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The Politics of Naming, Identities and Ideologies in Representations of Hi/story: A Reading of Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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Abstract:

Wars waged around the world have made significant changes in the course of history. However, the record of the details of conflict, its causes and effects have often been a prejudiced account written from the winner's point of view. The domain of literature has discoursed on history and historiography since time immemorial. But the treatment of history in literature has varied from one particular historical era to another. Post colonization, with modernism and postmodernism, historical fictions metamorphosed to historiographic fictions which treated the subject of history both skeptically and reflexively. One such novel is Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. It tells the story of a forensic anthropologist, Anil Tissera, who is deputed in Sri Lanka to investigate and find proof for government killings during the time of JVP insurgency. This paper attempts to take a closer look at how Ondaatje has (re)presented names, identities and ideologies in his novel and thereby draw inferences on the subject of the ever discursive history and truth. This paper could open up avenues for though in political fictions and its ideological repercussions and could be constructive in further research.

Keywords: historiographic fiction, naming, identity, ideology, Ondaatje.

Introduction:

Anil's Ghost is the fourth novel written by Philip Michael Ondaatje. Written in 2000, it tells the story of a forensic anthropologist, Anil Tissera, visiting her home country to investigate the human rights violation by the government during the civil war. She is sent to Sri Lanka on a seven week project "as the Geneva Organisation's forensic specialist" to work along with Sarath Diyasena, "an archeologist in Colombo" (Ondaatje 9). While ethnically Anil is Sinhalese, it is many years since she has moved into and assimilated into a part of the world which she terms "the west". She travels with a British passport and has studied in the United States. At one point in the text, the narrator writes, "She was now alongside the language of science. The femur was the bone of choice." (Ondaatje 61), meaning that she was ardently pursuing the study of western science. When she comes into the textual space of the novel, she is presented as the westernized foreign other who has come to objectively look for

proof of human rights violations but as the investigation progresses, her belief in an objective truth diminishes to accommodate other ways of perceiving truth. She thinks, "But here, on this island, she realized that she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere. There was less to hold on to with that one arm. Truth bounced between gossip and vengeance." (Ondaatje 24). This is a strange realization for one who believes that the truth shall set her free.

Anil is presented in stark contrast with Sarath, the archeologist working in Sri Lanka. His views on truth are radically different from Anil. "As an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use." (Ondaatje 65). According to Sarath, Anil who pursues truth to its end would not understand the relevance of "this old and accepted balance" (Ondaatje 65). Sarath is introduced in the novel by Anil who notices "a precise and time-stalling mannerism in him". She compares it with an Asian nod, "which included in its almost circular movement the possibility of a no." (Ondaatje 9). Sarath is thus introduced as someone who is not concerned with voicing the truth unlike Anil. He does not take much interest in the social life around him. His disinterest in the socio-political reality of the country springs from his knowledge that there are more than one truth. His way of life and his circumstances are different from that of Anil who has had most of her professional training in the West.

"Most of what Sarath wished to know was in some way linked to the earth. She suspected he found the social world around him irrelevant. His desire, he had told her, was to write a book someday about a city in the south of the island that no longer existed. Not a wall of it remained, but he wanted to tell the story of that place. It would emerge out of this dark trade with the earth, his knowledge of the region in chronicles—its medieval business routes, its presence as a favourite monsoon town of a certain king, as revealed in poems that celebrated the city's daily life." (Ondaatje 14)

Ironically it is Sarath who saves Anil towards the end of the novel. He is a believer in the sexuality of care for he says, "he would, he knew, also give his life for the rock carving from another century of the woman bending over her child....the line of the mother's back bowed in affection or grief. An unseen child. All the gestures of motherhood harnessed. A muffled scream in her posture." (Ondaatje 65).

