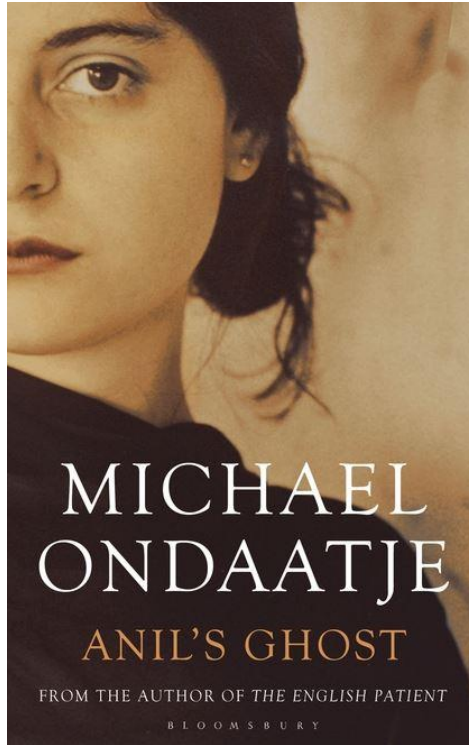


## Myth in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

V. Anandh and Dr. G. Arputhavelraja

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Courtesy: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/au/anils-ghost-9781408819784/>

### Michael Ondaatje

Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan born Canadian writer who won the Booker Prize Award for his novel *The English Patient*. He frequently presents a mythic and religious framework in his narratives. His novel *Anil's Ghost* records the atrocities of the Sri Lankan civil war began in 1983. It is combined with the descriptions of myths and social issues like Buddhist images, philosophical fragments, references to a sacred text of Sri Lankan Buddhism, *The Culavamsa* and also describes the sufferings of a common people. Ondaatje focuses on the religio-ethnic conflicts, reprisals' sequence of killing, resist comprehension and accept an atmosphere of unreality as each group splits claim to its version of the truth.

### Anil Tissera

Anil Tissera is a protagonist of the novel. she a forensic scientist sent by the Centre for Human Rights in Geneva for inquire about the civil war atrocities in Sri Lanka. Ondaatje technically narrates the story accompanied with the myths of the Sri Lankans. Her familiarity with current America, films, songs, and bowling backstreets sets up a series of juxtapositions with modern and ancient Sri Lanka. Her investigation reveals the competing regime of truth with the traditional religious philosophy of Sri Lanka. On the other hand, this novel registers the Buddhist philosophical ideas.

### **Buddhist Philosophical Ideas**

Enlightenment is attained through a proper understanding of historical process and the private processes of human lives. The wheel of life, the cycle of death and rebirth is supposed to be founded on a specific form of interconnection known as “dependent origins”; the whole situation, psychological states, and motivations started from a causal chain whose main determinants are desire and ignorance. Karma, the individual’s state of being, depends upon a chain of reactions based on those factors, and he or she attains freedom when able to free the self from the cycle of birth and rebirth. The Buddhist concepts of time and causality provide narrative models in *Anil’s Ghost*, which also has fictive estimates to the Buddhist ideal of Nirvana, when subjective misbelieve and unreason, are transcended in an experience of spiritual unity, and the sage has an outburst of compassion for the suffering world. Such experiences pay for utopian moments of intimacy as an alternative to the alienated ego of the exile. Buddhism’s specific blending of detachment and compassion offer an alternative to the public and private violence.

### **Detective Story**

*Anil’s Ghost* is at one level a detective story in which the Protagonist’s forensic science leads to the revelation of a government’s crime and the disclosure of a truth. The progressive lined plot with its revelatory end is set against disconnected descriptions of killings, kidnappings, and a random sequence of horror. The Buddhist passages in the novel reconcile the enlightenment narrative and the spectre of incoherence provides an alternative moral and sensitive budget for dealing with civil and private strain. In one of the passages, Anil is taken by Sarath to meet an archaeologist, Palipana, to identify the suspected murder victim. Palipana was later blind, had withdrawn from patriotic controversies in a meditative withdrawal to the remained of an ancient monastery in the forest. Anil endures a rational shift as the simple architecture and the Spartan routines tempt a trance-like state in which consciousness misplaces its sense of individuality and becomes occupied in the particulars of the environment: “These bones of an old settlement. It felt to Anil as if her pulse had fallen asleep, that she was moving like the slowest animal in the world through grass. She was picking up intricacies of what was around them.” (97).

### **Palipana’s Blindness**

In earlier, Anil had felt that Palipana’s blindness had provided him a specific relationship to the phenomenal world:

She imagined he could hear the one bird in the forest distance. She imagined he could hear Sarath’s sandals pacing, the scrape of his match ... She was sure he

could hear all that, the light wind, the other fragments of noise that passed by his thin face, that glassy brown boniness of his own skull. (87)

### **Awakening**

At the end of the novel, the Buddha's eye awakening to the enlightenment of the observer has been assimilated into the details of surrounding nature. Such passages recollect the Buddhist view of enlightenment as a vision into the interdependence of all myths and an experience in which the duality of subject and object is overcome through the individual's interest into the world.

