

A QUEST FOR TRUTH IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *ANIL'S GHOST***M. PATTAMMAL,****ADITANAR COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE, TIRUCHENDUR.****THOOTHUKUDI. TAMIL NADU.****ABSTRACT**

Anil's Ghost, a novel of war, pain, violence and sufferings. This a novel based on truthful elements. Through this novel the Sri Lankan born Canadian writer recounts the Sri Lankan civil war that has raged for years and has claimed thousands of lives. This novel sets in the middle of civil war in Sri Lanka. Through the protagonist Anil Tissera, Ondaatje highlights the incapability of the west to understand the Sri Lankan conflict and also indicates the cold attitude of Sri Lankan government on its own people. This novel also talks about violence and victimization. The personal stories of every character in the novel makes to understand the conflict clearly. This paper serves as a foundation to understand the truth behind the mysteries and identity within *Anil's Ghost*.

KEY WORDS

Civil war, mystery, truth, conflict, ethnic strife.

Sri Lanka, an island nation. It is located just a few kilometres away from the southern coast of Tamil Nadu. Like other nations in the South Asia region, it has about two crore people. It has a diverse population. The Sinhala – speakers (74%) and the Tamil – speakers (18%) are the major social groups of Sri Lanka. There are two sub – groups among the Tamils. Tamil natives of the country are called ‘Sri Lankan Tamils’ (13%). And the rest, whose forefathers came from India as plantation workers during colonial period, are called ‘Indian Tamils’. Sri Lankan Tamils concentrated in the northern and the eastern parts of the country. Most of the Sinhala – speaking people are Buddhists, while most of the Tamils are

either Hindus or Muslims. There are about 7% of Christians, who are both the Tamil and the Sinhala.

The Sinhala community enjoyed a bigger majority in Sri Lanka and could impose its will throughout the country. It has emerged as an independent country in 1948. To establish the Sinhala supremacy, the leaders of the Sinhala community sought to secure dominance over government adopted a series of majoritarian measures.

An act was passed in 1956 to recognize Sinhala as the only official language, thus disregarding Tamil. For university positions and government jobs, the governments followed preferential policies that favoured Sinhala applicants. A new constitution stipulated that the state shall protect and foster Buddhism. The government measures which comes one after another gradually increased the feeling of alienation among the Sri Lankan Tamils. They felt that none of the major political parties led by the Buddhist Sinhala leaders was sensitive to their language and culture. They felt that the constitution and government policy denied them equal political rights, discriminated against them in getting jobs and other opportunities and ignored their interests. As a result, the relationships between the Sinhala and the Tamil communities strained over time.

The Sri Lankan Tamils launched parties and struggles for the recognition of Tamil as an official language, for regional autonomy and equality of opportunity in securing education and jobs. But their demand for more autonomy to provinces populated by the Tamils was repeatedly denied. By 1980's several political organisation were formed demanding an independent Tamil Eelam (state) in northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka.

The distrust between the two communities turned into widespread conflict. It soon turned into a civil war. As a result thousands of people of both communities have been killed. Many families were forced to leave the country as refugees and many more lost their livelihoods. But the civil war has caused a terrible setback to the social, cultural and economic life of the

country. It has been still continuing in Sri Lanka in different forms. The novel *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje set during this time. The protagonist Anil Tissera tries to found out the truth but fails to prove it. Throughout the novel there is a quest for truth. This paper unveils the truth behind the civil war.

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje has not given any judgement or taken sides. He has depicted the situation of Sri Lanka as such. Ondaatje states that,

“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 guerrillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists 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 separatists and the insurgents” (AG 34) .

Anil's Ghost is a story about Anil Tissera, a 33 year old native Sri Lankan, left her homeland at 18 and returns to it 15 years later. She is a forensic anthropologist who returns to her native Island, Sri Lanka, after 15 years in the west. As a member of an international human rights organization, her mission is to examine probable “extra judicial executions” by the government. Anil at 16 had won the two – mile swim race that was held by the mount Lavinia hotel. More than a forensic anthropologist she was a very good swimmer.