Anil and Sarath are thus presented as people with different outlook towards truth—Anil is obsessed with correctness while Sarath is concerned about appropriateness and concern for the living. As these two people embark on their investigation to find proof of human rights violations by the government in Sri Lanka, three other characters come into the picture—Gamini, a dedicated surgeon, Palipana, a notorious epigraphist and Sarath's teacher and Ananda, the artisan working in the mines to earn a living. Anil and Sarath unearth four skeletons from a government protected zone in which one of them, they suspect, to have been recently killed. Their study of the skeleton (named sailor) leads them to believe that sailor was a victim of government killing and they seek out Palipana to help them find the identity of the skeleton.

Palipana is introduced into the novel as Sarath's stringent teacher who is unforgiving of any errors committed by his students. Palipana, the epigraphist who rose to fame in Sri Lanka was a central figure in the pragmatic Sinhala movement. He had become famous by "translating Pali scripts and recording and translating the rock graffiti of Sigiriya." (Ondaatje 34). He was known to his students as a strict historian and "the best archeological theorist in the country" (Ondaatje 34), to the point that all his protégées had picked fights with him over issues of correctness by the time he was sixty. But with the publication of the translation of "a linguistic subtext that explained the political tides and royal eddies of the island in the sixth century" (Ondaatje 35), he lost his name in his field for the texts he quoted could be found by no one. The narrator says, "Now it seemed to others he had choreographed the arc of his career in order to attempt this one trick on the world." (Ondaatje 35). Ironically nobody could prove his work false but he was defamed on the basis that his work could not be proven right. To him, truth was "just opinion" (Ondaatje 44). Thus Palipana becomes a paradox—on one hand he was stringent in verifying historical facts objectively yet he had committed a "strange act" of jeopardizing everything he had stood for by publishing an unverifiable truth. Palipana never accepts that he had fabricated his last work but the verifiability of his truth is called to question. He symbolizes a many-faceted approach towards meaning and truth. It is because of this that Sarath goes in search of him to seek his advice in discovering the identity of Sailor, the skeleton.

Palipana, in turn, introduces them to Ananda, an artisan who works in the mines to earn a living. According to Palipana, Ananda could recreate the head of Sailor by working on the skeleton. Ananda is portrayed as the peace-maker in the novel. He does not retaliate against the atrocities of the civil unrest, instead he reconstructs what is broken. This act of reconstruction in the face of political turmoil can be read as a healing act. Ananda thinks, "But if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, specters of retaliation." (Ondaatje 121). When the reader meets Ananda Udugama for the first time within the text he is working in the mines and when he is not working, he is drunk. He is delineated as one who does not take interest in the world around him. Anil is unimpressed by Ananda when she meets him first and is critical of him to Sarath. Anil and Sarath take him to the walawwa, an abandoned house to work on the skeleton.

As Ananda begins to work on Sailor and in the following days, Anil's resistance to Ananda decreases. She notices the "sadness in Ananda's face" (Ondaatje 70), and is moved on seeing the recreated face of sailor. The calm and the particularity of the face affects her. Later she learns from Sarath that Ananda's wife was one of the people who went missing during the insurgency. It is this grief of loss that gets translated in his works. It is Ananda, again, who reconstructs the face of the bombed Buddha statue. Ananda reconstructs the statue and paints the eyes thereby giving life to God. In this character who changes grief into art, it is care and love for the living that gets manifested. Ananda does not feed into a system of hate instead chooses to put aside the losses incurred during the time of political unrest for a better tomorrow.

Gamini is Sarath's brother and it is through him, the reader becomes aware of the atrocities of war. He is described in the novel thus,

“He turned away from every person who stood up for a war. Or the principle of one's land or pride of ownership, or even personal rights. All of those motives ended up somehow in the arms of careless power. One was no worse or no better than the enemy. He believed only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care, so the children would be confident and safe during the night.” (Ondaatje 50)

