

THE FRAGMENTATION OF HISTORY AND REPRESENTATION OF REALITY IN  
MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *ANIL'S GHOST*

**Samsonraj C** Research Scholar, Department of English, Providence College for Women, Coonoor, The Nilgiris. Email id: [samsonrajc@gmail.com](mailto:samsonrajc@gmail.com)

**Dr. R. Amudha** Assistant Professor, Department of English, Providence College for Women, Coonoor, The Nilgiris. Email id: [subramaniaamudha905@gmail.com](mailto:subramaniaamudha905@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

This paper aims at analysing Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. It focuses upon the post-modern writings by depicting history and literature. The fragmentation of history and the analyses of reality is explored in this novel. The story is the forgotten history and the violence of Sri Lankan Civil war wherein multitude of people were massacred. It depicts government-imposed brutality, anti-government militants, rebels, and the misery of ordinary civilians living in the midst of chaos. *Anil's Ghost* is the historical whitewashing which brings forth the irreparable knots of political constraints. The narrative casts doubt on the relationship of the characters' past and present as well as the Eastern and Western concept of truth, search for identity and the perception of reality.

**Keywords:** history, government, culture, identity, civil war and skeleton.

Post-modern writings of history and literature make it clear that both history and fiction are narratives that form signification systems through which we can understand the essence of the past. History and fiction at all time claims to be true because of their origin as human creations. As per Marxist theory, post-Modernism is historical in the sense that it questions rather than supports the historical process. Post-Modernism, Linda Hutcheon transcribes, "Reinstalls historical context as significant and even determining, but doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge" (89).

Edward Hallett Charr, a famous historian says about application of history in his work *What is History?* as "A continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (30). The Post-modern writers have used the history of Sri Lanka to depict the culture and social violence through their writings. Some of the works are Anuk Arudpragasam's *A Passage North* (2021), Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), Rajiva Wijesinha's *Acts of Faith* (1985) and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000).

Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan-Canadian writer, is a pioneer in the use of postmodern approaches such as employing historical parallels in his narrative methods. He as a post-colonial writer employs postmodernist approaches. Ondaatje undertakes an imagined reconstruction of his family history in his autobiographical novel, *Running in the Family* (1982) which depicts the family portrait or gesture with a mythical air. He begins his works with historical facts, but then fictionalises them to make them vibrant. The novel, *Coming through Slaughter* (1976) pictures the tragic life of an iconic figure, the Jazz Pioneer Buddy Bolden, whereas *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) is about a famous American bandit. The historical reports of the construction of Toronto's Prince Edward Viaduct inspired *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), while *The English Patient* (1992) tells the narrative of a plane crash victim set against the backdrop of World War II. As a writer, Ondaatje has a habit of incorporating historical facts into his works.

Similarly in the novel *Anil's Ghost*, he recounts the hidden history and specially focuses on the cultural roots of those who were killed in the Sri Lankan Civil War under extreme violence, primarily the poor and oppressed. An article writer Margaret CS Herrick describes Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* as follows in her article *Katabasis and the Politics of Grief in Anil's Ghost* as, "The whole novel is framed as journey in the land of the dead" (39). The narrative centres on the terrible killings

and human misery since it discusses corpses and their causes. The novel is fundamentally a mystery novel that deals with death investigations and the author, as stated previously recounts the national disaster and its aftermath, particularly emphasizing on the economically weaker and suppressed class of society.

*Anil's Ghost* focuses on a period in Sri Lankan history, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, when the country was destroyed by a political crisis and an ethnic war devastated the island brutally. The novel is an ethnic story that historicizes the horrific ravages of civil war in Sri Lanka and the planned campaign of murder that covered the island. It is a product of the author's understanding of the country's enormous historical convulsions. Anil Tissera, the protagonist of the novel, is a forensic anthropologist who was born in Sri Lanka but raised in the United States. She returns to her native for the first time in fifteen years to investigate the suspected unlawful deaths. Anil teams up with Sarath, a local Sri Lankan archaeologist, to complete the mission that the International Human Rights Organization has handed over to her.

