's Ghost*, provides an examination of identity reflective of the cultural clashes that are an inevitable consequence of such an interweaving of nationalities, histories, and border divisions. (02)

In her paper, Cook's focus is on how Ondaatje depicts identity as both a "construct" and a "process." She references critic Paul Giles' idea of a transnational perspective alongside postcolonial theory. (01) Cook emphasizes that identity transcends cultural and national boundaries, encompassing both central and marginal positions. Additionally, the paper highlights the concept of cultural hybridity and draws on Homi K. Bhabha's idea of "imagined communities" as presented in *The Location of*

Culture. According to Cook, Ondaatje's work reflects a world where multiple cultures coexist while maintaining their distinctiveness, aligning with the multicultural ethos of Canada. (02)

She affirms:

Anil's Ghost provides an examination of identity reflective of the cultural clashes that are an inevitable consequence of such an interweaving of nationalities, histories, and border divisions. In his discussion in *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha states that "the very concepts of homogenous national cultures ... are in a profound process of redefinition ... there is overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities" (5). Bhabha's work mirrors the cultural diaspora that is a result of the contemporary move towards internationalism. (03)

Cook examines the liminal spaces occupied by characters in *Anil's Ghost*, focusing on their locations and the challenges they face in defining their identities. She explores the marginal positions within cultural and national boundaries, highlighting the fluidity of identity in a transnational context. Overall, the paper provides a comprehensive



analysis of identity in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, emphasizing the interplay of cultural, national, and gender dimensions. By framing her analysis within the concept of transnationalism, she offers valuable insights into the nature of identity in contemporary literature.

Bimal Kishore Shrivastwa's article titled "Historical and Cultural Roots in Anil's Ghost" critiques Ondaatje's novel by examining the civil war in Sri Lanka from cultural and historical perspectives. The paper presents *Anil's Ghost* as a tragedy that uncovers the hidden roots and cultural history of the Sri Lankan Civil War. The author highlights the suffering of ordinary people during this brutal period. Furthermore, the paper argues that in *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje positions the character Anil as the underclass, providing access to a silenced history. A critical issue discussed in the paper is the reconstruction of the cultures and histories of war victims. The author explains the act of reassembling skeletons as a means of uncovering a hidden history that has been overlooked and ignored. This is viewed as an effort to recover colonial native history in a literary context. His paper asserts that Ondaatje gives voice to those who exist outside the confines of historical literature, representing individuals who are often considered marginalized or forgotten by history.

John Bolland's paper, "Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*: Civil Wars, Mystics, and Rationalists," offers an in-depth analysis of Ondaatje's

narrative, focusing on the interplay between civil conflict, mysticism, and rationalism in the context of Sri Lanka's history. The author effectively explores how these themes are interconnected, highlighting the complexities of truth and identity amid turmoil. The paper emphasizes Ondaatje's framing of the narrative within a mythic and religious context, drawing on Buddhist philosophy and symbols. This approach not only enhances the storytelling but also critiques Western historiography, which often overlooks the nuanced realities of Sri Lankan history. Bolland notes that the novel weaves together grim historical accounts with Buddhist elements, creating a layered understanding of the characters' experiences and the socio-political landscape. (102)

The main focus of his paper is the contrast between Anil's Western rationalism and Sarath's Buddhist worldview, hence the two cultures as well as two generations – old and young, clash to some extent. Anil's forensic investigation represents a pursuit of empirical truth, while Sarath's perspective emphasizes the spiritual significance of the deceased, referred to as "Sailor." This conflict symbolizes the larger debate between mysticism and rationalism, suggesting that both viewpoints are essential for a comprehensive understanding of human suffering and justice. Additionally, the paper effectively places the narrative within the historical context of Sri



Lanka's civil war, highlighting how nationalist ideologies have distorted the country's past. It discusses how the novel critiques these ideologies by offering a more inclusive view of history that acknowledges the coexistence of Tamils and Sinhalese. This critique is further strengthened by references to the complexities of interethnic violence and the challenges faced by Western liberalism in understanding such conflicts. (103)

Bolland States:

