

Routes to Roots and Roots to Routes: A Study of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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Abstract

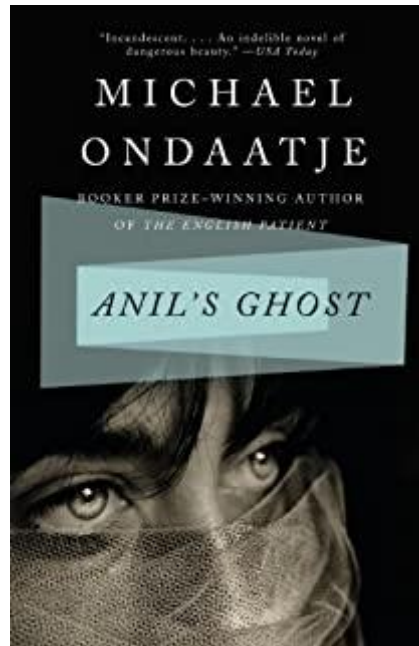
In the present times, mobility opens up new paths to humanity. On the one hand, it brings new opportunities and a sense of achievement for migrants in foreign lands; on the other there is an earnest desire to keep the bond with the birth land. This desire let them take the back routes to homeland. However returning to home and to one's roots entails changing notions of identity construction, citizenship and home. Political, economic and social scenario of the homeland forces a migrant back to the host land feeling safe, secure and established there instead of sticking to the roots. This article traces the journey of Anil to her roots in the homeland and her efforts to identify herself to the roots as portrayed in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. It also examines the causes that force her to take routes back to the host land and how back and forth mobility affects the identity of migrants in the present transcultural times. While examining this journey, this article also explores the civil war of Sri Lanka and its effects on the migrants.

Keywords: Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, civil war of Sri Lanka, identity of migrants

Introduction

Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan born Canadian novelist, essayist, poet, dramatist, and non-fiction writer who moved to England in 1954 and to Canada in 1964. Canada becomes his country of destination where he has been living since then and at the same time travelling throughout the world. He has seven novels to his credit - *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), *The English Patient* (1992), *Anil's Ghost* (2000), *Divisadero* (2007), *The Cat's Table* (2011), *Warlight* (2018) - along with several poetry collections. He is a winner of several prizes such as Giller Prize (Canada) (2000), Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction (Canada) (2000), Man Booker International Prize (2007), Commonwealth

Writers Prize (2008). *The English Patient* is his most celebrated novel which was also adapted into a film in 1996.



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Anils-Ghost-Michael-Ondaatje-ebook/dp/B000FC1GMY/ref=sr_1_4?crid=HERKIXW2S5E9&keywords=michael+ondaatje+books&qid=1682610138&sprefix=Michael+Ondaatje+%2Caps%2C749&sr=8-4

Anil's Ghost is a story of violence and traumatic homecoming and is told from the perspective of Anil Tissera, the female protagonist of the novel, a fully westernized character who returns to a civil-war ridden country, Sri Lanka, her birthplace after her fifteen-year long stay in England and America. She comes to her homeland as forensic anthropologist on a seven-week long project for an international human rights group in Geneva unwelcomed by the local government. Her assimilation in the foreign culture is to such an extent that she forgets Sinhala language, a common link between her and her country of birth without which she often feels herself a handicap whether it is to understand the local people or to convey her thoughts to them. However, now a completely transformed individual, she finds herself to be an outsider for the natives and is unable to identify herself as Sri Lankan. She has neither been accepted by the people nor by the government and ultimately, she has to leave the country.

Avinash Jodha rightly avers, “*Anil's Ghost* is an expatriate's journeys into the landscape of origin beyond the personal relationships and nostalgia to seek a newer belonging and responsibility, the journey from countering violence to the *eyes* of Bhuddha, an unfailing faith in redemption and an understanding” (Jodha 164). Ondaatje beautifully narrates the anguish and painful moral dilemma of the protagonist, a transcultural subject who tries to find her roots in the country.

Civil War in Sri Lanka

In order to understand the plot, it is important to know the historical background of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka, a small island in South Asia, has been in crisis due to civil war since 1980s. In “Author’s Note” that prefaces the text, Ondaatje summarizes the groups as there were “three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatists guerrillas in the north” (Unnumbered). Sarath Diyasena avers:

The bodies turn up weekly now. The height of the terror was 88 and 89, but of course it was going on for long before that. Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. *Every side*. This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign powers. So it’s secret gangs and squads. ... The government was not the only one doing the killing. You had, and still have, three camps of enemies – one in the north and two in the south – using weapons, propaganda, fear, sophisticated posters, censorship. Importing state-of-the-art weapons from the West or manufacturing homemade weapons. A couple of years ago, people just started disappearing. Or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition. There’s no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are. (Ondaatje 17)

Thus, the tragic history of Sri Lanka is significant in understanding this text; to know the reason why people start disappearing suddenly and what happens to them.

