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Sense of place in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

Abstract

Michael Ondaatje in his novel *Anil's Ghost* seems to be dealing with the sense of belongingness and alienation as experienced by the natives and the non-residential Sri Lankan people. The young protagonist of the novel, on her visit to her native place, senses that she is not used to the way of life there. Armed with the western culture to a great extent she faces difficulties in carrying out the work endowed upon her by the United Nations. Initially blinded by her expertise and experiences in forensic science she fails to recognize the real face of her native place. Her ignorance of the common beliefs and folk myths appears to become a recurring hindrance in her work. As the novel progresses an understanding of the demographics and local places dawns upon her. An attempt shall be made here to enquire how the sense of belongingness to a certain place becomes integral to an understanding of one's nativity as well as development of one's personality.

Set against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* takes us to the world of ethnic violence and merciless killings that Sri Lanka encountered between mid 1980s to early 1990s. Anil Tissera, a forensic expert born in Sri Lanka and educated in Britain and America, revisits her native place through the mission bestowed upon her by the United Nations. This mission brings her into the midst of social unrest where she finds herself as an outsider. Though she could speak both Sinhala and Tamil languages prior to her departure before 15 years and was accustomed to the Sri Lankan way of life, she now feels herself to be removed from the native culture. "She had lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze" (Ondaatje 7). As the narrative moves,

Ondaatje's novel takes up spatial concerns which enable Anil to understand the geography and political atmosphere of contemporary Sri Lanka, and therefore create her own outlook towards various conflicting situations.

Place becomes a determining factor in shaping up one's identity and personality. Upon her arrival to Sri Lanka, Anil seemed to be influenced by the Westernized way of thinking, her love for Western music and literature and her empiricist philosophy. She tended to believe only on what the skeleton showed her. Unknown to the native myth and histories, she appears to be outside the ambit of what Bhabha calls "hybridity". In Anil it becomes difficult to find the diasporic elements or acculturated traits; her identity seems to be the result of her own construction rather than diasporic experiences. Her initial reluctance to dive into the histories of the myths and legends of Sri Lanka, which Palipana seem to symbolize, asserts her as the one who has "courted foreignness". Upon her return she remembers and is remembered by her swimming achievement, which she does not like. She prefers to be known by her professional skills. The novel also speaks of Anil's initial unwillingness to meet any of her relatives in Sri Lanka. Her birthplace does not hold any of her emotions or feelings for her roots. Anil's sense of her place is more guided by the turmoil that it faces than her feeling of belongingness. On the contrary, at times of loneliness, Anil recoils to her memories of the West and her friendship with Leaf. She longs for her at her side, reminiscing of the life and adventures that they had once shared.

Leaf, on the other hand does not let her friend know that she is dying. She hides her illness under the veil of asthmatic problem. It is only after Anil meets her at New Mexico that she encounters the truth. Leaf had settled herself in the solitariness of the desert in New Mexico, finding solace in the strong winds and therefore slowly disappearing from the world as well as from Anil into death. The narrator lets us know that "she had just wanted to be a cowboy. She loved the Southwest" (Ondaatje 251). The place factor, as seen in this context, connotes the comfort a sense of belonging to a space brings. Leaf was fighting with her disease comforting herself with the thunder and lightning and storms that the place offered. Place here becomes the agency to carry on with life, a force which enables the person to live full even when one is on the verge of death.

Anil's Ghost uses the political turmoil at the outset to expose how a native can feel like an outsider in his place of birth. Anil, now an outsider, is not able to comprehend the environment of her native land. Engaged in finding out the death details and identity of a skeleton found in a government restricted area, the skeleton later named as Sailor, Anil comes across various characters out of which Sarath, Gamini, Palipana and Ananda influence her

discovery immensely. Anil is not able to locate the details of Sailor. She realizes that her scientific experiments and the unavailability of adequate resources for forensic investigation in Sri Lanka act as hindrances in her quest. Her indifference to the history of her land further disrupts her perception of the place. In the course of her investigation of Sailor, she travels to various places and encounters a sense of the place in which she was born. Palipana's ascetic lifestyle appears to be soothing to her and she, for once, feels like not leaving the place. The comfort, tranquility and serenity offered by Palipana's place enable her to come out of her frustrations in being unable to identify Sailor, and she forgets all her worries in the divinity of The Grove of the Ascetics. The impact of the grove on her was such that "she would give away every earring she owned for an hour by a well" (Ondaatje 86).

