

Teaching Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*: Diverse Nuances and Convergence of Disciplines

S. M. Tamal

Lecturer, Department of English, Gopalganj Science and Technology University, Gopalganj

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ABSTRACT

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, one of the most prominent literary documents on Sri Lankan civil war, captures the early years of the war and interestingly, this novel tells a little about the underlying causes of the civil war. To add, in the four hundred pages novel that revolves around the war, the names of the groups involved in the war are mentioned not more than four times. Rather it keeps registering the sufferings of mass people through the poignant portrayals of hospital scenes where people are seen struggling to survive. However, with his polished craftsmanship, Ondaatje has subtly avoided naming the involved groups and deliberately depicted the pathetic sufferings probably, as some critics assert, to accumulate the world interest into the point of human rights violations. It is, no doubt, fine to have discussions on human rights violations and its various dynamics in the classroom but at the same time, in a literature classroom, it is equally relevant to investigate and decipher the causes of the bloody war and resultant mass sufferings which needs a comprehensive understanding of Sri Lankan history, its distinctive anthropological realities, social and linguistic diversities along with human rights discourse. This paper argues that in teaching Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, an interdisciplinary approach is a must and through a critical discussion, it presents that the convergence of diverse disciplines in classroom discussions will help make a comprehensive and holistic interpretation of the text.

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* is arguably one of the most significant novels among all other literary pieces produced keeping the Sri Lankan civil war as the backdrop. This four hundred pages novel registers the incidents of killings, abductions, massacres and showcases an all-out insecurity that pervades the whole space. Apparently, this novel is an adventurous journey of an expatriate young Sri Lankan lady – Anil, who returns to her motherland to investigate the human rights violation claims using her western education, and training. Gradually she gets involved in the complexities of the war and at one point is forced to leave the country when she manages to gather evidence against the government sponsored human rights violations. However, apart from this adventure story, Ondaatje, being a seasoned artist, connecting stories with stories has added layers after layers and thus created a very complex text which carries warm instigations to decipher the real causes of the bloody war besides considering the human rights violation issues.

However, neither the adventure story nor the human rights violation issues is the focal point of this paper. This paper takes the novel *Anil's Ghost* as a case study on how the literature students would deal with texts that revolve around wars – war literature in general. It is quite widely accepted that the texts those revolve around wars are multi layered, more complex and contain diverse nuances as they sometimes function as soft propaganda tools to serve certain politics and are used to normalise or criminalise a particular narrative. Therefore, linear approach to these texts might mislead the readers and offer them with a partial understanding of the context. So, the reception of these texts should not be unidirectional and comply with the way of its presentation. Rather the readers must apply their agency in the reception and interpretation of these texts as no text is complete in itself as it is, in fact, the readers who are to complete the meaning of the literary texts. Therefore, there remains a huge scope of subjective and thereby plural reception of a particular text and in this process, the readers are endowed with potent agency to “excavate the knowledge” (Oliver 19). This process of excavating the knowledge, without any debate,

empowers the readers but at the same time, the readers are endowed with some responsibilities like contextualisation, considering the para-literary factors, transgressing the politics of the text itself and that of its author's. This paper recognises the significance of all these factors in the reception and interpretation of the text *Anil's Ghost* but primarily it aims to narrow down its focus on the last factor just mentioned – the politics of the text itself and that of its author's. Like reading, the productions of literary texts and critical activities are also political acts as the authors cannot disassociate themselves from the “circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of a society” (Said 18). And so, they claim more sincere attention as they often function as soft propaganda tools or a medium to normalise or criminalise a particular narrative. Unidirectional reading and complying with the author's interest might restrain readers from decoding the maze and getting the comprehensive meaning. To overcome this problem, in Eagleton's words, a text needs to be “read against the grain” (*Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985*, 3) and the subtexts (*Literary Theory*, 155) are to be consulted with utmost sincerity. Reading against the grain and consulting the subtexts unmask the “silences of the text” (Macherey 87) which add different dimensions in interpreting it as these silences sometimes become louder than what has been narrated. Prince rightly comments – “the disnarrated can, moreover contribute to the development of a theme ... and it can help to create suspense and to articulate the narrative in hermeneutic terms (in detective novels, for instance, the possible solution and the false solutions it introduces are contrasted with the real ones); ...” (5)