Mobility

People leave their homeland and settle in the host land often voluntarily and sometimes involuntarily. The movement that used to be forced one in the past has now-a-days become self-wished. The reason for this movement can be better job opportunities, upward social status, improved financial conditions and future security. Every day throughout the world, a number of people from third world countries are migrating towards first world countries in search of the meaning of their life. And in this search, one has to pass through several changes and transformations – prominently geographical and cultural that lead to an identity crisis and problem of self-recognition.

As mobility and migration has been “a constant and influential feature of human history. It has supported the growth of the world economy; contributed to the evolution of states and societies, and enriched many cultures and civilizations” (Koser, 332), at the same time, there is always an urge in a migrant to connect and return to his/her roots. Working simultaneously in the homeland as well as host land is what is called the success. But this success is a bit about the complexities in that space of reintegration as for migrants it seems actually difficult to adjust in the changed political and social atmosphere.

Ondaatje outlines and evaluates problems and difficulties faced in the process of intercultural integration as well as negotiations and compromises in one's identity construction after return. His interrogation of Anil's identity crisis through time and space and her living in the cultural-in-betweenness space of her homeland stumbling on the crossroads of intercultural encounter while searching for her roots reveal that the new generation does not like to exist on the fringes or the margins rather their desire is to be at the centre-stage and participate in the activities.

Changed Notion of Home and Belonging

Connection with the homeland is one thing that provides a feeling of belonging and intimacy. There is a complete change in the concept of home and belonging in case of Anil. She does not feel any sense of belonging or attachment to the country of her birth rather she behaves and performs as an outsider concerned only about the task assigned. Sri Lanka has never been a home to her that provides sense of security and protection. Rather, she has to face estrangement, alien surroundings and even life threatening situations in her homeland. Hostility of the land does not let her feel intimate to anyone. Apart from Anil, the locals also live in perpetual fear of disappearing – Gunasena, Ananda and his wife and many others are the victims of the government apathy – not knowing about the certainties of their lives.

Anil's movement from birth land to host land and return to homeland is her reconstruction of herself as a subject away from home. She makes home in the host land away from home in the homeland. When she returns to earlier home, Sri Lanka after fifteen years, it does not appear to be the same home of her past. It lacks the peaceful ambience of the past and hence her unwillingness and failure to support the transformed Sri Lanka. But it is her birth country and she has natural emotional attachment with it. Her situation is that of conflict and "she occupies a space that is simultaneously one of belonging and unbelonging" (Kamboureli 34). She does not offer herself to be treated as a native or local and remains neutral involved in her work. Though she returns to her birth land, she does not act as a diasporic subject helping her land and its people but as a "westernized outsider who can no longer fluently speak her mother tongue" (Burrows 167). She, "is indeed fashioned to be an alternative image of the diasporic subject to that of the writer Ondaatje" (Kamboureli 30).

Ondaatje provides a realistic picture of the present world revealing the hypocrisy of the governments. The Sri Lanka Anil returns to does not offer her a red-carpet welcome rather by hostile government and its official who does not offer her any help even in the initial stage of being at the airport. As a forensic scientist, Anil is assigned the task to search government archaeology sites, find bodies and their age. She is more interested in her work rather than talking to her team member, Sarath Diyasena – an archeologist she is attached with.

Transcultural World

Till now the identity and recognition of people of a country is determined by its borders but currently “the fixed borders of the modern territorial state have almost invariably encompassed a diversity of ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups with mixed identities and allegiances; and the relationship between these entities – the nations and nation-states – have been variable and sharply contested” (Held et al. 48). Thus, the contemporary transcultural practices have disturbed the conventional model of sovereign nations making them abode of multicultural and multi-ethnic folk.

Ondaatje has established himself as transcultural writer and his characters’ “names and identities are not fixed entities, but cultural and ideological constructions” (Cook 4). In this sense, *Anil’s Ghost* thrives with people of multiple and transcultural identities. Meenakshi Thapan’s observation is quite apt:

“...the multiplicity, heterogeneity and difference inherent in the way individuals experience migration in relation to the dimensions of race, gender, ethnicity, culture, citizenship and work and how, while each of these informs the immigrant’s identity, it is constituted within a larger framework along structural and psychological divides between the public and private, the past and the present, loss and belonging, well being and despair” (Thapan 55).

Thus, operating at multiple levels with multiple concepts, Ondaatje deals with issues such as social and cultural displacement, race, and gender.

It is also noteworthy that Ondaatje provides a real picture of a westernized Sri Lankan who faces clash of cultures after return to the homeland. Undoubtedly Anil embeds herself in the foreign culture that shapes her identity but her long time physical and geographical distance from her land interferes in her bond with Sri Lanka. Going abroad at the age of eighteen for her education, she adopted and assimilated herself in the foreign land of Europe and North America as she had “courted foreignness” and felt “completed abroad” (Ondaatje 54) whereas in Sri Lanka it is other way round, as “she realized she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere” (Ondaatje 54) and “those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic” (Ondaatje 55).