Gamini is a dedicated surgeon but he was not always like this. During his childhood he was called “Meeya” or “the mouse” for he “burrowed away unknown” and he “loved never being at the centre, while perceptive of what went on there.” (Ondaatje 89). His parents were embarrassed of “unsavory anecdotes about him” (Ondaatje 89), and gave up on him. His desire to become like his brother makes him break away from his family and Sarath. He dedicates his skill to heal people affected by war only to find that one of the dead bodies ushered into the hospital was that of Sarath's. Gamini's rivalry towards Sarath which “had begun with the desire to be the other, even with the impossibility of emulating him” (Ondaatje 89), ends with Sarath's death in a bomb blast. Anil is forced to return back to her foster nation without submitting her findings. Sailor is seized from her as her findings provide proof of government crimes. The novel ends with Ananda performing the ritual of Netra Mangala to reinstate the bombed statue of Buddha. The last lines speak of what the newly painted eyes of Buddha can see as the dawn breaks. The narrator writes,

“The eyes he had cut and focussed with his father's chisel showed him this. The birds dove towards gaps within the trees! They flew through the shelves of heat currents. The tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart. In the heights she loved and in the dark she feared.

He felt the boy's concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world.” (Ondaatje 122)

Name, Naming and Identity:

Names/ labels form a part of our identities. Stuart Hall in his work, “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference” says,

“In order to speak, in order to say anything new, we must first place ourselves within the existing relations of language. There is no utterance so novel and so creative that it does not already bear on it the traces of how that language has been spoken before we opened our mouths. Thus we are always within language. To say something new is first of all to reaffirm the traces of the past that are inscribed in the words we use.” (4)

Thus, ascribing a name to someone or something is an act that gives a unique identity to that thing/ person within a larger system. A name/ label already bears meaning within a particular system of language hence giving someone a particular name is an act by which he/she is accepted into a particular society. The inadequacy of names/labels is a constant topic in Michael Ondaatje's fictions. In *Anil's Ghost*, the protagonist Anil is dissatisfied with her original name and attempts to rename herself. Smyter quotes Derrida who writes, “The

proper name is a mark: something like confusion can occur at any time because the proper name bears confusion within itself” (“Roundtable” 108)” (12). Smith interprets Derrida’s take on proper names saying, “The proper name must belong to this system of relations to remain nameable” (37) but once it enters into the category of proper names, the word’s relation to the larger system of signification is severed and “we are opened to the confusions of chance and the haphazard constellation of nominal effects” (37). Proper names could be compared to masks—both the mask and proper name hide what lies beneath it imposing on the person an identity which is not their own. (Derrida, “Aphorism” 427). The narrator in *Divisadero* says, “That there was nothing more assuring than a mask. Under the mask she could rewrite herself into any place, in any form.” (Ondaatje 149)

Anil’s story starts only after she takes this name. In other words, she is born into the textual space of the novel with this name. Her history is erased. She deems the name originally given by her parents inappropriate for her. ‘Anil’ was the unused second name of her brother and was also the name of her grandfather. He had been long dead and both of the siblings had not known this grandfather personally. Yet she vies for this name and her brother being aware of his sister’s need for the name refuses to give it to her. When her parents’ intervention in this issue proves ineffective, they give up and let the siblings solve the issue. Finally a deal is drawn:

“She gave her brother one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eying for sometime, 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 64)

The deal mentioned above between siblings is even suggestive of incest. The thirst for the name is what makes her do all the above mentioned acts.

“Later when she recalled her childhood, it was the hunger of not having the name and the joy of getting it that she remembered most. Everything about the name pleased her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its feminine air, even though it was considered a male name.... She hunted down the desired name like a specific lover she had seen and wanted, tempted by nothing else along the way.” (Ondaatje 64)

She treats the name like a prized possession that she owns and is unwilling to share it with anybody else. When Palipana addresses her as “you” she insists that she be called by her name. The search for a lover is the search for a compatible other. She does not take up any name but desires a name that is both her brother’s and her grandfather’s. Her act of renaming herself can be read as an assertion of her agency in representing herself.

It is also worth noting that she is appropriating her brother’s name. Anil is never shown to have a good relationship with anyone in her family except for her *ayah*, Lalitha. Anil by borrowing her sibling’s “unused name” is making an attempt to recontextualize and associate a new identity with that name. The fight over her acquired name and her desire to rename herself should be read in the context of “family wars” that continued to “reside in her” (57), even after she left Sri Lanka. Her struggle for her name goes through a second phase when she is sixteen years old. She is “taut and furious within the family” and hence is taken to an astrologer by her parents to suggest a possible remedy for her problem. The

astrologer suggests that she change her name but Anil refuses. The soothsayer then compromises to just adding an "e" to her name and tells that the "e" would make her name more feminine and "curve away" the fury in her. Anil refuses even that.