Now the next point is that how can a ‘reading against the grain’ be conducted? How the subtexts and the silences should be unveiled? Critics like Eagleton, Macherey and some others have talked on these issues. But in today's academia which is more accommodating and multidirectional their ideas need to be supported by insights from other disciplines rather than disjointed compartmentalisation and it is that what is suggested by Cultural Studies – an interdisciplinary approach that offers a wider spectrum of theories, ideas and thoughts from diverse disciplines like – history, anthropology, archeology, psychology and others in interpreting a particular text. On this note, Maswood Akhter opines – “CS [cultural studies] provides a very liberating interpretive infrastructure premised on insights from diverse theories and disciplines” (251). So, this study aspires to disrupt the ideological frame of *Anil's Ghost* through a “symptomatic reading” (Althusser 27) to uncover the consciously kept unconscious of the text by excavating knowledge and consulting the gaps and silences of it.

At this point, let us talk about the novel – *Anil's Ghost* is quite successful in particularly gathering the interest of the literary critics and researchers on the brute reality of the war. Of course, novels are pieces of literary art and therefore, an amalgamation of reality and imagination unlike the concrete anthropological or historical documents. But literature, by its very nature, does capture the reality of the time and is said to be the artistic representation of time. Therefore, for a holistic understanding of any literary text, it needs to be understood with references to contemporary social dynamics that encapsulates history, politics, economy and other social parameters.

Anil's Ghost, broadly set against the Sri Lankan civil war, particularly captures the years of late 80s and early 90s which, till the publication of the novel, were the most disastrous years of the civil war. Therefore, the novel carries a very dark ambience full of incidents of bombing, killing, abduction, and massacre. With all these, the whole four hundred pages novel is filled with frequent portrayals of hospital scenes where the doctors are seen with their restless efforts in managing the ceaseless wave of the war wounded people. An atmosphere of absolute insecurity, terror and uncertainties prevail in the whole novel where “the only reasonable constant was that there would be more bodies tomorrow – post stabbings, post land mines. Orthopaedic trauma, punctured lungs, spinal cord injuries. ...” (116).

This is how Ondaatje has captured the war – a detailed description of human rights violations. Interestingly, although the novel deals with a brutal civil war, it does not mention names of the fighting sides without some exceptions nor does it portray any head to head battle. It is quite evident that Ondaatje has made sincere attempts to maintain a balance while portraying the

atrocities. He deliberately equalises the parties which are involved in the war and on this ground, some critics assert this text to be apolitical. But another group of critics contends that the text is apolitical in terms of partisan politics but like all other pieces of literary art, this text also has its own ideological frame through which it upholds and perpetuates a particular stance. Here Ismail can be cited – “[n]ovels like all other texts take side” (24). Through this text Ondaatje has tried to bring the human rights violation issues to the domain of discussion and thereby has upheld the discourse of human rights which has been pointed out as the politics of the author. However, this paper does not aim to decode the ideological frame of the text or the politics of the author only. Going beyond, it attempts to discuss the subtexts and silences as sometimes they carry more meanings. This study recognises the contemporary Sri Lankan politics, its ethnic history, cultural and linguistic diversities as the principal subtexts and silences of *Anil's Ghost* where lie the causes of the war. Therefore this paper aims to look into Sri Lankan history for a comprehensive interpretation of the text.