Multiple Narratives

Ondaatje as a master narrator brilliantly weaves his narrative at multiple levels. As a liberal identity in terms of gender, Anil’s masculine name suggests her disavow toward traditional authentic marks. She proves herself to be a “determined creature” (Ondaatje 67) when she trades with her brother for his unused second name giving him “one hundred saved rupees, a

pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favour he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse” (Ondaatje 68).

Her relationship and breakup with Cullis reveals her power and authority over her own life. The incident of stabbing Cullis’s arm with the small knife indicates her willingness to displace herself from his life before going to Sri Lanka. She does not want to continue with her relationship due to his comfortably settled married life and not to carry forward his memories to Sri Lanka escaping the past. No doubt, their relationship has tender aspect and Cullis does not want to let it go but “she was determined to underline their crimes towards each other, their failures. It was just this she wanted to be certain about, although she knew that later there would be other versions of their fatal romance” (Ondaatje 265). And she achieves whatever she wants may be with fury and violence and her determination is of the nature of warrior who fights for everything and anything in her life. She fights for her name; she fights for her independence with her ex-husband and Cullis; she fights for her professional truth and neutrality until she leaves Sri Lanka.

Socially constructed styles, social institutions and practices, hybridity in fashion, music, film, and visual arts are discernible in mobility that encourage the creation of new social fields connecting people of different nations. This forms an individual’s relations with his/her newly adopted geographical dislocated homes and home societies. Homi Bhabha’s notion of hybridity is no longer a negative concept rather considered as an achievement. For example, Anil takes solace under the umbrella of western literature and music at the time of her illness and at the same time the cotton thread of ‘protection’ on her left wrist looking paler under her rubber glove (Ondaatje 18-19) reflects her connection with native culture.

Mobility leads to manifold consequences. Khalid Koser in his book *International Migration: A Very Short Introduction* writes, “Migration is inextricably linked with other important global issues, including development, poverty, and human rights” (Koser 220). It leads to the growth and development of people, lessens the poverty, however the contrary viewpoint given by Rushdie is also true. He willfully concedes to the relation between mobility and migrant in an interview to Kumkum Sangari in 1984 saying, “If you arrive in society as a migrant, your position is automatically a dislocated one, and so you have to work out a literary mode which can allow that kind of conflict of descriptions to take place in it. ... I do feel that physical and geographical displacement makes you self-conscious about your position” (Sangari 250). These are two opposite notions but equally factual and imposing. Anil is able to gain because of her movement but at the same time her spatial and temporal dislocation takes her away from her roots and she has to make genuine efforts to rebuild them.

Multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies – consequences of mobility – sometimes lead to an atmosphere of fear and violence. Ondaatje’s unbiased narration of working of the government

forces, the Tamils and the insurgents against each other and aesthetic expressions of fear, hardships and suffering of common man discern the fact that violence always harm whoever comes in its way without distinguishing anyone. Political violence is a well-known historical fact.

Mobility and Identity

Anil and Palipana highlight the relationship between mobility and identity. Their first meeting in the Grove of Ascetics identifies them as individuals as well as same in certain aspects. Anil identifies herself as Western-trained forensic scientist and Palipana as an archaeologist gaining a reputation for his skill in piecing evidence together. Their similarity lies in the fact that both are self-made personalities.

The process of knowing identity of Sailor builds up a new relationship between Anil and Ananda, a local working in a mine. Ananda is a key person in reorganizing the features of Sailor by observing the habits and working of locals that signifies how life style and culture of a place helps identification of its inhabitants. He is a voice of marginalized as John Bolland aptly notes, “It is the quest to reconstitute “Sailor” - his appearance, manner and place of work, the location and form of his execution - that becomes the central metaphor of the novel, representing the possibility that the marginalized subject might yet outface the attempt by the powerful to elide his presence from the official account” (Bolland 85). This helps Anil to solve the mystery of Sailor. While Anil observes Ananda working on the skull and constructing its shape, she feels handicapped in the absence of common language link being unable to make him understand what she requires. Still, her relation with Ananda is sympathetic and protective one. She saves Ananda’s life when in a fit of memory of his missing wife and loneliness he attempts to kill himself without caring for the consequences. Her concerns are not due to her own profession or his importance for work rather as a human being for the sake of compassion and sympathy. Thus, Ananda’s identity is quite fluid from being a miner to a discoverer to a constructor ending the narrative in a positive note.

Conclusion

To conclude, Ondaatje in *Anil’s Ghost* explores the infinite field of human communication with its possibilities and limitations – particularly language barrier, native and foreigner, Sri Lanka, and the vast world outside. Simultaneously, the clash of cultures and tension between west and east is articulated with globalization and transculturalism manifested in Anil with her individuality without sacrificing one part for the other and local identity embodied in Sarath, Gamini and Ananda. Ondaatje highlight recent trends in the mobility to move from routes to roots and vice-versa where a migrant does not feel belonging to the place of origin as much as to the place of arrival.

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