For Anil, herself a Sri Lankan who has returned to her home country after an education and career in the West, this soon becomes not just a forensic task, but an enlightenment project: the establishment of empirical truth will lay the foundations of a legal process through which a just social order can be established. It is in the conflict between Anil's enlightenment rationalism and Sarath's religio-philosophical apprehension of the significance of "Sailor," as the dead man comes to be known, that the novel's debate between mystic and rationalist, Buddhist and secular perceptions of the world is conducted. Much of Ondaatje's work has set out to explore and compare different kinds of

truth: temporal and transcendent, fact and fable, objective record and subjective conviction. (103)

Bolland concludes the paper by highlighting the significance of compassion and shared empathy in addressing various forms of suffering. Ondaatje's narrative advocates for a shift away from punitive justice towards a more sympathetic approach, which aligns with the Buddhist understanding of the self and the world. This perspective encourages the audience to reflect on broader interpretations of truth and justice in a world characterized by conflict. Ultimately, the paper provides a detailed and insightful analysis of *Anil's Ghost*, exploring themes of civil war, mysticism, and rationalism. This analysis is distinctive in its argument for a greater emphasis on pluralism in understanding truth and justice in today's world.

Another paper titled "Mapping Massacre and Restorative Justice: A Study of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" by D. Venisha and Yadamala Sreenivasulu offers an in-depth exploration of themes such as violence, historical trauma, and the pursuit of justice within the context of Sri Lanka's civil war. It discusses how colonialism has exacerbated conflicts in Sri Lanka, leading to significant divisions between opposing groups. Understanding this historical backdrop is crucial for comprehending the socio-political landscape depicted in



Ondaatje's novel, *Anil Ghost*. The paper examines the relationship between aggression and historical events, with a particular focus on the civil war in Sri Lanka. It emphasizes the use of fictional narratives as a means to address critical issues such as grief, communal action, and the marginalization of postcolonial cultures. (223)

Their study examines key aspects of various forms of violence, including witnessing violence, grieving, and revolt. This analysis is essential for understanding the emotional and psychological effects of warfare on individuals and societies. The paper investigates the cultural elements that were lost during the war, particularly from the perspective of minority groups. It provides evidence of the consequences of the civil war and argues that these narratives should be preserved and taught. (223) Primarily, the paper focuses on the genocide of ethnic groups, civil strife, and the apathy of the Human Rights Commission. This raises important questions about accountability and who has the authority to tell the history of the oppressed.

They state :

[I]t can be observed that most of the researchers have focused on genocide, the reflection of civil war and its violence, the sufferings, and suppression based on race and ethnicity, which forms the root cause

for the civil war. The current research focuses on the genocide of ethnic minorities, the failure of the Human Rights Commission during civil riots, and the suffering of ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka. (223)

According to them, the *novel Anil's Ghost* is an emotional work that intertwines the histories of suffering among Sri Lankan ethnic groups. It serves as a case study to explore the complexities of identity, heritage, legacies, memory, and the pursuit of justice following violence. The analysis emphasizes the human emotions tied to civil strife and advocates for the importance of peace and unity. Additionally, it examines the government's practice of burying war casualties without informing their families, which exacerbates denial and trauma. In conclusion, this offers a comprehensive analysis of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, connecting it to broader themes of violence, trauma, and the quest for restorative justice in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Most notably, it highlights the significance of storytelling in addressing and understanding the complexities of war and its aftermath.



Depiction of Island's History, Cultural Heritage and Aftermaths of Colonialism in *Anil's Ghost*

Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* depicts the history and heritage of the country, colonial affectations, civil war and its aftermaths, and human suffering. Set in Sri Lanka, Ondaatje's birthplace, the novel addresses one of the least discussed nations in South Asia. The backdrop is the undeclared Sri Lankan Civil War, a conflict between the government and various rebel groups that lasted from 1983 to 2009. Tensions between the two major ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, the Tamil and the Sinhalese culminated in a civil war, marked by the struggle against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), also known as the Tamil Tigers. This conflict left deep humanitarian, social, economic, and political scars on the country. This is one of the aftermaths of colonialism.