Sri Lanka got independence from British colonial rule in 1948 with a population broadly comprised of two groups – Sinhala and Tamil. The Sinhalese were around 70%-75% of the total population whereas the Tamils were 15% or so. During the long colonial rule, the white masters employed the infamous ‘divide and rule’ policy which fostered a trust issue between these two major communities and it became severe in the post-colonial period through some of the decisions of the Sinhalese dominated government and the counter responses from the Tamils. This paper has identified five major incidents of Sri Lankan history which gradually pushed the groups to get into that civil war.

Firstly, the Sinhalese dominated government passed an act in the parliament in 1956 namely ‘Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956’ which stated that instead of English, Sinhala will be the only official language of Sri Lanka with an option of using English till 1960. After 1960, all official activities were supposed to be held only in Sinhala which appeared as a threat to the Tamils as Sinhala was foreign to them. This act, in the name of decolonising the nation, pushed the Tamils to an existential crisis.

Secondly, in 1971, the Sri Lankan government introduced a quota system in the university admission system with the name ‘Statistical Standardization’ which stated that an applicant would be considered on the basis of the ethnic percentage of his/her self-selected language. For example, if a candidate takes the exam in Tamil language, s/he would be considered only for 15% seats as per the Tamil share in Sri Lankan population. This quota system barred the Tamil youth from getting access to higher education.

Thirdly, in 1974 in the ‘4th International Tamil Convention’ police opened fire upon the Tamil gathering and killed at least eight. In response, the Tamil organisations agreed to adopt the ‘Vaddukoddai Resolution’ that, for the first time officially, demanded an ‘independent, sovereign, secular, socialist Tamil state’ by name ‘Tamil Eelam’. This resolution worsens the situation and takes both the parties to a point of no return.

Fourthly, in 1981, the Jaffna library, a storehouse of ancient Tamil books, manuscripts and religious scriptures, was burnt into ashes by the state backed mob in response to an attack on the military personnel and resultant deaths from an agitated Tamil demonstration. The Tamils took it as an intentional assault on their historical, cultural and religious legacy by the Sinhalese dominated government which aggravated the situation.

Fifthly, Sri Lanka observed an emergence of a Marxist group in the southern part of the country. The first uprising of this group was brutally suppressed in the late 60s but this time, it was more organised and had solid philosophic and political ground. The government, instead of thinking of a political solution, opted for military suppression and thereby, made the situation more complicated.

This paper observes that like all other wars, the Sri Lankan civil war was not a bolt from the blue. Wars are manufactured; in most cases, deliberately to erase the ‘other’ in the name of ensuring peace. Similarly, it is quite evident that the majority-minority issue, the self-other conflict, the trust deficit among the communities in then Sri Lanka gradually pushed the nation to a war. The

government, instead of acknowledging, accommodating and celebrating the differences, repeatedly took steps to create a singular identity failing to perceive Sen's idea that identities are "robustly plural" (19). As a result, the Tamils always felt threatened as they found their language, literature, culture, religion and livelihood – everything was under attack and therefore, they opted armed resistance to secure the future of their ethnicity and thus got engaged in the civil war. However, regarding *Anil's Ghost*, in spite of having its own politics of fore fronting the human rights violation issues, the text subtly managed to contain the subtexts and silences in it and especially in the 'Author's Note', Ondaatje categorically names the fighting sides and puts hints to these subtexts. There Ondaatje jots down –

FROM THE MID-1980S TO THE EARLY 1990S, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatist had declared war on the government. Eventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatist and the insurgents.

Anil's Ghost is a fictional work set during the political time and historical moment. And while there existed organizations similar to those in the story, and similar events took place, the characters and the incidents in the novel are invented.

To conclude, it is to be said that *Anil's Ghost*, celebrated for its sensitive subject-matter, polished language and layered structure, will only be partially understood and its ideological frame will remain intact unless it is contextualised and read in conjunction with insights from different disciplines. It should also be recognised that it is fine to have classroom discussions on human rights discourses but with that, at the same time, to ensure justice to the text – that is to have a comprehensive and holistic understanding, the diverse nuances of *Anil's Ghost* in particular and war texts in general need to be understood through the convergence of multiple disciplines.

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