When she came back to Sri Lanka, she feels that the Island no longer held her by the past. She has read the newspapers which was filled with murder case reports. But no one knows who was the actual murderer. Ondaatje registers that “This was the place of a complete crime” (08). Anil examines victims of political violence. She was chosen as the Geneva Organization's forensic specialist, to be teamed with an archaeologist in Colombo named Sarath Diasena. After seeing the reports which Sarath has given, Anil speaks

“The bodies turn up weekly now. The height of the terror was ‘eighty – eight and ‘eighty – nine, but of course it was going on long before that. Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. Every side. This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign powers. So it’s secret gangs and squads. Not like central America. The government was not the only one doing the killing. You had, and still have, three camps of enemies – one in the north, two in the south – using weapons, propaganda, fear, sophisticated posters, censorship. Importing state – of – the – art weapons from the west, or manufacturing homemade weapons. A couple of years ago people just started disappearing or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition. There’s no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are. I am just an archaeologist. This pairing by your commission and the government was not my idea – a forensic pathologist, an archaeologist, odd pairing, if you want my opinion what we’ve got here is unknown extrajudicial executions mostly. Perhaps by the insurgents, or by the government or the guerrilla separatists. Murders committed by all sides” (14).

The murderers was not found. The criminals were not arrested. The people who disappeared was not found. It was not the people government. That has been shown by Ondaatje through the following lines:

... who had brought the police to the location – was arrested. The identity of others in this grave in the Eastern province – how they died, who they were – was never discovered. The warden of an orphanage who reported cases of annihilation was jailed. A human rights lawyer was shot and the body removed by army personnel. (38)

Simultaneously Ondaatje places a statement that “The reason for war was war” (39) and also he says that “ sometimes law is on the side of power and not truth” (40).

Ondaatje narrates the situation and trauma in Sri Lanka. Anil feels and worries about the report which was terrible and she couldn't tell who was the worst. They both, Anil and Sarath reached the ancient sacred cave and finds a fragment of bone which is recent in Bandarawela. There were rocks and bone fragments wrapped in clear plastic all over the floor. Being a forensic anthropologist, she could assist in the identification of deceased individuals, whose remains decomposed, burned, mutilated or otherwise unrecognizable. Forensic anthropologists are also instrumental to the investigation and documentation of genocide and mass graves. Using physical markers present on a skeleton, a forensic anthropologist can potentially determine a person's age, sex, stature, and ancestry. And they found out the skeletons which were wrapped in leaves and then cloth. Then the stones were placed on top of them, some of the skeletons were belonged to sixth century and it might be of the monks in the caves. Later she picked a fragment of bone from the detritus pile and rubbed it which doesn't seems to be the skeleton of sixth century. She identifies that the fragment of bone is recent. The cave in Bandarawela was a government – protected zone. After taking the skeletons, they have gone to the lab to examine. The novel embedded with mysteries and that paves the way to find the truth.

Sarath who has teamed with Anil has some political background. Anil wants to find out the murderer at the same time she suspects Sarath who might play with her work with his political background. She knew that during a political crisis the forensic work was notorious. She recalls that, once in the Congo, a human rights group has gone too far and their data was disappeared and their paperwork burned. Anything which they want to do against the government was prohibited. The investigative team, which included her in a lowly role as a program assistant, made her to do nothing but to get on a plane and go home. She was afraid

that it might happen. So she tries to be cautious. In the middle Ondaatje speaks about the political crisis which lies behind at the every action of people.

Meanwhile the political killings take place in side by side. The criminals and the murderers were not arrested. But the people who reports on the criminals were arrested. The died and missed people were not found out. Ondaatje says that the political enemies have gone for a financial deal. Each and every aspect of the novel carries mystery and which took the novel to the next level. Characters were introduced abruptly. Through the characters the mystery behind the war has been explained. Almost the civil war affects every character in the novel and Ondaatje shows the cruelty of civil war through this novel *Anil's Ghost*. At the same time he makes us to know that there is some power behind the war, which is none but the government. Anil hardly wants to prove that these all are political murders.

Ondaatje elucidates that,

“In a fearful nation, public sorrow was stamped down by the climate of uncertainty. If a father protested a son's death; it was feared another family member would be killed. If people you knew disappeared, there was a chance they might stay alive if you did not cause trouble. This was the scarring psychois 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. The only chance was that the creatures who fought would consume themselves. All that was left of law was a belief in an eventful revenge towards those who had power”(AG 52).