Victoria Cook in her paper, "Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" comments that *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." (2). Her argumentativeness, she thinks later, was a phase in her life. But I argue that her argumentativeness and her desire to rename herself are intricately linked with her problem with the "family order". She says,

"In Sri Lanka one is surrounded by family order, most people know every meeting you have during the day, there is nothing anonymous. But if I meet a Sri Lankan elsewhere in the world and we have a free afternoon, it doesn't necessarily happen, but each of us knows all hell could break loose. What is that quality in us? Do you think? That makes us cause our own rain and smoke?" (Ondaatje 57)

Thus her act of renaming herself is not just an assertion of power over herself but is also her conscious effort to break free from the existing order/structure of the society she lives in.

Anil, in the novel, is a blend of two different cultures—Sri Lankan and U S culture. Her migration to U S has made her a U S citizen in record while ethnically she remains a Sri Lankan. She has acquired the western culture while being ethnically anchored in the Sri Lankan culture. . In a conversation with Chitra Abeysekera, the researcher on pupae, Anil reveals what she likes about the West. She says, "Oh—what do I like? Most of all I think I like that I can do things on my own terms. Nothing is anonymous here, is it. I miss my privacy." (Ondaatje 68). However she does not look at herself as a Westerner. When Dr. Perera comments that her dress is Western, she laconically replies, "It's a habit." (Ondaatje 22). Neither does she look at Sri Lanka as her nation. In short, she does not have ties binding her to either of the nations. She does not want to belong. Migration has changed the social category she belongs to but she retains elements of both the cultures in her. The delineation of Anil's character is similar to what Homi Bhabha mentions in his book, *The Location of culture*, "'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). She acknowledges the multiple facets of both the cultures. Her act of naming herself is suggestive of hybridity—firstly, she chooses a male name and admires it for its feminine air and secondly, she chooses to take up a kin's "unused" name and not anybody's name.

Her refusal to belong to a particular social category echoes in her final statements in the novel when she is about to leave her country, which was once her home. . When she finally wants to write a report of Government sponsored terrorism, Dr. Perera says that it's not a good idea. "'You made a speech about political responsibility,' she said. 'I heard a different opinion then.' 'That was a speech,' he replied." (Ondaatje 268). Sarath who overhears this conversation narrates,

“It was a lawyer’s argument and, more important, a citizen’s evidence; she was no longer a foreign authority. 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.” (Ondaatje 269)

The ‘us’ in the above mentioned conversation needs consideration. Firstly, she acknowledges herself as one among them but the problem arises when we think about who ‘us’ includes. In this novel, ‘us’ are the people and ‘you’ become the government. The expatriate who returns to her homeland as a deputy locates herself as a Sri Lankan in the above discussed conversation. But, interestingly the position that she takes does not segregate people as Sinhalese and non-Sinhalese. Instead she stands by the victims of war and speaks for people who cannot or are not given an opportunity to speak for themselves—the subaltern, the others.

All through the novel, Anil is working to find out the identity of the skeleton found in a government protected zone.

“To fetch a dead body: what a curious task! To cut down the corpse of an unknown hanged man and then bear the body of the animal on one’s back...something dead, something buried, something already rotting away? Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest.” (Ondaatje 25)

Anil believes that identifying/naming a victim would provide proof of Government crimes against suspected dissenter in Sri Lanka. It borders on the postmodern idea that absence can only be determined by presence and in the present is always the trace of the absent other. Anil’s act of naming/renaming is thus an attempt to give voice for the repressed in the story.

