

Terrorism's Time In Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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ABSTRACT: Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, create a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror. Written in even more tightly condensed fragments than his earlier books, the novel asks the reader to engage in an act of reconstruction, piecing together stories and psychologies of Sri Lankan artist, Ananda, will piece together the ruined Buddha. Like Ananda, the reader's will be imperfect, a human artefact with visible sutures. The novel is characterized by abrupt breaks in time called as chronoschisms. This term chronoschisms in *Anil's Ghost* create a sense of time experienced through terror, by people living in fear that they can be blown away in an instant, to whom historical perspective is an alien luxury. It reproduces no political rhetoric, adjudicates no political claims, projects no political solutions. Its terrorists remain shadowy, nameless figures, encountered briefly; no police, no secret agents, no journalist heroes emerge to look wits with them, hunt them down or play the part of secret sharer. We understand that there is no master narratives, no organic psychologies, no resolution and no moral.

Keywords: Terrorism, Politics, Chronoschisms, Reconstruction, Subaltern

Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* includes an epigraph a fragment of Sri Lankan folksong, a miner's beatitude for the links that connect him to the world outside the mine: "Blessed be the scaffold deep down in the shaft/ Blessed be the life wheel on the mine's pit head/ Blessed be the chain attached to the life wheel..."(3). The tropes of mining and burial are highly significant in the novel; Ondaatje has described their germination as occurring in his previous work, the poetry collection *Handwriting*, which was rooted in the tradition of Buddhist statues being stolen and buried, and moved around and reburied which seemed a strange parallel to what was going on politically. *Anil's Ghost* began slowly, through an archaeological angle and the idea of unburials. The implication of transference, burial, and excavation, make possible for Ondaatje a response to the politicization of atrocity. In an article by Jagath Senaeratne, he has quoted:

Certain words, certain phrases are said so often that they come to have no reverberation. Human rights, the phrase is indivisible, but the words mean nothing to me. When I heard the word politics, I roll my eyes, or if I hear a political speech I can't listen to it. And so in a way I burrow underneath these words, and I try not to refer to them. The words are like old coins. They just don't feel real. (21)

Before we talk about the novel, we need to look briefly, in the most literal way, at the time of terror in which *Anil's Ghost* is set. Burton in his work, *Archive of Bones: Anil's Ghost and the Ends of History* has stressed Ondaatje's interest in the "unhistorical, unofficial" story, "what goes on in private, "how ordinary people live through violence: "the book isn't just about Sri Lanka; it could be Guatemala or Bosnia or Ireland" (7). One obvious difference, however, between Sri Lanka and these other trouble spots, at least for North American readers, is unfamiliarity. The readership's ignorance poses a problem that an omniscient narrator with an authoritative overview would solve. Bauman in his work, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*, shares the postmodern resistance to any version of the true and one story that suggest that "we know how to fix "an elusive reality, asserts that in writing this novel he did "blackflips" to avoid having it "taken as representative" (6,7). His head note, therefore, limits itself to informing us that the crisis depicted took place between the mid 1980s and early 1990s and "involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgent in the south and the separatist guerrillas in the north. Both had declared war on the government. Legal and illegal government squads were sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents"(5). Though this note omits ethnic, religious, and political labels, the text identifies by name actual archaeological sites with their Buddhist and Hindu artifacts, distinguishes between Tamil-speaking terrorist and Sinhala speaking government officials, and depicts a suicide bomber's assassination of a fictional Sri Lankan president, recalling President Ranasinghe Premedasa's death in similar circumstances on May 1, 1993. Many local references to cuisine, clothing, architectural details are left untranslated. So whatever its wider relevance, specific geographical, linguistic and cultural details remind the reader that Anil's ghost wrestles with a real history and politics and should not be read simply as a fable about terrorism in the tropics.

Into the setting of intractable and largely incomprehensible violence, Ondaatje brings a Westernized outsider, Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist who has spent the last fifteen years in Britain and America. As a UN human rights investigator, she is grudgingly permitted to return to her homeland for seven weeks on the condition that she work with a local archaeologist Sarath Diyasena. Her story, then, has the potential limits of one of those films shot from the perspective of an English or American visitor to a violent Third World country. When the visitor leaves, as Sarath's brother, Gamini, puts it, "the camera leaves with him"; for the West, the "war is over"(285). Because her name appears in the title, and the early chapters are seen from her perspective, she initially seems to be the central character; but as the book goes on the Diyasena brothers assume greater importance; reversing the film cliché, Ondaatje drops her from the narrative as soon as she heads for the airport. Yet though she is not finally the novel's center, Anil is the means by which he introduces many of the novel's themes. Some of these arise from the cultural shock of return to a place and language she had walled off after divorcing her Sinhala-speaking husband and losing both of her parents in a car wreck; some arise from her temperament and circumstances, others from her profession.