In his novel *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje refrains from passing judgment, taking sides, or exploring the origins of the conflict. Instead, he aims to provide clarity for his readers in the author's note, where he offers a brief yet clear description of the Sri Lankan context in which his story is set. Ondaatje states that,

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the anti-

government insurgents in the south and the separatist guerrillas in the north. Both the insurgents and separatists had declared war on the government. Eventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and insurgents. (01)

The story follows Anil Tissera, a Western-trained forensic expert who returns to her homeland after being appointed by the United Nations, as the organization suspected that the Sri Lankan government was supporting terrorism. Accompanying Anil is Sarath Diyasena, a local archaeologist appointed by the government. For Anil, this mission becomes more than just a forensic task. As the "prodigal" daughter, she initially feels like an outsider, but as the narrative unfolds, she reconnects with her country, its culture, history, and current circumstances, becoming as engaged as any other Sri Lankan.

The novel primarily addresses issues such as terrorism, disrupted identities, and human rights, while also reflecting the cultural and historical roots of Sri Lanka. It advocates for the restoration of this culture, which has been overshadowed by the ongoing civil war. Despite being a multi-religious country, Sri Lanka has a rich and continuous tradition of Buddhism, with Buddhists making up seventy



per cent of the population. This tradition is central to *Anil's Ghost* and is depicted for the readers. Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 2nd century, and the predominant branch is known as Theravada Buddhism, which means "the school of elder monks."

Michael Ondaatje often incorporates mythic or religious structures into his narratives. For instance, in his early poems he references the Trojan Cycle, while in *In the Skin of a Lion*, he draws upon the Gilgamesh myth of Mesopotamia. In *The English Patient*, he employs biblical motifs. In *Anil's Ghost*, the narrative of the Grim Civil War is interwoven with Buddhist imagery, icons, philosophy, and references to the *Chulavamsa*, a sacred text in Sri Lankan Buddhism. The novel begins with a 'Miner's folk song' that introduces Buddhist concepts, particularly the life wheel, which is a universal symbol of Buddhism.

In search of a job I came to
Bogala

I went down the pits
seventy-two fathoms deep

Invisible as a fly, not seen
from the pit ahead

Only when I return to the
surface

Is my life safe

Blessed be the scaffolding
deep down in the shaft

Blessed be the life wheel on
the mine's pit head

Blessed be the chain
attached to the life wheel. (03)

This wheel represents the ideology of life, death, rebirth, and suffering realities that individuals strive to escape. This symbol is particularly relevant for a novel focused on war and human suffering. Anecdotes play a significant role in the storytelling of the novel. In the first section, titled 'Sarath,' there is an anecdote about a Buddhist temple that was desecrated in Shanxi province. It references Buddhist ideologies, including bodhisattvas, twenty-four rebirths, and the afterlife. Cave 14 was once the most beautiful site in a series of Buddhist cave temples in Shanxi province. When you entered, it looked as if huge blocks of salt had been carted away. The panorama of Bodhisattvas-their twenty-four rebirths were cut out of the walls with axes and saws, the edges red, suggesting the wound's incision. (12)

This anecdote illustrates how a once beautiful sacred space has been reduced to "a heap of skeletons" due to war. The destruction of the Buddha highlights the disintegration of spiritual peace and the erasure of history and culture. It also symbolizes the fragility of art, as Palipana remarks, "Art burns, dissolves" (12). In the novel,



Ondaatje tells us about how these discoveries from the cave became museum pieces for the West, "all the statuary had been removed in the few years following its discovery by Japanese archaeologists in 1918, the Bodhisattvas quickly bought up by the museums in the west." (12) The references also illustrate how war and terror whether internal or external, civil or colonial devastate the preserved culture and history of a nation. The destruction of the cave cannot simply be viewed as the demolition of a monument or a tourist attraction. This anecdote reflects the condition of South Asia and highlights how culture and tradition are perceived in the West.

Sarath's teachers, Palipana, Narada, and the artist Ananda, represent the unique Buddhist tradition and culture of Sri Lanka. The contemporary and historical significance of Pali, the sacred language of Theravada Buddhism, is emphasized in the novel. As Sri Lanka became a united nation, Pali, both as a language and a culture, enabled the Sinhalese to distinguish themselves first from colonial rulers and later from the Tamils. The spoken Sinhala language, which evolved from Pali and Sanskrit, also served as a powerful political tool for the Sinhalese majority.