Paul Briens in *Modern South Asian Literature in English* comments on the naming of the skeleton and argues that there is a “grim humour” to it,

“The corpse is irreverently dubbed “Sailor,” according to the old children’s counting rhyme that begins “Tinker, tailor,/ Soldier, sailor,/ Rich man, poor man, / Beggar-man, thief.” Little girls used to recite it to determine what sort of man they would marry. The name is part of the grim humor hinted at throughout the text.” (193)

However as different from Brian’s argument, the Sailor in this novel seems to be named after the novel, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1974) by John le Carre. The novel is set during the historical epoch of cold war in Russia. It tells the story of a freelance agent trying to identify a Soviet mole in the British Intelligence Service. In this novel, “Tinker”, “Tailor” and “Soldier” are code names given to top level officers who are suspected to be the mole. Hence by naming the skeleton by a code name, Anil seems to refer to the context of the secret investigation against government officials in the novel. Juliet in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* says, “What is in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet?” (II ii 1-2). But in this story names become more than ‘just names’, they have meanings associated with them. The exhilaration that Anil feels on acquiring her name is partly because the act of being able to name someone/something gives her a kind of power. Names become instruments of locating ourselves. They are also critical for the politics of the

discourse on government crimes and punishment strategies. Embedded in the politics of the civil war as the situation of the novel is, name and naming acquires critical importance. Catherine Nash argues "Both the act of naming and mapping assert the power of representation. Attempts to rename and remap claim this power to recover an authentic identity and relationship to place" (3)

The Ideologies that Surface:

Anil's Ghost is a story that criticizes the Sri Lankan government's crimes against civilians. The story does not focus on the Tamil problem and there are no characters of Tamil ethnicity in this novel. But by commenting on the fascist ways in which the government works, the work criticizes the government's response to any dissenting citizen. None of the characters in this novel is shown to have an ideology—religious or political—that cannot be questioned. But just because it is less evident in the characters it does not mean that the text is ideologically neutral. While the novel is accused of propounding a simplistic maxim, "The reason for war was war." (19), this section argues that the political outlook that the text propounds is not as simplistic as it seems superficially. A complex political and ethical perspective surfaces on the issue of Sri Lankan civil unrest, which shapes and is shaped by the complex identities of characters in the novel.

One of the many accusations against *Anil's Ghost* is its lack of political inclination towards one of the warring groups. Kanaganayakam in support of *Anil's Ghost* writes, "...far from being biased, orientalist or otherwise irresponsible, Ondaatje's novel charts new territory by establishing a careful balance between political engagement and aesthetic distance." (5). While the story does not discuss the war in detail, the characters in the story are affected by war and are shown to contribute to helping those affected by war in their own ways. Gamini who is a dedicated doctor in the novel loses interest in his social and personal life and turns his attention to helping victims of war. His lack of interest for the material world and his belief in the "sexuality of spirit" is narrated thus,

"Fifty yards away in Emergency he had heard grown men scream for their mothers as they were dying. 'Wait for me!' 'I know you are here!' This was when he stopped believing in man's rule on earth. He turned away from every person who stood up for a war. Or the principle of one's land or pride of ownership, or even personal rights. All of those motives ended up somehow in the arms of careless power. One was no worse or no better than the enemy. He believed only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care, so the children would be confident and safe during the night." (Ondaatje 50)

Gamini's disillusionment with private property becomes evident after his wife leaves him. He never leaves the hospital and buys food from the street vendor. One day he longs for a home cooked meal and goes home. He finds his house inhabited by strangers. Strangely, he feels happy that, "all the space was being used" (86), and even gives the woman who is cooking in his kitchen a signed cheque in exchange for a home cooked meal. Money and private property, according to Gamini, only interested people who wanted power. His act of giving away ownership of properties and money in the context of war is a complex political position,

not against any of the warring parties but against the materialistic base of society. His belief in the “sexuality of care” symbolizes his hope in humanity. Care stands against everything destructive a human being is capable of. Gamini believes that the “sexuality of care” is the only hope for people who are afflicted by war in the country.

