

Michael Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost: an Aesthetic Voicing of Human Rights

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Abstract

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Paris by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, human rights have always drawn attention of the thinking minds towards their violation worldwide and consequent human efforts to sustain and preserve them. Though it has been a specific field of interest for the students of law, history, politics, journalism, and social service; but as it happens, even the students of literature cannot keep themselves detached from such a vast and humanitarian issue. Michael Ondaatje, an expatriate Sri Lankan writer, who himself has been, to some extent, the victim and first hand witness of the Sri Lankan civil war and human rights violation in the island. In his novel *Anil's Ghost*, he gives a realistic representation of Sri Lanka. The present paper tries to present the kind of treatment which Ondaatje gives to aestheticize this so much universally talked about ethical-legal issue. The paper will discuss how human rights in Sri Lanka have different meaning and status for the West and the Sri Lankans/Asians, and how they are being presented by Ondaatje in his novel.

Keywords: Civil War, Human Rights, Nation, Identity, Majority, Minority, Democracy.

Introduction

Officially gaining independence from Britain in 1948, Sri Lanka found itself marked by a postcolonial condition with each of its two dominant ethnic groups the minority Tamils and the majority Sinhalese, enforcing their own brands of ethnic nationalism. The Sinhalese used the Sinhala language and Buddhism as markers for amplifying "their" particular ethnicity. The Tamil communities, concentrated mainly in the north and east of the island, looked to the neighbouring south Indian state of Tamil Nadu for cultural and social support. The Sri Lankan civil war was an armed conflict between these two ethnic groups, erupting at a large scale in July 1983. After a 26-year long military campaign, the Sri Lankan army defeated the Tamil Tigers in May 2009. The origins of Sri Lankan civil war lie in the continuous political rancor between these two groups. Some of the actions by Sri Lankan government which inflamed the minority group to go far up to an armed agitation include- Ceylon Citizenship Act, 1948; Sinhala Only Act, 1956; Policy of standardization, 1970; etc.

The Sri Lankan civil war had disturbed the island for more than 26 years, causing an estimated loss of 100,000 lives, and US\$200 billion money. Such a long period of unrest and such a big number of deaths in the island made Sri Lanka and violence as synonymous terms in the eyes of the world. It has been termed variously as a clash between two cultures/classes, or between government and LTTE. Such a limitation is not adequate enough to discuss the position of Sri Lanka; Ismail argues that "culture" and "violence" are not categories central to the Sri Lankan debate. For Him, the debate "does not turn around culture or violence, but the terms nation, majority, minority and democracy. (Indeed, the debate could be summarily caricatured as pivoting around the significance—value—of one word: majority.) To speak to the question of peace in Sri Lanka in the current conjecture is to address their relation. (Ismail, 306)

Michael Ondaatje left Sri Lanka at the age of eleven, and migrated to England and then to Canada, settling permanently there and begun his writing career. As is the case with most of the diasporic writers, Ondaatje too feels the pull of his homeland, and writes for it. The search for roots and identity cannot remain untouched by the chaos of the present, as the threats to both lie buried in the past of the country. The crisis in the countries of origin puts the expatriates in a complex position of



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contradictory impulses and allegiances. Can he or she disown the present of the countries of their origin? Can they assume a neutral position or identify themselves with the so-called humanistic stance of the West towards their country? If not, what position should they take? Can they still commit themselves to a cause despite the distance and western citizenships? All these questions loom large around the psyche and creative output of these expatriate writers, and are always used as yardsticks to judge their work as subjective or objective.

Michael Ondaatje has written to Sri Lanka through his 1982 memoir, *Running in the Family*, his 1998 collection of poems, *Handwriting*, and most recently in 2000, through his latest novel, *Anil's Ghost*, the first novel-length treatment through which Ondaatje, in realist mode, represents Sri Lanka. *Anil's Ghost* brings an altered perspective to bear upon the island. Ondaatje searches meaning, sustainability and faith as his characters in the novel struggle to handle the chaos and the violence of the ethnic clashes in Sri Lanka. The novel does not take sides as Ondaatje sees 'blood on everyone's hands', nor does it offer any easy solutions. Ironically both the causes and solutions lie buried in the past of the island and in the complex layers of human history. The novel juxtaposes simultaneous unearthing of the past and the burials of the present that reflect each other in curious ways.

The protagonist of the novel, Anil Tissera, is a forensic anthropologist, a diasporic Sri Lankan based in the U.S. and educated in the U.K. who returns to Sri Lanka as part of a United Nations-sponsored human rights intervention to investigate the role of the government in the continuing violence and terror that has now devastated Sri Lanka for more than two decades. Anil's 'in-between' location facilitates the ethical scenario problematic reflecting Ondaatje's diasporic nationalist concerns: what is Sri Lanka? How can it be presented? It is precisely in that process of representation where there can be a rich convergence between human rights as a politico-legal discourse, the aesthetic space of the novel form, and the historical condition of post-colonial Sri Lanka. What, indeed, is the terror and violence that has been devastating Sri Lanka now for over twenty years? What is Sinhalese majoritarianism? And Tamil minoritarianism? Michael Ondaatje invokes the discourse of human rights in order not only to elicit political and ethical responses to Sri Lanka, but also to show how the discourse itself can break down and become frustrated by its application to a particular nation-state context. It is the constitutive polyphonic space of literature—one with which Ondaatje has continually experimented in his writing career—that allows Ondaatje to give dimension and voice to those affirmative aspects of human rights concern that may not always be able to be expressed through what Ranajit Guha has termed the "abstract univocality" of Law. (Guha, 135-165)