Anil's training in a tradition of Cartesian dualism, taught her to treat the material world, such as bodies, insects, and plants as passive and meaningless since submitted to the analytical intelligence of the scientist. However, the detachment of the analytic mind from different symbols is taken by an experience of empathy into the boundaries of self and other is broken down. Anil confronts a form of inter-subjectivity separation from her Western theories of selfhood. Her appropriating male name from her brother has shown willpower to prompt her own identity against society's narrow labels. She gives importance to her privacy and has rejected her Sri Lankan culture, finding its strong communal ties repressive. In the course of a nomadic life and a series of fragmented relationships she has re-defined herself: "I live here ... in the West." (36)

The origin of suffering lie in the longings of passion is the Buddhism's second noble truth: "'There has always been slaughter in passion,' she heard Palipana say" (102). Later, Sarath's visit to the Forest Monastery of Arankale, elucidates that achieving the peaceful mind depends on disciplining the self to ignore passion: "Those who cannot love make places like this. One needs to be in a stage beyond passion" (189) Then, the self must throw away the consumerist world of power, including "historical honour, measured ownership, their sure truths" (190).

### **Gross and Subtle Material Worlds**

In the forest scenes, Palipana is informed to Anil as "the distinction between the gross material world and the 'subtle' material world" (86), and this marks the basis of a debate between Western and Eastern theories of knowledge. Enlightenment arises from an appropriate grasp of reality, the recognition that all perceptions are based on nothingness; they are bondage of interdependent, baseless phenomena in a continuous state of fluidity, and it is wrong to sort them the object of knowledge or desire. Contrast to that, as a forensic scientist informs to the Geneva Centre for Human Rights, Anil holds a positivist epistemology and a generous ideology: "We use the bone to search for it. 'The truth shall set you free.' I believe that" (102). But the novel deals with a killing committed at the peak of the civil war. The conflict between the dominant Buddhist Sinhalese and the minority Hindu Tamils provocative secession had become more complex. The dominated Sinhalese government was in conflict with a high Nationalist Buddhist mutiny in the South while in the East and North an Indian Peacekeeping Force had been imposed into violence against its fellow Hindu Tamils. In addition to inter-ethnic atrocities,

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co-religionists were killing one another now, as armed teams and death groups carried out implementations and “disappearances.”

### **Ethnic Cleansing**

Ethnic cleansing and civil war give a challenge to Western liberalism and its epistemological assumptions, because in such circumstances “truth” and “reality” are obviously being built in different ways by the parties in opposition. Buddhist epistemology elucidates more persuasively to such crises of legitimacy. Buddhism is sceptical of the possibility of attaining knowledge since to do so is to put on stable theoretical classifications to something that is essentially flexible.

In the extremes of inter-ethnic violence, an alternative epistemology founded on a more related view of truth answers to the condition more effectively:

Sarath knew that [for Anil] the journey was in getting to the truth. But what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter. (156-57)

### **Irrational Passion**

The Buddhist image of fire portrays irrational passion kindling the “truth” for some destructive end, and it echoes the simplicity of Anil’s confidence that she can take her evidences to some Western court of appeal. Truth will be reconstructed to suit the West’s interests in global realpolitik.

In addition to underscoring the ongoing controversy over the truth value of the chronicles, Ondaatje reinforces further in his novel the connection between Buddhism and earthly politics by fashioning striking parallels between its portrait of Palipana and the real life eminent Sri Lankan epigraphist Senerat Paranavitana, the first Sinhala Commissioner of Archaeology. In the 1920s, Paranavitana published an interpretation of inscriptional evidence that was used to legitimate the claim that the first Sinhalese king Vijaya, celebrated in *The Mahavamsa* for repeating the unification of the island first enacted by the Buddha, was not simply a hero, but a member of the Aryan race. As Steven Kemper in “The Presence of the Past: Chronicles, Politics, and Culture in Sinhala Life” observes:

Wilhelm Geiger, who first visited the island in 1895 and analyzed the Mahavamsa at the turn of the nineteenth century, used the tools of comparative linguistics to analyze the morphology of Sinhala. His study led him to the conclusion that Sinhala was, in fact, an Indo-Aryan language. For Geiger, categorizing the language was “simply a matter of scientific taxonomy; for Sinhalese nationalists, it became a fundamental element in the twentieth-century claim that Sinhalese sprang from a distinct and elevated bloodline. (22)

### **Palipana and Paranavitana**

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The parallels drawn between Palipana and Paranavitana are even more striking symbols when one considers that Paranavitana discovered and translated the gold foil Vallipuram inscription in 1939.

In the end, Dharmapala became the most dominant symbol in Buddhist revivalism, which based on an appeal to the ancient glories of Buddhism and Sinhalese civilization celebrated in the Mahavamsa and other chronicles as a way of pervading the Sinhalese with a new nationalist identity and self-respect in the presence of humiliation and restraints suffered under British rule and Christian missionary impact.

### Renovation of Sacred Sites

The final episode of the novel not coincidentally draws our attention to the progression of renovating sacred sites, featuring the artisan Ananda's effort to rebuild a large statue of the Buddha. Thus, the novel registers a drastic shift from the combining and protecting myth of the thread of the Pirit ceremony to the myth of quilting, a form of stitching that likewise unites yet, at the same time, acknowledges separation and difference. In representing Buddhism, Ondaatje signals toward the ideals of transcendence, wholeness, and unity.

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