



INTERSECTION OF HISTORY AND FICTION IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *ANIL'S GHOST*

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ABSTRACT

Michael Ondaatje, is a Sri Lankan settled in Canada and his literary artifacts constitute Sri Lankan Diaspora discourses. He is capable of transcending dichotomies like total assimilation and alienation or acclimatization and ethnic assertion. He is capable of straddling between the ethnic boundaries of both the countries. In Anil's Ghost (2000) Ondaatje's affiliation towards his ancestral land is fore grounded. Ondaatje renovates the native history by clearly depicting the suppressed and unidentified past.

Key words: postmodern, identity, archaeology, history, war

INTRODUCTION

“the process of critically examining and analyzing the records and survivals of the past is... historical method. The imaginative reconstruction of that process is called historiography” (Gottschalk, 48). The Pluralistic view of historiography demonstrates that it consists of varying but equally meaningful reconstructions of past reality or the textualized versions of the past. According to Marxist theory the Post Modernism is ahistorical as it questions rather than confirms the process of history. Post Modernism, to quote Linda Hutcheon, “reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge.” (Hutcheon, 89).

Post Modern writings of history and literature make it apparent that both History and Fiction are discourses through which we can record the essence of the past. According to Linda Hutcheon “ the meaning and share are not in the “events”, but in the systems which make those past “events” into present historical “facts”” (Hutcheon,89) Michael Ondaatje gives a

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pragmatic approach in his novel *Anil's Ghost* while picturing the realism of war and its effects on people's lives. The pragmatic focus in the novel is evident because the story dealing with life provides a clear insight to the characters and readers as to how to live with truth. In the words of Atwood, "the past no longer belongs only to those who once lived in it, the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it" (Atwood, 98).

Michael Ondaatje uses postmodern modes of discourse in his works to establish his Canadian identity. John Pouw, remarks, "if one defines literary post modernism as that mode of writing which features some or all of the following: a stylistic reflection of the chaos around; the unclear distinction between fantasy and reality; matter-of factness rather than lyricism; the writer caught in the act of writing, fictionalization of history and especially reader participation; then this vogue hit English Canada towards the end of the 1960s" (Pouw, 11). Bringing historical context is one of the traits used by Michael Ondaatje in his postmodern fictions. Though Ondaatje's works are about the past, they never seem to be in the past. Using his creative skill, he showcases the past, present. He begins his works with seeds of historical facts but transforms them vibrating through fictionalizing.

Anil's Ghost contextualizing Sri Lankan history is a paradigm for a narrative that recreates the history of the nation. The Government, the anti-government insurgents in the South and the separatist guerillas in the North were the three essential groups who involved in the historical war in Sri Lanka in 1980's and 1990's. Against this gruesome backdrop is depicted the tale of Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan native educated in U.S.A., a forensic anthropologist sent to Sri Lanka by a Geneva based international human rights group to investigate in collaboration with local Government representative, Sarath Diyasena and discover true facts about the mass genocide and establish the identity of the victims. The novel, a product of the consciousness of great historical convulsions of the author's nation, is an ethnic narrative that historicizes the macabre ravages of civil war in Sri Lanka and the organized campaigns of genocide engulfing the island. In a Government protected archaeological preserve, a skeleton that is not certainly prehistoric is found and a desperate enquiry is conducted to discover its identity and the government's involvement in the crime. Though the historic climate is captured authentically, the focal point is highlighted on the supreme sacrifice of Sarath in order to protect Anil and the reconciliation of Sarath and his brother and the Netra Mangala ceremony during which Ananda performs the eye carving on the New Buddha statue wearing, with veneration, Sarath's cotton shirt.

On return to Sri Lanka Anil interprets her native land with a long distant gaze and finds "the darkest Greek Tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale" (2000:11). The pervasive violence



erupting everywhere, the shootings, crucifixions, tortures is appalling. “It was a Hundred year’s war with modern weaponry, the backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by guns and drug runners... the reason for war was war” (2000:43). Fragments of collected information revealing the last sighting of a son, a brother, a father was recorded in the office of the civil rights movement. The abysmal depth of sorrow is evident in the description of how people “held on to just the coloured and patterned sarong, a missing relative last slept on, which in normal times would have become a house hold rag but now was sacred” (2000:56). The senselessness of the war is brought out when Gamini the doctor exclaims “who sent a thirteen years old to fight, and for what furious cause? For an old leader? For some pale flag?” (2000:220).

Ondaatje’s mission in the novel is to illuminate as if flashlights the drastic effect of the war on the various victims, Dr. Perara, an abducted medical officer; Narada and Palipana the two brothers who were Sarath’s teachers; Ananda Udugama, a Sculptor, Sirissa, Ananda’s wife; Gunasena, the truck driver, Gamini a surgeon and brother of Sarath and ‘Sailor’ a skeleton found in a cache of nineteenth century bones, whose identity as a miner is established by Anil and Sarath. Gunasena is discovered by Anil and Sarath lying on the road nailed to the tarmac through his palms in front of a parked truck with its headlights on. Palipana, a historian and a scientist, an archaeologist retreated to a forest monastery when his discoveries were not acknowledged as true, when “farther away were the wars of terror; the gunmen in love with the sound of their shells, where the main purpose of war had become war” (2000:98). Narada was shot in his room while sleeping and about his murder Sarath recounts “there was a rumour that his murder was organized by his own novice, that it was not a political killing as most thought at first. Those days you didn’t know who was killing who” (2000:48). Palipana’s niece Lakma saw her parents killed and the twelve year old girl was ‘scared of the evidence of anything human’ till her uncle reassured her and convinced of her safety in the ‘Grove of Ascetics; Directed by Palipana, Anil and Sarath got Ananda for rebuilding the head of ‘Sailor’ in order to get it identified. Ananda’s wife Sirissa was one victim of the ruthless war and after her disappearance Ananda retreated to the stupor of alcohol. The impact of her loss was such that the sailor’s face reconstructed by Ananda showed a calm, Ananda had known in his wife, ‘a peacefulness’ he wanted for any victim. After the reconstruction Ananda stabbed himself in the throat but was fortunately rescued by Anil and Sarath. Gamini seeks refuge in his work at the emergency ward in the hospital, providing medical relief to the victims of the political storm.

Sarath and Anil had identified ‘sailor’ as Ruwan Kumara, a toddy tapper turned miner belonging to third plumbago village. He was abducted from the village after he was identified as a rebel sympathizer by the Government forces. When Sarath tried to search for Ruwan Kumara’s name in the list of Government undesirables he and Anil became the target of the Government. Sacrificing his own life Sarath saves Anil and arranges for her escape from Sri



Lanka. In the novel the public life and the private life are juxtaposed and a thin demarcation divides the two. Against the backdrop of the enigmatic political events such as the assassination of President Kattugala are the elimination of the villagers, the children and innocent women like Sirissa. In the final chapter Ananda Udugama wearing Sarath's garment, uses his inherited chisel to open the eyes of the huge Buddha statue. It is ironic that the eyes of Buddha would fall on so much of destruction manoeuvred by man in the lap of the natural world which had such a seductive effect on Ananda while performing the Netra Mangala Ceremony.

Anil's Ghost, the novel, is a product of the consciousness of great historical convulsions of the author's nation and the fantastic reality and the marvelous events portrayed in the novel suggest the adoption of the technique of magic realism. The novel, on that score, merits comparison with Gabriel Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* etc., Ondaatje's words in the 'Acknowledgements' at the conclusion of *Running in the Family* "And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well told lie is worth a thousand facts" (1982:206) explains his stand point with reference to the intersection of history and fiction in his works.

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