It is the abstracting and monological voice of the state that Ondaatje challenges through the space of literature and in particular through the genre of the novel, one which—through a realist mode of narrative-

no less promises the offer of the 'real' and 'particular'. With the thematization of human rights within literary space, the empire of the sign becomes co-extensive with an empire of ethics. The anesthetization and literarization of the letters of the law allows for a form of witnessing—characters universalized, particular identities become represented—that challenges the limits of the law's abstract univocality. The novel presents us with, and takes us along the path of a process. Ondaatje begins the novel with human rights on the scene of the international, by referring to human rights abuses in Guatemala, and moves to the increasingly particular: as Anil moves from the U.S. to Sri Lanka, she moves toward greater understanding of the Sri Lankans with whom she works closely, and she moves towards a deeper examination of her diasporic identity so that by the end of the novel she is able to proclaim, "I think you murdered hundreds of us". (Ondaatje, 272)

Ondaatje's female protagonist Anil functions as an emissary of human rights, but here is no simple intervention. Returning to Sri Lanka, returning 'home', she undergoes a process of learning, of revisiting her beliefs, of developing humility. The abstract univocality that produces a signification such as 'violence' becomes translated and anesthetized by Ondaatje within the polyphony of the novel form. It is the malleability of the aesthetic space of literature that will allow Ondaatje the opportunity to explore the ways in which human rights may both succeed and break down in different nation-state contexts, a 'literarization' that helps to address questions of law concerning precisely the application and enforcement of such rights. The aesthetic space of literature will allow Ondaatje to present a certain subjectivity as opposed to a static objectivity, most obviously through the phenomenon of 'characters' so that the individual voices can be placed against one another. The emergence, along with the temporal narrative axis, of a human identity for the skeleton 'Sailor' could be read as a metaphor for the emergence throughout the novel of gestures toward the humanistic traits, those values consonant with the values of human rights.

For Ondaatje, the discourse of human rights also becomes a way of structuring violence in *Anil's Ghost*. A paradigm of 'universal' human rights enables the structuring of the novel's plot in a form similar to that of a detective novel. The narrative motor driving the novel forward thus becomes an investigation, a search for the truth of the circumstances of Sailor's death. Anil's official intervention allows for multiple significations within the text: (1) comments on the 'West' and how it may differ from 'Asia/Sri Lanka'; (2) reflections on what constitutes 'truth' and the 'true'; and (3) the various forms of epistemology that stem from there. These three facets of Anil's intervention allow for the intersections between an international or universal value (or Values) of human rights and a regional ethnic culture, a space of intersections within which Ondaatje can explore and gesture toward affirmations of such humanistic values as regeneration and renewal from within the midst of crisis.

The truth of politics and the truth of humanity are juxtaposed in the novel and with power being on its side the truth of politics appears to get the better of it. The fate of millions hangs in abyss as the West, terrorist factions and the government wrestles for power or join hands secretly to remain in the centre. The West has used human rights as a double-edged weapon. It becomes the pretext for the western intervention into the autonomy of the Third-World countries. Avinash rightly observes it,

Anil's Ghost calls into question the role of the West, its self-assumed authority of being the sole judicator and representative of human rights while it simultaneously houses the terrorist headquarters and the human rights offices, supplies the weapons of destruction to governments and terrorists without any discrimination, makes and breaks dictators and sends in international referees or armies to ensure peace and harmony. (Jodha, 156)

Sri Lanka involves not just the question of human rights, but also of minority rights and state sovereignty. It is an attentiveness to and concern for the particular that allows Ondaatje's gaze in Anil's Ghost to Shift from the public/political to the private/personal, from such large, encompassing narratives as nationalism to such local, intimate narratives as those concerned with love between two people. It seems that in Anil's Ghost, ironically, he wishes to work in a kind of timelessness: he visits a particular time, a particular place, but his craft—framed through the discourse of human rights—wishes to universalize identities embedded within this locus. A memory that Ondaatje donates to Anil: "Clyde Snow, her teacher in Oklahoma, speaking about human rights work in Kurdistan: One village can speak for many villages. One Victim can speak for many Victims." (Ondaatje, 176) Such a humanistic affirmation is given a special urgency when framed by Ondaatje within the context of an ethnic civil war, that awakening—his, ours—to such catastrophic violence can have a catalytic effect on ethical response.

Aim of the Study

As it is aptly said that "Literature is the mirror of society". Social happenings certainly have an

impression on the human mind. The present paper is an effort to show how the political and social issues at his homeland affect the creative psyche of the author and how that effect is visible in his creative works. The aesthetic treatment of a politico-social issue i.e. the Sri Lankan civil war and the violation of human rights in it and how it has been treated by the West, is being tried to discuss in the present paper.

Conclusion

Michael Ondaatje left Sri Lanka when he was only eleven years old in the year 1954. He later migrated to Canada in 1962. He has never visited his homeland before writing Anil's Ghost in 2000. The novel was written nearly after a long separation of 46 years from his homeland. Still, when it came to the turbulent times faced by his own people, he was compelled to take up the issue and fictionalized it. Though the whole novel is written in an objective manner, yet the presence of author or his heartfelt kinship to his homeland is apparently visible and here he seems to be raising that big question of Human Rights from the perspectives of a native. The paper has been an effort to find out how the author has fictionalized the socio-political issue and how far he has justified his affinity with his own people.

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