They investigate to see if a recent skeleton can provide evidence for the act of the Sri Lankan government that has been systematically murdering its own citizens in a murderous campaign. Their research begins with the context, "The first body they brought in was very recently dead, the man killed since she had flown in. When she realized it must have happened during her early evening walk in the Pettah market, she had to stop her hands from trembling" (9). They continue to explore and take four recently buried skeletons to examine and determine the cause of their deaths. They take the skeletons into laboratories and attempt to analyse them. Later, they go to several cities to discover more bones that have been buried and are unknown to the public, either because they were killed or because they were misplaced. Anil and Sarath collaborate to determine the identities of bones discovered in ancient sites. They try to figure out what caused the state-sanctioned murder. And as they discover a new body buried among the excavations of a sixth-century archaeological preserver, Anil's emotions change, and she becomes enraged by the suffering of the people and the resentment of the government.

Anil and Sarath find skeletons in Bandarawela, "Whose bones were still held together by dried ligaments, partially burned. Something not prehistoric" (46). And they find something suspicious about the skeleton as "they buried him, then later moved him to an older gravesite" (46). They are attempting to determine whether it is a case of murder or a political assassination. Anil wants to establish that the skeleton she discovered during her study is a recent one. This sentence illustrates her pursuit of experimental truth, "She began to examine the skeleton again under sulphur light, summarizing the facts of his death so far, the permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy. One forearm broken. Partial burning. Vertebrae damage in the neck" (60). The terrible state of the buried corpse provides information to help her continue her inquiry into the identity and culture of the people who have gone missing. Eventually, Anil and Sarath look into Sailor's name and kidnapping date. They continue the inquiry by giving each skeleton a name and a date of abduction, with Sailor being the first and foremost skeleton through which they create the concepts for the examination of other skeletons. They couldn't find any information regarding the skeleton's identity when studying it. As a result, it demonstrates that names and identities are cultural and ideological inventions that can be documented over time rather than fixed entities.

Anil undertakes research in order to uncover the truth about Sri Lanka. With Sarath's support, she goes to several locations. In an archaeological expedition, Sarath and Anil come across a cave painting depicting a woman leaning over a kid. Sarath ties the present fact of grief and affection for his hometown with the historical truth of the mother's blend of anguish and affection for her kid.

Palipna, Sarath's old teacher and a Sri Lankan archaeologist, is well-versed in the background of ancient civilization and is one of the important characters of the novel, who treats history and

cultural truth as a multi-layered object. To him, the things that are discovered as art might provide the foundation for uncovering past truth. His approaches remain as a historian and scientist, not with a historical book, but with a practical understanding of locally inherited abilities. Thus, Palipna's historical hints provides the way to Anil and Sarath to know much more about the history and the past events.

Palipna suggests, Anil to call Ananda Udgama, an alcoholic gem mine worker who used to be an artificer, a ceremonial painter of the sacred eyes on Buddha statues, for assistance to find out the original face of the Sailor. Palipna describes about the artificer as, "The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence" (95). Though, the artificer is banned from looking directly into the eye of the sculpture and must instead work with a mirror, he is well trained in images and the study of souls, both of which are necessary in reconstructing a human being's essence.

Anil and Sarath travel to the south and find a person named Ananda to build the skeleton's head in order to identify the victim. While searching for Anand, Anil gets to know more about the country's cruel behaviour especially the cruelty done to Sirissa the wife of Anand. She was one victim of the ruthless war and after the disappearance, Ananda retreated to the stupor alcohol. They try to discover the meaning of the skeletons that have gone missing. As Anil's teacher used to say "One Village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims" (172), she tries to know if that skeleton, which they have named as Sailor, is real and through that they need to represent more missing people of the Country. Following their discovery of Anand, Anil and Sarath explained their situation to him and engaged him to recreate the Sailor's face.

Ananda patiently reconstructs the skull of the skeleton so that it can be recognized. Anil keeps a close eye on Anand's artisan act. What Anand creates, is Ruwan Kumara, a toddy tapper. He was kidnapped from his community when Government soldiers identified him as a rebel supporter. Sarath attempted to find Ruwan Kumara's name in a list of government undesirables, and Anil became the government's target. Meanwhile, Anand tried to stab himself in the throat, but Anil and Sarath arrive to his rescue.

