

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

TRAUMATIC REVERBERATIONS IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *ANIL'S
GHOST*

Harneet Kaur

Ph.D. Research Scholar, School of Humanities, Lovely Professional University,
Phagwara, Punjab, India

**Harneet Kaur : Traumatic Reverberations In Michael Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost--Palarch's
Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 18(6). ISSN 1567-214x**

Keywords: Trauma, Flashbacks, Memories, Abductions, Cruelty

ABSTRACT

In Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, background details resonate with the cruelty of civil war. Ondaatje's fictional description of Sri Lanka and its constant civil conflict primarily records in abundance the disappearances that have occurred and caused trauma for the Sri Lankans during the years. Traumatic reverberations are the traumatizing effects that have been faced by the characters in the novel and felt by the readers of the novel. Anil Tissera, the protagonist; Sarath, the hero; Gamini, a young doctor and Ananda, an artist from *Anil's Ghost*; all are the victims of trauma in one way or the other. A sense of trauma pervades Sri Lankan public and private life from the very beginning; the reader is aware of the trauma that builds up through the narrative, even though Anil herself is not a direct victim of the violence.

INTRODUCTION

Michael Ondaatje is a versatile genius who artistically explores a variety of themes through different genres. A gifted poet, a talented novelist, an anthologist and a filmmaker, Michael Ondaatje is hailed as one of the most celebrated and multitalented diasporic writers of Canada since the 1960s. He is the achiever of many awards as well as author of great excellence and rare literary distinction. Ondaatje's writings reveal his multicultural perspective. His writings contain vivid but bitty details, powerful imageries, astounding juxtapositions, and an obsession with intense experiences. *Anil's Ghost* is embedded in the continuous flow of artistic creativity that is so typical of

Michael Ondaatje: the novel is marked by the same poetic strength, emotional intensity and fragmentation with which his major novelistic works are featured. However, many critics have remarked that the novel manifests remarkable changes from Ondaatje's previous works; it displays an outstanding fusion of fact and fiction.

Before examining the novel, it is useful to elaborate the traumatic reverberations. Traumatic reverberations are the traumatizing effects that have been faced by the characters in the novel and felt by the readers of the novel. These effects are the outcome of the unpleasant happenings that give birth to memories, dreams or nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations, in case of the characters of the novel. So far as readers are concerned, they revisualise and experience the trauma through their imagination. Readers are led to sympathize more intensely with the trauma survivors whose experiences have been fictionalized:

"The trauma, it often seemed, was not evinced in the narrative component or in the ostensible meaning, but in a certain affective dynamic internal to the work." (Bennett 1)

American Psychological Association states that trauma is: Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways: (1) Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s); (2) witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others; (3) learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend – in cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental; (4) experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event (s). . . . (Singh 49)

In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth describes trauma in the following terms:

"To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished." (Caruth 5)

Anil's Ghost depicts Anil Tissera, a forensic researcher from the UN, who returns to her home country Sri Lanka to investigate infringement of civil rights and possible murders committed by the Sri Lankan government. The island undergoes immense abductions, murders and war crimes carried out by all parties. In Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, background details resonate the cruelty of civil war rather than the characters and their life events. The novel draws an image of the conflict and underscores the fact that the three sides involved in it are responsible for the problem:

"There had been continual emergency from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerrilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the

south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses.” (Ondaatje 38-39)

Ondaatje’s fictional description of Sri Lanka and its constant civil conflict primarily records in abundance the disappearances that have occurred and caused trauma for the Sri Lankans during the years. The novel, thus, sketches the traumatic condition:

“This was the scarring psychosis in the country. Death, loss was ‘unfinished’, so you could not walk through it. There had been years of night visitations, kidnappings or murders in broad daylight.” (52)

The diminutive details found in the novel makes the readers feel the same unease and disturbance. The central character Anil Tissera articulates the first impression of the nation-wide trauma that results from the civil conflict:

“She used to believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear. But she saw that those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection of the self.” (51-52)

This quotation communicates a sense of trauma that pervades Sri Lankan public and private life. From the very beginning, the reader is aware of the trauma that builds up through the narrative, even though Anil herself is not a direct victim of the war violence.