The novel opens with Anil examining a burial site in Guatemala. Here she is afforded, in her role as a forensic scientist, a reverential status as finder of truth and lost identities, an uncoverer of testimonies. Ondaatje describes the families of the disappeared standing aside to allow Anil to pass as if she were a priest. Even here, however, the presence of the local problematizes the search after truth. Despite the esteem in which Anil's team is held by the Guatemalans, one of their number, Manuel, is exposed as "part of that community, so he has less protection than the others like us"(34). To be in some way attached means to be vulnerable, because it implies a

greater degree of intimacy. Anil has spent her adult life so far “courting foreignness” (54), maintaining a distance from her culture of origin while simultaneously holding the host culture at one remove. This is compromised in Sri Lanka by the fact of her homecoming; as someone who has left, she has forfeited the right to proclaim what is truth. No longer the revered and sheltered forensic scientist, Anil must learn how to move from the cocooned us of Guatemala to a more intimate, and dangerous, us, altogether. When she can finally say, before an assembly of government officials, “I think you murdered hundreds of us” (272), the “us” is a far more complex and problematic usage. Rather than neatly tying up the loose ends of her return, it emphasizes the untidiness of homecoming, its unresolvable quality, which for Anil becomes an engagement with the “dark trade” in intimacy.

As well trained in science as Anil, Sarath “can read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel” (151). But as the metaphor suggests, he is much more of a humanist, considering an archaeologist the “link between the mortality of flesh and bone and the immortality of an image on rock” (278). Where Anil looks for permanent truths in the chemical traces that survive in bones, Sarath insists that truth is inseparable from life “for the living” truth is “in character nuance and mood”(259). Anil’s objection that these are only “what governs us in our lives” is meaningless for a man who sees the most durable artifacts sharing humanity’s fragility, so that the “dropping of arms and hands of rock as a result of the fatigue of centuries....existed alongside human fate” (279). Like an old fashioned historian, he values the narrative dimension of the past; an archaeologist moves a stone “and there’s a story”(259). Knowing the context, the rest of the story, is the only way to understand an artefact; early in their acquaintance, he insists that Anil learn the details of Sri Lanka’s recent political history, the “archaeological surround of a fact” that Westerners usually miss(44). Without this context, even accurate information is dangerous, as when the foreign press publish isolated facts with irrelevant photographs that “lead to new vengeance and slaughter”(157). But Sarath’s eye for the *longue duree* suggests to his brother Gamini, a surgeon, a certain cynicism, or at least a lack of commitment to the present: “he is the one in our family with historical irony. We are prime examples for him of why cities become ruins”(192). And even Palipana, the great archaeologist with whom Sarath studied, says that “to be loved with irony of history- that is not much”(12).

As forensic anthropologist and archaeologist, work out Ruman Kumara’s identity, they enlist the help of handful of people, victims of terrorism of them, whom Sarath can trust. Palipana is the first of these. Now an old man, he was once a leading member of the first generation of Sri Lankan archaeologists, who wished to preserve what was left of their cultural heritage after the depredations of their Japanese and European predecessors. In his old age, has adopted an ascetic life near Ritigala, sleeping on one of the meditation platforms that mark the site of an ancient monastery. His only companion is his niece Lakma, whom he rescued from a government ward for orphans of the civil war. With great gentleness, he teaches her basic skills, such as the alphabet and he also talks to her at the furthest edge of his knowledge and beliefs. As Palipana eyesight fails, she takes over their lives and cares for him with the same gentleness he had shown her. Though removing Lakma from the terrors of civil war helps her to heal, Palipana understands that his brother’s death proves that no retreat assures safety, that “passion or slaughter” come after the person who renounces them(103). His move to remote monastic ruins has another motivation, for the great scholar has suffered public disgrace from the recent disclosure that his influential translation of rock graffiti were fraudulent. Although an archaeologist,

Palipana, fits a romantic conception of the artist, and in keeping with this persona, he recommends that Anil and Sarath find a local artist to help them identify their skeleton by rebuilding its face.

Anil and Sarath find Ananda, who gave up art to work in a gem mine after terrorists killed his wife; day after day, his work done, he drinks arrack until he collapses. Before Sirissa's death, he practiced the traditional art of Netra Mangala, the ritual painting of the eyes on a holy figure; with the painting of the eyes, the statue or painting comes alive, so that what was previously a lump of stone or metal "is thenceforward a God"(97). Ananda's task, then, is to produce a reasonable approximation of the victim's face from his skull, a task that in different circumstances might be accomplished with a computer-generated model. What he produces, however is not the face of Ruwan Kumara but a younger face from which radiates what both Sarath and Anil recognize as "a peacefulness he wanted for any victim"(187). But Palipana's intervention leads to the identity of the skeleton all the same; watching Ananda at work, Anil realizes that he is squatting in a painful way that is bound to produce a permanent mark on the bone. When Ananda explains that he grew used to this position in the mines, Anil has an occupational marker, an explanation for distinctive strictures on the skeleton's ankle bones. This last clue leads the team to check for information about men missing from plumbago-graphite mines in the region; they find their name in the third village they visit.