As the novel comes to a close, we learn that Sarath protects Anil and organizes for her to escape Sri Lanka by sacrificing his own life. In the novel, public and private life are paralleled, with only a thin line separating them. The hunt for the truth, as well as the rebuilding of skeletons' skulls and heads, is an attempt to rewrite the land's past. In their travels, they discover and carve various images, which marks the beginning of new historical thought. In the course of search of missing people, the novel represents the various incidents that took place in the country such as, "Intentional violence in March 1984" (114), the bombing over the innocent Tamils (129), and "Mass disappearance at Suriyakanda" (154). These are few incidents that show the sufferings of Sri Lankans during the civil war. As Palipana states about the history to Sarath, "All history was filled with sunlight, every hollow was filled with rain" (80). Throughout the novel, history repeats as a voice of missing people through various heart-breaking incidents.

The truth of the civil conflict is fully exposed. We can see Anil presenting a story from the past that has been ruined by history but is still alive in the minds of Sri Lankan people. Ondaatje depicts further images of political violence, which is ongoing due to the fact that there are so many aspects involved in the struggle. It is the violence against property and people that has its origins in private quarrels and goals. Since violence is so frequent, determining who the offenders of specific murders are sometimes challenging. It is impossible to identify victims whose remains have been horribly tortured, burned to ashes, and carried over large distances in such a condition. Anil searches the scientific clues left behind in bones for eternal truths. Sarath, believes that truth and life are closely intertwined.

As a forensic expert, Anil examines the skeletons' remains to determine the victim's physical traits, as well as the reason, manner, time, and place of death, in order to establish the victim's identity. She discovers various secret facts about the country as a result of this. When she tries to find the government enemies, the Government officials immediately separate her from the skeleton. Anil was the sole individual who attempted to uncover the truth through the corpse of the Sailor, while the government and political parties worked to hide the causes of the missing persons. As per Alice Nelson's Chilean situation, "It is important to remember that, from the moment of their disappearance, missing people were relegated to a perverse limbo in which the State not only denied their *deaths*, but also attempted to negate their *lives*, by claiming that the disappeared never had existed" (50). This is precisely what happened in Sri Lanka, where Anil tried to uncover the truth about the history of the horrible murders, while government officials tried to cover it up and erase it because it would put them in trouble since they are the only people responsible for the massacres.

She recognizes that her results will be worthless since they are all against her and her discoveries. After a fifteen-year absence, she tries to identify herself with Sri Lankans, but at the end, out of frustration she says, "I think you murdered hundreds of us. Hundreds of us" (269). She repeats the words as she wants to be a part of minority history, associating herself with them.

The full story was told simultaneously to both layers of the audience. On one level, Ondaatje is conveying his own story through Anil, while his readers are on another. The novel's plot changes to another incident, the search for skeletons and their rebuilding, after introducing Anil and her arrival in Sri Lanka. Though Anil knows that "This was the place of a complete crime. Heads separated from bodies. Hands broken off. None of the bodies remains all the statutory had been removed ... ." (8) she takes the risk of searching for skeletons in such a dreadful place, knowing that minority can gain attention and a voice for their presence.

Ondaatje believes that ancient realities must be remade through his portrayal of modern reality. Global citizens like Anil represent it. This novel demonstrates that there is no fixed law binding the people of each century, but has only history, which can integrate and record every person of each century. The depiction of the Reconstruction of a Buddha Statue towards the end of the novel metaphorically relates to the reconstruction of past civilization. The sculpture was devastated or destroyed by armed forces and now been restored. Similarly, the history of minorities, which was destroyed by the political civil war, is being recreated. When the story is concluded, it takes on the shape of Ananda's restored Buddha statue.

As a genealogist, Ondaatje turns the novel into a rebuilt history of oppressed people. As a result, the unheard history and culture of the minority people are resurrected through the medium of art. Through this novel, the official history as well as the history of marginalised people have been clearly documented. Ondaatje proves his affection for the oppressed people by placing the central character outside of the dominant political, economic, and social scene.

In his article, *An aesthetics of war: The postcolonial ethics of Anil's Ghost*, author Ryan Mowat describes the novel as, "This novel is intimately concerned with the suffering that result from violence, and ethically represents this in a narrative of war" (33). Unsurprisingly, the entire book is closely related to the historical conflict that caused so much suffering for the community. And the novel *Anil's Ghost*, aids and creates a chance for the Sri Lankan people to learn more about the hidden facts and history of suppressed people and their cultural roots.

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