



# INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY AND CIVIL WAR: A PARALLEL STUDY OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S ANIL'S GHOST

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**Biography:** Supriya Deogharia is presently pursuing his Ph.D. from Usha Martin University, Ranchi, under the supervision of Dr. Prakash Chandra Panda. The topic of his research is “*Alienation, Migration and Minority- Identity: A Comparative Study of The Works by Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje and Farrukh Dhondy*”.

## ABSTRACT

This paper unfolds basically the topics mentioned in the title – individual identity in parallel with the Civil War of Sri Lanka. The author vividly gave the account of the traumatic condition that the country had witnessed in the hands of various separatist groups. This paper makes a study of the historical details of Civil War as reflected along with the main plot of the novel. The main focus is on the objective representation by the author who emphasised more and more on the values of peace and human bonding. Besides, in such a situation the identity of a person is always in question. It becomes more critical for a person like Anil who

has long been absent from her own native. She fails to locate herself to a particular place although at every inch she can feel a sense of bonding. Identity and study of the historical facts actually foreshadow the effects of migration, later resulting in the concept of dislocation. The relation between Anil, the central character with 'the ghost' of the Civil war also comes to the forefront of discussion in the paper.

**KEYWORDS: Civil war, Identity, Dislocation, Diaspora, Migration, Peace, Ghost**

## INTRODUCTION

Michael Ondaatje is a famous name in the world's literary scenario for his novels, more particularly for the novel *The English Patient* which has been filmed and won the prestigious Oscar award. His fourth novel is *Anil's Ghost* which is written against the backdrop of Civil War in the island country Sri Lanka. Whole through the novel we find an individual's search for her own root. Quite naturally the term identity becomes relevant. This term is very much important for the writers dealing with the theme of Diaspora. If we look into the root of the author Michael Ondaatje, we will surely find out his multinational identities. In the case of the central character of the novel Anil, we also get this same indication, a feeling of transnational identities. Anil's identity crisis is the result of her migration from her motherland which is at the same time the root of dislocation. Searching for homeland is must for the migrants but the failed attempt to locate oneself with his or her homeland makes one dislocated and at the same time, to some extent, alienated. Diaspora and searching for identity or dislocation are the salient features of expatriate literature which can be found in the works of Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Monica Ali, Farrukh Dhondy etc. But in the novel *Anil's Ghost* along with the theme of identity and dislocation we also find a graphic picture of the internal crisis of Sri Lanka, the pathetic picture of the civil war. Anil's alienation from her own country and her emotional bonding in the internal

crisis of the nation form a curious amalgamation in the plot of the novel and makes an important issue of argument. Michael Ondaatje, the author, himself established his own strong liking for this novel.

The novel *Anil's Ghost* moves from the international scenario, as seen in *The English Patient*, to his own soil Sri Lanka. The novel presents the internal crisis of the country in the name of racial supremacy and cultural prejudice. Set in the time period of the 80s when the tension between the Government and the Separatist groups was high, the novel presents other very sensitive issues like migration, identity-crisis, and alienation. The concept of multiple identities comes repeatedly in the novels of Michael Ondaatje. The author Michael Ondaatje is himself of multiple identities. He was as a part of the Dutch colony in the Sri Lankan soil and his initial stage of life was spent in Sinhala culture. Then he was immigrated to England and so, a sense of Diaspora works in him. Later from England he moved to Canada, the country renowned for multi-cultural identities. Like Rohinton Mistry he also felt a sense of double migrations. In this novel Anil, who came to her native after a long gap of fifteen years as a part of the international forensic department to investigate the reason behind the death of the buried corpses, not only found mystery behind the Governmental killings but also came to know her own native soil, its own culture, its own crisis. But Anil could not intimately relate herself to her own country. She felt a sense of being alienated from these happening but the more she got involved the more she was awakened by her inner self and her roots haunted her which was no less than a ghost. Her intimacy with the Sri Lankan brothers Sarath and Gamini, involvement with their private life and her emotional attachment and adventures related to her search formed a great part of the novel. Her own private past was also reminded. The life of the sculptor Ananda and Anil's experiences with the saintly Palipana in the groves were not only the evidences of her investigation purposes but also the

emotional reflection of her own self. They indicate how much she is attached with the crisis of the country and is moved by the bizarre incidents.