Anil is allocated to work with Sarath Diyasena, an archaeologist who recently discovered four bodies in a government-protected historical site. Anil observes that one of the corpses, labelled Sailor, have been buried only recently. The location of the corpse makes them suspect a murder ordered by the government. Anil felt the agony for all the murdered and anonymous bodies which were lying in the ground. She went through the pangs of pain and Ondaatje, artistically, displays movement of memories between flashbacks and flash-forwards. Anil’s discomfort can be felt closely:

“WE ARE OFTEN CRIMINALS in the eyes of the earth, not only for having committed crimes, but because we know that crimes have been committed.” (50)

With a desire to do something for the dead, Anil and Sarath board on a hazardous project, in which they try to identify and pinpoint the victim, so that it can be used as evidence against the government. They call in the help of Palipana, Sarath’s former teacher, who directs them to Ananda, a native artisan who lost his wife in one of the abductions. He is the most sympathetic character who is a sufferer and not a spectator like the others. Anil and Sarath hire him to re-create a face for Sailor, the skeleton. Ananda involves himself in his mission in almost a religious manner. Finally, he creates no other face for Sailor but his lost wife’s face, which reflects his trauma. After his wife’s

murder at the hands of either the rebels or the government, Ananda took to drinking and gave up his art. With his artistic skills, he re-enact Sailor's face, which partially leads to his identification. When Anil has to present the evidence to the government, mysteriously Sailor's body turns out to have disappeared. Sarath senses the danger Anil is in and takes her and Sailor out of the building. For this action, Sarath has to face the consequences and he is killed. After Anil has left Sri Lanka, Ananda is called upon to restore a destroyed Buddha statue and to paint the eyes on a second, new Buddha statue. The novel closes with his contemplations and panoramic view of the island which lessen the impact of trauma to some extent.

Although literary language allows us to treat trauma in a way no other medium can, there seem to be failings as well. The novel, in other words, self-reflexively underlines its own inadequacies and the need for alternative forms of expression, which could be found in the literary use of visual categories. Ondaatje's literary description of Sri Lanka and its ongoing civil conflict primarily figures the vast number of disappearances that have occurred throughout the years:

"There had been continual emergency from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerrilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses. (42-43)

Incidents like the blindfolded victim's episode that takes place in the market, a public place, show the intention of the rebels – creating fear among the public. Dora Wuyts explains how this episode becomes traumatic for the characters as well as readers:

"the memory and traumatic impact of the event linger and Sarath admits that he did nothing to stop the abduction: the testimony thus reveals possible layers of guilt. However, the narration does allow for revisualization both by Anil (the primary listener) and the reader (the secondary listener) and thus allows that different parties become involved in the memory as it is related. As such, the traumatic memory is opened up to possibilities of sympathetic knowledge and community. (28)

The mystifying death of his wife shocked Sarath so much that he could not lead a normal life. He expressed his state to Sarath:

"My marriage disappeared. All that ceremony – and then it evaporated in a couple of months. I was too intense then. I'm probably another example of trauma you see." (128)

Sarath's younger brother Gamini has to face more complications in adapting to the alienation than his elder brother. Working at the Gunshot Services as a Physician Gamini, has to meet a lot of traumas in his profession. The number

of injured casualties went on increasing with the improvement in war weapons, shortage of painkillers, screaming all around, the smell of antiseptics and so on. Gemini aspired for comfort and “wanted a mother’s arm to hold him firm on the bed, to lie across his rib cage, to bring a cool washcloth to his face. (115) Besides the public traumas, Gamini faces failure in his nuptial life. Chrishanti, his wife left him all of a sudden for no remarkable reason. The sudden aloofness traumatized his heart heavily. Gamini avoided his brother as he did not want his concern and drew himself towards his profession completely.

Anil has a traumatic past which is shown through a number of flashbacks. She married a Sri Lankan who insisted on love-making even at semi-public places. Such an attitude creates in her strong aversion for him. She was stunned to see his well – planned tactics to limit her research activities. She was also distressed by his use of physical power and charm to decree her. When she realized his plans, she stopped quarrelling. She yielded to his desires and left him at the end of the term. Her affair with the married man also ends up disastrously.

CONCLUSION

Anil Tissera, the protagonist; Sarath, the hero; Gamini, a young doctor and Ananda, an artist from *Anil's Ghost* all face trauma in one way or the other such as the death of the near ones, emotional breakdown or war trauma. To sum up, it can be said that with the violent background, the novel resembles a piece of traumatic painting:

“Street bombs, usually containing nails or ball bearings, could cut open an abdomen fifty yards from the explosion. Shock waves travelled past someone and the suction could rupture the stomach....Everyone was emotionally shattered by a public bomb.” (122)

WORKS CITED

Bennett, Jill, and Rosanne Kennedy. Introduction. *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time*. Ed. Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. pp.1-15

Caruth, Cathy. Introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. pp. 3-12

Dora Wuyts “*Visuality and Trauma in Michael Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost*” Dissertation, Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Engels – Duits, 2009.

Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil's Ghost*. Vintage, 2011.

Singh, Amrik. “*Exploring the Selected Novels of Khushwant Singh Chaman Nahal and Bapsi Sidhwa in the Light of Sigmund Freud's Theory of Nachtraglichkeit Deferred* ” Ph.D. Thesis, Lovely Professional University, 2018.