Another character who stands for what she believes in is Anil. She believes that her investigation on Sailor’s identity would give proof of government crimes against dissenting civilians. Ironically, she was chosen by the Geneva Organisation as their forensic specialist, “to be teamed with an archeologist in Colombo” (Ondaatje 9), because they thought she has been away long enough to qualify herself as an outsider in her country. The narrator says, “Anil had read documents and news reports, full of tragedy, and she had now lived long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze.” (Ondaatje 7). But she finds that it is impossible to look at the tragedy and interpret it as an outsider. After Ananda recreates the face of Sailor, Anil realizes the grief that Ananda has been subject to and breaks down. Ananda, who does not realize that Anil is crying for him and all other victims of war, wipes away her tears. This act of wiping away Anil’s tears makes her reminiscent of the mother figures in her life—Lalitha and her mother. She narrates, “Now Ananda had touched her in a way she could recollect no one ever having touched her, except, perhaps, Lalitha. Or perhaps her mother, somewhere further back in her lost childhood.” (Ondaatje 77). She becomes affected by the war and the tragedy surrounding her. Her involvement is what makes her counter Dr. Perera saying the government had “murdered hundreds of us” (Ondaatje 108), making it a citizen’s argument. She is no longer the UN’s forensic specialist who has come to find out Government crimes against civilians but identifies herself as one of the victims. She takes a position here and identifies herself as one among those affected by war. According to Sarath, Anil becomes a citizen only when she questions the government’s involvement in civilian murders. She becomes a national only when she cares enough to question the wrongs done by the government against its citizens. Anil manages to free herself from that constricted space where she is either this or that.

Inferences on ‘History’ and ‘Truth’:

“If it – learning to live—remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death alone. What happens between two, and between all the “two’s” one likes, such as between life and death, can only maintain itself with some ghost, can only talk with or about some ghost.” (Spectres of Marx, xvii)

History and its re-construction is an ongoing obsession in *Anil’s Ghost*. The name of the novel is suggestive of a Derridian *differance* or haunting. Meaning/Truth is forever postponed by an endless chain of signifiers. Anil, the ‘foreign’ forensic anthropologist who is certain about her truths, finds herself in a place where one can no longer differentiate between speculation and truth. She thinks, “But here, on this island, she realized that she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere. There was less to hold on to with that one arm. Truth bounced between gossip and vengeance.” (Ondaatje 24). This is a strange realization for one who believes in the modern maxim that “The truth shall set you free”. In her conversation with Palipana, the epigraphist, she says,

“We use the bone to search for it. “The truth shall set you free.” I believe that.” And Palipana replies, “Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion.”(Ondaatje 44)

The fixation on the trace of truth and the difference with which “truth” is looked at in different places and epochs is brought out in the novel in the episode of painting the Buddha's eyes. The eye is the centre of perceiving truth. It is used as a metaphor for the truth. Palipana says,

“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. Later he will be honoured with gifts. Land or oxen. He is dressed like a prince, with jewellery, a sword at his waist, lace over his head. He moves forward accompanied by a second man, who carries brushes, black paint and a metal mirror.” (Ondaatje 42)

The above quote has two parts to it—the first part talks about the binary of blindness and sight, understanding sight and seeing through its absent counterpart of blindness and secondly there is the description of the material remuneration that the artificer receives thereby bringing to light the worldly motif of the act of creation, subverting the idea that the eyes of the unchallenged God which sees/knows the ultimate truth.

I read the process of construction of the face of Sailor as a prelude to the remaking of the Buddha statue from the remnants of the original statue, which was bombed. Ananda Udugama who reconstructs both the face of the victim, who was killed in war and Buddha's statue, which had been bombed, stops believing in the originality of what is created.