It is very usual for a close reader to find the links between the works by the same author and there is always a chance to find them, however implied it may be. In his earlier work, *The English Patient*, there is a sense of history, which may better be analysed as historiography. So, the novel can be categorised as historiographic metafiction, a term named after Linda Hutcheon. There is a parallel study of the recent history of Sri Lankan Civil War along with the main plot of the novel which is an outsider's search for her root. Anil, the protagonist of the novel is more and more captivated by the hidden truth of her native. By investigating the skeleton of an unknown victim of the Civil War, she can realise the pathetic condition of the country which is torn by anxiety and suppressed fear. The author does not take any direct reference of the history in the plot of the novel but history is omnipresent. The growing tension between the Buddhist culture and the extremists is felt in the name of unknown killing, kidnapping of the doctors by the terrorist squad for the treatment of the war victims, and suspicion in every field. Anil suspects his partner of the investigation Sarath, a local archaeologist and often tries to make distance from him. Gamini, Sarath's brother knows very well the bleak aspects of the national politics as he himself was a part of this crisis. As the novel advances the novel becomes a thriller. The mysterious disappearance of the Sailor, the skeleton, after its rediscovery by the sculptor Ananda, makes us aware about the fact that there is something mysterious in it. The prediction that one dead body can tell the story of thousand killings is felt in the later part of the novel.

Here the picture of the Sri Lankan civil war is pictured by a writer who besides being a native of that very soil felt a Diaspora for her long absence from her motherland. The novelist does not give any direct reference or any incidental details. The racial attack, public killings or the emergency in the Nation after the 1983 massacre that come along with the main plot are purely fictitious. The Civil war is one of the central themes in the contemporary Sri Lankan literature or World literature as a whole. *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai is another beautiful example of coming-of-age novel where the crisis of the civil war is presented from the perspective of a Tamil boy. He, like Anil in the present novel, is little aware about her own motherland and falls more and more into the seamy sides of her country. But these works are purely fictitious and here the recent history comes inventively. These novels are not like the book *The Divided Island* by Samanth Subrmanian where the author gives a vivid detail of the 30-year long ethnic conflict in the Island country. The author here makes a fictionalized survey of his native Sri Lanka in the period of time when the country was utterly disturbed by the waves of internal problems. The novelist here takes the humanitarian approach and tries to uphold the values of life and peace. He is more concerned about the loss of people in the civil war who are also beyond any recognition or identity. The dead bodies are suppressed. The author highlights the values of peace and understanding. In the end of the novel the image of Buddha looking down the field of massacre symbolizes the juxtaposition of doom and the ray of hope at the same time. Whatever ideologies it may be, the cost of human life is above all.

The internal crisis is presented graphically in the novel as the effect of the Civil War in Sri Lanka. The backdrop of the novel is the decade of the 80s when the crisis between the Government and the Separatists is strongly felt. The origin of this Civil War is long rooted. Traditionally Sri Lanka bore the tradition of the Buddhism brought in the Land Long before

with their native people. Later the Portuguese and Dutch came and with them colonized people introduced Christianity in the land. During the British colonization, the British colonizers brought the Tamil people from India with them. They started living in Sri Lanka as Hindu religion in the South and the Eastern part of Sri Lanka. However, they had animosity with the native Tamil minority living in the Northern Part of Sri Lanka. In the British period the Tamil people were treated better with the Sinhala people. But after the Sri Lankan Independence from the British Government the situation became grave and serious. The matter was all about racial supremacy and intolerance. The Tamil race in the free country was treated inferior to the Sinhala, the vast majority of the country. The Sinhala people began to regard themselves as the Aryan race and the believer of Buddhism of North India. The tension between the two ethnic groups took its crude form when the Tamil group in the Northern and to some extent in the Eastern parts of Sri Lanka declared guerrilla war against the Sinhala led Government for a separate free state for them. The long tension resulted in rapid killing, bombing and a wave of panic and terror in the country. The main frame of the novel is in the 80s when the panic of the civil war is most crudely felt in the country. It is the time when the dead bodies of people were being suppressed by the Government. Throughout the novel a sense of mystery, a feeling of panic like a thriller is felt strongly. At the end of the novel, the ending of Sarath or the advice of Sarath to Anil to leave the country by giving a fake report suggests corruption at a massive scale inside the country where justice was denied at every inch and human beings were killed without number.