The Grove of Ascetic was also a place where Palipana sought refuge from the happenings and misgivings of his life. Introduced by the narrator as one of the best archaeologists of the country, his attachment and obsession with myths and legends to gain knowledge about the history and past of the country invited criticism and caused him to select a life of recluse. Cut off from the sociological and political aspects, he spent the rest of his remaining life in the jungle. Palipana seems to be dwelling in what Foucault has called as the "heterotopias", as "heterotopias are capable in juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 6). His desire to know about the ancient places and relics has secluded him from the country. He dwelt in the jungle with his writings and tablets, the writings which were finally proved not true. Losing his place as one of the greatest archaeologists in the country, Palipana immersed him in a place where he had no ties, be it social, political or familial except for his niece; the place which also protected him from the insurgents.

Another character remarkable for occupying an important influence in the narrative is Ananda Udugama. Ananda Udugama reflects the mental space which has been impacted by the political unrest of the country. Immersing himself in the sphere of art, he is in constant battle with sorrow accompanied by the loss of his wife. Anil even tends to think that the face which he had constructed for Sailor may be the recreation of his wife's face. His suicide attempt towards the latter part of the novel may be seen as a symbolic act of giving up the place which has taken his love away from him. Ondaatje uses place as the agent which influences the every character in a particular manner. The under furnished hospital becomes Gamini's place. He dedicates his whole day and night operating and treating the war victims. Torn away from his family and friends, Gamini's place of reclusion is the hospital. He sleeps in the hospital bed and literally lives in the hospital. What Ondaatje may be hinting here is

that the civil war in Sri Lanka had taken away the place of dwelling from the characters in the novel. Everyone seemed to have selected a place for reclusion for continuing with their life ahead. Ondaatje not only comments on the plight of Sri Lanka in his novel, he extends the geographical boundaries to Guatemala and the United States.

For Anil Tissera, Sri Lanka was never the place of her choice. After she leaves the country the narrator questions the possibility of her memories in Sri Lanka- “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?...Wherever she might be, would she think of them” (282). Unlike these two brothers, she could not help but leave the place. The two brothers collectively and Anil represent the ambivalence between the native and alien culture. Anil had established her place in the West while the two brothers’ place was the war-torn Sri Lanka. The novel shows that both these sets of characters are true to the place they view as their own. Past is also the place where almost all the characters visit to be away from the atrocities of the present. While Anil longs for seeking out the truth behind the skeleton of Sailor, the two brothers find themselves caught in between the political and social turmoil of their place. The inability to identify Sailor may be seen as a symbol of the helplessness the Sri Lankan people experienced during the Civil War. Even a family of a famous doctor and a government archaeologist became the victim of the war, let alone the humble and the low.

Sailor is the tool Ondaatje uses to juxtapose the geographies of the country. His identity quest enables Sarath and Anil to come across various places of beliefs and practices. They encounter myth, legend, art, village life, politics, and governmental pressure all together. All these aspects become detrimental in the character’s quest for self. Each character develops his own understanding of the war crimes, his own place of enquiry and his own theory about the political killings. As Aarthi Vadde notes:

In *Anil’s Ghost*, Sailor becomes the centre of debates about how to read and rectify war crimes- by seeking justice in the legal-historical realm or by pursuing national reconstruction through the renovation of communal myths. The novel balances the struggle of the former path with the limitations of the latter, contextualizing the search for Sailor’s identity within a larger meditation on the discourses of history, myth and artistry that the novel’s characters use to name him and to imagine Sri Lankan reconstruction in the wake of civil war. (259)

The attempt to reconstruct Sailor’s face enables the concerned characters to examine the racial conflict in depth. Though initially Anil had not much inclination towards Sri Lanka, towards the end of the novel she appears to understand the two brothers’ love for their country, their efforts to rectify the plight of its citizens as well as to social reformation. She

develops her personality through the various encounters she comes across in the novel. Realization of the importance of place in one's life enables her to change her view point. She now comprehends the love which the characters felt for their places; the sense of place being a driving factor in personal motives and personality development.

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