“He stood over what they had been able to recreate of the face. It was a long time since he had believed in the originality of artists.... He himself did not create or invent faces anymore. Invention was a silver. Still all the work he had done in organizing the rebuilding of the statue was for this. The face.” (Ondaatje 121)

For Ananda whose wife went missing in the war, it is the face that gives solace. The specificity of it consoles him. Ananda is haunted by the disappearance of his wife. Death is unfinished. Ananda constructs a story about the death of his wife so that he can find peace. In *Anil's Ghost*, the dead who “are not properly buried” do not return as ghosts but the living dig them up for they are the ones in search of the truth. Death and loss in *Anil's Ghost* are treated as “‘unfinished’ so you could not walk through it.” (Ondaatje 25). In one of Anil's conversations with Sarath, she says that there are so many anonymous bodies in the ground now and people can't even differentiate between the old and new ones for most of them are burnt. She says, “Some people let their ghosts die, some don't. Sarath we can do something....” (Ondaatje 23)

Anil who is doing excavations of bodies observes that the family who waits to see the bodies that are excavated lives in a double-edged fear for, “the possibility of their lost son was everywhere.” (Ondaatje 4). Nchamah Miller in his article, “Hauntology and History in Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*” argues,

“Hauntology is a commitment to deconstruction's project of differance; hence to a destabilization of all reductionisms, essentialisms and dichotomies, ontologies,

teleologies, and epistemological claims. Hauntology's difference creates an expectation either for return and/or repetition of presences/absences, and also the tension inherent in the phantasmagoria and obsession, anxiety and fear of mourning. Derrida asserts that mourners are necessary. They are the inheritors of all that ensues from the past and in their mourning, they iterate a promise of responsibility for the future." (3-4)

The mourners are the inheritors of the grief of loss over someone they loved. It is the mourners who can make a change in the future. Ananda's art is a response to his wife's death. He is a mourner who refuses to succumb to the inhumanity perpetrated by war and responds constructively with art.

When Ananda reconstructs the face of Sailor, it is a calm and serenity of the reconstructed face that affects Anil. She describes the war thus,

"... 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 had translated lines from Archilochus—In the hospitality of war we left them their dead to remember us by. But here was no such gesture to the families of the dead, not even the information of who the enemy was." (Ondaatje 7)

Ananda's recreation of the face of Sailor and the serenity in the face can be read as his hope for peace. He hopes that his lost wife had died in peace. He reconstructs what is left and he looks at himself as an artificer who has a role in the society that has turned savage. He thinks, "But if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, specters of retaliation." (121).

Meaning/Truth is also intricately connected with the ability to use language and logic. Palipana's niece who is affected by war loses her language and motor abilities and recedes from the materialistic world. Anil who used to "believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear" realizes that "... those who were slammed and strained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection for the self." (Ondaatje 24). Thus the symbolic realm is central to the act of creating/ manipulating/ distorting the multiplicity of truths in reality. This novel thus is not just fiction but by self reflexively narrating fictionalized historical episodes it contributes to the reader's understanding of a historical reality of Sri Lankan civil war.

Conclusion:

Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan expatriate who now hold Canadian citizenship. The distance and his transnational identity allow him to explore the government actions and criticise the government in a way that novelists holding Sri Lankan citizenship might not for fear of censure. The novel discussed ends with hope for a better future. It highlights the importance of art in a war-torn society. Ananda's act of recreating the face of sailor and Buddha has been interpreted in this study as a self-reflexive form of aesthetically reconstructing that which was destroyed by war. His artistic expressions are responses to the brutality of war. *Anil's Ghost* affirms the need of informed and self-critical art. Such art adds to the dimension of truth, is political and functions as a discourse to decenter the hegemony prevalent in the construction

of history, knowledge and truth. Ananda's reconstruction of the skeleton is such an act. It is political because he knows that it is not the face of the victim but a victim that he is reconstructing and it adds to the dimension of truth because it is his honest response to the brutality of war and the sorrow of losing a loved one to it.

Ghosh in his work, *The Imam and the Indian* writes, "The truth is that the commonest response to violence is one of repugnance and that a significant number of people everywhere try to oppose it in whatever ways they can" (60). The novel discussed criticizes the government for its misuse of power and the play of politics along ethnic lines. The novelists' act of representing the war in all its coarseness is an attempt to sensitize the reader to the truth of violence. Writing such novels as the ones considered in this study is a political response and a testimony to the importance of art that engages with history and politics in the face of power.

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