Ondaatje compares the fictional character of Palipana to the real-life figure of Senarath Paranavitana, a prominent Sri Lankan archaeologist. Throughout his career, Paranavitana published

numerous articles about texts he claimed to have discovered as inscriptions on rocks from various locations across the island. In a similar vein, in the novel, Palipana also publishes interpretations of rock inscriptions that "stunned archaeologists and historians" (79). This indicates that the novel is not merely a product of Ondaatje's imagination but is firmly grounded in historical facts. Integrating Sri Lankan history into the novel assists the reader to aptly comprehend the situation concerning the civil war. Ondaatje didn't want people to be oblivious to the real tragedy of the nation during the war, which is why he uses history to assist his narrative. There is a long anecdote about the atlas of Sri Lanka in the novel, and through that, Ondaatje aims to make the reader know about his country, its geography, its culture and its history.

This is evidenced during a conversation between Gamini and Sarath.

Gamini says:

This was a civilized country. We had "halls for the sick" four centuries before Christ. There was a beautiful one in Mihintale...There were dispensaries, maternity hospitals...By the twelfth century, the physicians were being dispersed all over the country to be responsible for far-flying villages even for ascetic monks who lived in caves....



The names of the doctors appear on rock inscriptions. There were villages for the blind. There are recorded details of brain operations in the ancient texts. Ayurvedic hospitals were set up that still exist... (191-192).

Ondaatje tries to validate that the country in those days competed with the most elegant civilizations like the Greeks, and was in no way lesser than them. It also places colonialism and civil war as the evil which makes the nation underdeveloped. This historical novel focuses not only on Sri Lankan history from the 1980s to the 2000s, but includes the entire history from the prehistoric era. The invasion of Buddhism, as noted in some of the quotes, has been described as the point from where civilization began. The time when Sri Lanka was a British Colony is regarded as another important period in the history of Sri Lanka. The novel also encompasses elements of colonial history and postcolonial concerns. The history of one's own nation is one of the most debated topics in the former colonies and this becomes a main concern in most of the postcolonial writings. Though the novel does not discuss colonial history and post-colonial issues as in other rich postcolonial fiction, there are certain incidences which refer to the same. For instance, the novel follows the story of Anil, the protagonist, a Sri Lankan-born,

Western-educated forensic anthropologist who returns to her native country to investigate human rights abuses. Through Anil's journey, Ondaatje masterfully portrays the ongoing impact of colonialism on Sri Lankan society, culture, and identity. Ondaatje has created a narrative which focuses on Anil and her personal story; but, he slowly begins to unravel and break the story, imitating the real-life fragmented society he is depicting and transmitting not only the true local realities of the island but also the lingering colonial aftereffects of a bygone era.

Various factors influence our identities and simultaneously shape our lives based on how we are perceived. One important aspect of identity is the name assigned to an individual. Names and naming are deeply rooted in history and culture; they not only reflect how the world views a person but also how the individual perceives themselves. Anil, the protagonist, embodies this colonial legacy. As a Sri Lankan-born, Western-educated forensic anthropologist, Anil is caught between two worlds, struggling to reconcile her cultural heritage with her Western training. Her return to Sri Lanka forces her to confront the colonial past and its ongoing impact on Sri Lankan society. The novel portrays colonial experiences as traumatic and violent, with lasting effects on individuals and communities. The character of Ananda, the epigraphist, is a



powerful example of this trauma. Ananda's experiences during the colonial period have left him with physical and emotional scars, which continue to haunt him.

The novel also highlights how colonialism has created a culture of violence and impunity in Sri Lanka. The disappearances, torture, and killings that Anil investigates are all symptoms of a larger colonial legacy, in which the powerful have been able to act with impunity. Despite the overwhelming presence of coloniality, the novel portrays Sri Lankans as agents of resistance and change. Anil's investigation into the disappearances and killings is a powerful act of resistance against the colonial legacy of violence and impunity. The character of Sarath, Anil's friend and colleague, is another example of resistance and agency. Sarath's work as an archaeologist is a way of reclaiming Sri Lanka's cultural heritage and challenging the colonial narrative.