In many ways, Anil's difficulty in interpreting the Sri Lankan situation is posing the question of how, even with a degree of inside knowledge, one can read across cultures. At the heart of the hermeneutic riddle Anil has to solve is the issue of who is the enemy and a complex understanding of how the dynamics of place exists in time, chronotopes seems to be needed in order to arrive at any kind of satisfactory answer. The text's concern with excavating the past may suggest that time is privileged over space in Anil's *Ghost*, but Sarath's remark on the 'archaeological surround of fact' makes it clear that historiography and related discourses of the past are inseparable from spatial considerations, and his apparent desire to insulate himself from the present by burying himself in the past is undermined by the investigation into Sailor's death. The solution to this mystery is not finally the main focus of the novel, as it would be in a conventional detective story, but when Anil's suspicion that Sailor's skeleton has been buried out of place is confirmed, the evidence of official involvement in human rights abuses seems conclusive: Sailor has died four to six years ago, but his corpse has been "found within the historical site constantly under government or police supervision"(53).

Once Anil and Sarath have Ruwan Kumara's identity, scientific inquiry is at the end; leaving Anil in the countryside, Sarath returns to Colombo to see if he can find Kumara's name on government enemies list. Meanwhile, officials immediately separate her from the skeleton, and although she is permitted to report to some police and counter-insurgency experts in an anti-terrorism unit, she realizes that without evidence her findings will have no real value. But she soldiers on, refusing to be baited, taping every word of her testimony. Sarath watches silently from the back row, noting that after fifteen years' absence she has finally begun to identify with Sri Lankans: "I think you murdered hundreds of us"(272). Realizing how hostile this audience has become, Sarath interrupts, pretending to dispute Anil's finding and finally challenging her to examine an ancient skeleton to see if she can really distinguish it from a contemporary one. She's hustled out of the room, her tape recorder confiscated, with her former colleague warning her not to attempt to return. The denouement of the novel, though turns upon another issue. Sarath altogether more pragmatically aware of how the society operates, has smuggled the skeleton and other pieces of evidence away, to ensure that her case can be made. He is

murdered for doing so, but his action does, it seems, make it possible for Anil to document what would otherwise be no more than unsubstantiated allegation. So, the novel suggests, collaboration between the idealistic diasporic professional and the pragmatic local expert may achieve something in the struggle against human rights abuses. And, in so doing, Anil's Ghost perhaps validates its own positioning.

When Anil disappears, the narrative moves to Sarath's brother, a surgeon, Gamini, in his office, turning through the black and white photographs of victims that a civil rights organization brings to him every Friday afternoon. When he reaches the third photograph, he recognizes his brother's body by its innocent wounds, the scars from a childhood biking accident and a fight with a cricket stump. And though he is not a man to deal with the dead, Gamini realizes that he must do so now, that if he does not talk to his brother "at this moment, his brother would disappear from his life" (288). So he begins a permanent conversation with his brother who had always been his rival, but who in death is simply what he is, "no longer a counter of argument, no longer an opinion that Gamini refused to accept"(289). The novel does not, however, end with Anil flying off to the West, mission accomplished. That would be too much like the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing that it critiques. The last vignette in the novel "Distance", like so many of the earlier ones, is almost self-contained, with no transition to tell the reader if it takes place a few months or a few years after Sarath's murder. Ananda has returned to Netra Mangala; he has been commissioned to paint to paint the eyes in the reconstructed Buddha. But there's no sense of perfect restoration. As he climbs the ladder to the Buddha's head, he is wearing an old shirt of Sarath's with his sarong, a recognition that " he and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena" (305). The narrator tells us that Sarath's last thought when he interrupted Anil's report was that "he had somehow to protect himself", he knows perfectly well that there is no forgiveness for people who do what he has just done (279). The text's reticence suggests much decision are made rapidly, without prolonged agonizing, perhaps without conscious thought, as the outcome of a life. Certainly self-effacement, suffering, and a scrupulous respect for truth were habitual with Sarath. The novel ends, then, with a creative act that is a trope for a new vision of Sri Lanka, which refashions an ancient practice; and Anil's Ghost seems to align its own artistic approach with this kind of reconstruction. There may, of course, be serious objections to the implied politics of this ending, since the ceremony appears to reinstate an ancient Buddhist Sinhala construction of Sri Lankan identity to the exclusion of Tamil culture, though critical opinion has been divided on this. However, at the very least this conclusion privileges subaltern creative agency and frustrates a reading that sees Anil's work, abetted by Sarath's sacrifice, as the ultimate site for closure offered in the novel.

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