Michael Ondaatje in this novel actually wants to present the multi religious nature of Sri Lanka. The symbol of Buddhism, the marginalized Hindu Tamil, the Muslims or the Catholic Christians – all, as a whole, is the integral part of the Island Nation. The author is worried about the loss of human beings in the name of the Civil War and even the dead who were



not then got justice. The entire system was corrupted. Anil's visit to her native country after a long gap in such a state, gives her only a distorted dystopian picture. Besides, the sculptures of Lord Buddha or old ruins of art and old architectures indicate that art can bring peace and hatred can be overcome only through art. The way Palipana sees the nation with all its diversities gives a sense of philosophical tolerance in the world. The author at the beginning of the novel tries to sum up the extreme condition of Sri Lanka which works as the backdrop in the decade of the 80s, though the author has not taken the side of any Party or group.

“From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the anti-government insurgents in the south and the separatist guerrillas in the north.” (Author's note AG)

However, the novel was published ten years later, in the year 2000. So, the author ends up his note by saying ,

“Today the war in Sri Lanka continues in different form.”(Author's note AG)

The Civil War was also continuing during the publication of the novel, though the extremist nature of it was changed.

By searching truth behind the corpses of the civil war of Sri Lanka, Anil herself also found a strong sense of bonding with the country. This search for identity is one of the major themes in literature, particularly in the works of the migrated writers. In the earlier works by Michael Ondaatje, we find this identity working behind as one of the major themes of the works. Anil initially cannot relate herself to Sri Lanka. Her gestures seem to us like the foreigners residing in hotels for special purpose. But in the course of her investigation she can realise the condition of the country, its people, its crisis. The sense of being a part of the nation works within her. Actually migration gives birth to this sense of no-where-ness which is resulted in identity crisis. Anil's intimacy with the two Sri Lankan brothers makes her emotionally attached to the country and at the same time her past life , her abroad education

haunt her. The term 'dislocation' is an integral part of the identity. This dislocation can happen in any case whether it is within the country or it is outside the country. The person like Anil who has different residing in different places is naturally dislocated of a misguided identity. But at the same time the root always reminds one though the angle of observation surely changes. Anil's seeing of her country has naturally become a different one in comparison with the others. While leaving the country in haste Anil feels again a sense of emotional detachment with her own self that can be another moving of Anil whether it is in different form.

"If she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be a part of her life? Would she talk to intimates about them, the two Colombo brothers? And she in some way like a sister between them, keeping them from mauling each other's worlds? Wherever she might be, would she think of them?"(AG 282)

The word 'ghost' plays the role of a crucial symbol whole through the novel. It can be taken as the central metaphor of the novel. The ghost is able to tell the evil aspects of the civil war which is resulted in innumerable killings. Anil with the help of the local archaeologist Sarath found out four dead bodies for investigation. Among them they gave an imaginary name of the last dead body as 'sailor'. They started investigation of the 'Sailor' whom they thought to be the key to expose the reasons of thousand killings all over the country. While Anil was crossed about her investigation she told them about that reality.

"The skeleton I had was evidence of a certain kind of crime. That is what is important here. "One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many villages"."(AG 272)

The events that followed after the discovery of the Sailor by the sculptor Ananda create tension in the plot. The attack on the sculptor Ananda, the disappearance of the Sailor and Sarath's advice to Anil to leave the country by giving a fake report suggest that the Sailor is



the evidence of thousand crimes, the ghastly presence of all evil deeds. So, the word ‘ghost’ which is apparently taken for the sailor may be taken as a symbol also. After Sarath’s death he also becomes a ghost among the thousand killings of a country torn in Civil War. At the end of the novel Ananda, the sculptor while preparing himself to paint the eyes of Lord Buddha for the Netra Mangala ceremony could feel the ghastly presence of Sarath.

“He could feel its partial warmth on his arms, saw it light the brocade costume he wore over Sarath’s cotton shirt – the one he had promised himself he would wear for this morning’s ceremony. He and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena.”(AG 301)

## CONCLUSION

Michael Ondaatje is very powerful in his presentation of the theme of internal conflict of Sri Lanka which can also be taken as the matter related to his own root. He presents very clearly and in a very objective way the helpless situation of the country but nowhere is he too much opinionated. The conflict for the supremacy of race or the urge for freedom by means of terror is strongly felt throughout the narration of the plot. The author presents Anil as an outsider or at the same time as an insider who can dislike the internal chaos but cannot leave without loving her native Sri Lanka. By presenting her Ondaatje actually wants to generalise the crisis of identity felt by one who is separated from his own country for a long time. In Anil’s case, her own feelings for Sri Lanka get interconnected with her own self which feels a sense of Diaspora in that land. But the real twist is where we find her inner attachment for her native which is revealed in her intention to find out the mystery behind the death of the ‘Sailor’. So, in this novel there comes the theme of identity and Civil War in a parallel way.

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