Anil Tissera's character represents the complexities of identity in a postcolonial context. Her Western education and professional detachment illustrate the impact of colonial systems that prioritize Western knowledge over local traditions. Anil's sense of estrangement from her homeland emphasizes how colonial legacies can disrupt both personal and national identities. She grapples with her sense of belonging, caught between her Sri Lankan heritage and her Westernized perspective. As she reflects, "She can only

'interpret [...] with a long-distance gaze.'" This tension reflects broader societal challenges in reconciling Indigenous identities with the remnants of colonial influence.

Ondaatje makes use of the concepts of mapping not only in a geographical sense, but also in the context of the body through forensic science, and the context of history through archaeology. He critiques the imperial narrative of maps as progress from savagery to civilization, and the roads to the source of most mysteries being "clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries" (54). In doing so, he attempts to sketch the intricate relations between the coloniser and the colonised. "The imaginative maps" of *Anil's Ghost* chart a journey across nations without regard for borders, boundaries or cultures.

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* concludes with a sense of cautious hope, despite its unflinching portrayal of the horrors of war and the enduring wounds it leaves behind. In the final section called "Distance", the reconstruction of the Buddha statue and the eye painting ceremony serve as powerful symbols of cultural resilience and the possibility of peace. These acts of restoration suggest that healing and renewal are achievable, even in a nation scarred by decades of violence. Ondaatje connects Sri Lanka's Buddhist and Sinhalese cultural heritage with its contemporary struggles, using these elements to frame a narrative that reflects both



terror and the potential for recovery (300 – 301). The Buddhist rituals, such as Ananda's eye painting ceremony, carry deep symbolic significance, representing rebirth and vision in a society striving to overcome its blindness to justice and truth. As Palipana remarks, "Without the eyes, there is not just blindness, there is nothing", underscoring the importance of restoring clarity and hope.

The novel also ties history to its characters' professions: Anil's forensic work focuses on uncovering immediate truths about political violence, while Sarath's archaeological efforts aim to preserve Sri Lanka's ancient cultural identity. Together, these fields illustrate how history both recent and ancient shapes identity and collective memory. The narrative suggests that even when wars end, their legacies persist, leaving unresolved wounds that demand acknowledgement and reconciliation.

In his "Author's Note," Ondaatje acknowledges that the war in Sri Lanka continues in different forms, but through his narrative, he offers a vision of resilience rooted in culture and history. By intertwining Sri Lanka's colonial past, civil war, and Buddhist traditions, *Anil's Ghost* presents a nuanced exploration of a nation grappling with its fractured identity while holding onto hope for restoration and peace.

Conclusion

In *Anil's Ghost*, Michael Ondaatje explores the complexities of colonialism and its aftermath as well as themes of national identity, history, and cultural heritage, all set against the backdrop of a civil war and its consequences. The novel illustrates how cultural identity is shaped by memory, forgetting, and the negotiation of various cultural narratives. Memory is a crucial element in understanding identity within a fractured society. Through personal struggles, cultural preservation, and acts of resistance, Ondaatje emphasizes how memory influences both individual lives and entire communities.

The novel's examination of forensics and archaeology demonstrates that both recent and ancient history continues to impact identity and collective memory in post-conflict societies. It underscores that even after wars end, their legacies remain, manifesting as cultural wounds, suppressed truths, and fractured identities. This highlights the need to confront and reconcile with the past. Ondaatje uses Anil's journey to highlight the challenges faced by individuals in post-colonial societies as they navigate fractured identities while striving to reconnect with their roots. Through its exploration of belonging, the novel underscores the enduring impact of colonial legacies on personal and collective identity formation.



Anil's Ghost further critiques the lasting effects of colonialism on identity, history, and justice in Sri Lanka through its characters, themes, and narrative structure. By emphasizing displacement, historical erasure, and systemic violence, Ondaatje illustrates how the legacies of colonialism continue to influence post-colonial societies. At the same time, the novel celebrates acts of resistance that seek to reclaim agency and cultural heritage. Through its portrayal of coloniality and colonial experiences, the novel challenges readers to think critically about the ongoing impact of colonialism and to consider how we can work towards justice, accountability, and healing.

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