Anil clearly wants to prove the murder and she thinks that the skeleton which they named ‘Sailor’, a recently buried skeleton, that it has been moved from somewhere else and reburied in the restricted zone Bandarawela. She examined the skeleton under the Sulphur light. She has found out a broken forearm, partially burned skeleton, vertebrate damage in

the neck, a small bullet wound in the skull. She could guess the last actions of Sailor with the wounds on bone. She guesses that he might put his arms on his face to cover and protect himself from them. He was shot with a gun. The bullet has teared his arm, then gone through the neck. While he was on the ground, they came up and killed him. The smallest and cheapest bullet has been used to kill him named ' Coup de grace'. Then they have set a fire on him and began to dig a grave for him.

Anil's Ghost may be described as a forensic detective novel in which the quest for truth and the justice is re- configured within a narrative of the forensic case study or murder mystery. The body under the investigation is thought to be that one of the many victims of the politically motivated murders committed by Sri Lankan government forces.

In the journey of solving the mystery behind the circumstances of sailor's death, Anil and Sarath moved to the Grove of Ascetics, an ancient 6th century monastery, which was occupied by Sarath's former teacher, Palipana. He was an epigraphist and the historian of inscriptions who had "wrestled archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans" and " had made his name translating Pali scripts and recording and translating the rock graffiti of Sigiriya" (79). Palipana was in his sixties. He retired into the forest to live in the ruins of an ancient monastery. He was blind and cared by a young girl named Lakma who was his niece. Sarath and Anil goes there by bringing the skull and talks with Palipana.

Here the story of Lakma has been narrated. She was a victim of civil war. When she was 12 year old, she saw her parents killed and became frightened of everything. Palipana brought her to the forest and taught her. And she helps Palipana after he became blind. After getting suggestions from Palipana, she found an idea to identify the skeleton. He suggested them to find out the ritual painter and describes the rituals of painting the eyes of the statue. With the help of the ritual painter, they could bring out the face of sailor and they have seen

a ritual painter Ananda to get help from him. Then they drove back to Colombo. On the way they found a truck driver named Gunasena who was crucified but alive on the road and they brought him to the hospital where Gamini works, who was the brother of Sarath. Gamini knows the arrival of Anil to her native and he thought that her work was dangerous.

Once Gamini became a war doctor, he has treated so many people who got injured during the war times. Thousands of people were killed and murdered and their sufferings have been portrayed from a doctor Gamini's point of view.

“ Sometimes bodies washed in onto the shore, the combers throwing them onto the beaches. On the Matara coast, or at Wellawatta, or by St. Thomas's college in Mount Lavinia where they, Sarath and Gamini, had learned to swim as children. These were the victims of politically motivated murders – victims of torture in the house at Gower street or a house off the Galle Road – lifted into the air by helicopter, flown a couple of miles out to sea and dropped through the fathoms of air. But only a few of these ever came back as evidence into the arms of the country” (208).

Anil is sustained in her grim task of reading the bones of the dead with an unshaken confidence that her scientific expertise will reveal the truth in terms of the concrete and verifiable evidence that enables the law to work. The outcome of the narrative, in which both the evidence and the legality of the institution to which the appeal for justice is made are collapse, highlights the dangers inherent in too great a faith in empiricism and the exclusion of the other forms of knowledge. Such knowledges are represented in the novel by the blind epigraphist Palipana, on 'Oriental' Tiresias of sorts whose disciple, the local forensic anthropologist Sarath, is teamed with Anil for the duration of their UN sponsored investigation into the widespread undercover killings taking place in Sri Lanka. Sarath's cautionary warnings about the mutability of 'truth' in the morally and politically more

complex environment of war torn Sri Lanka go unheeded by Anil. In order to preserve her evidence before the court of law, Sarath plays with his life while she leaves the country to return to the West. The ‘truth’ Anil presents as verifiable evidence is un – made by the political powers that hold sway in Sri Lanka and who are at liberty to produce and circulate their own forms of truth. The novel calls into question the “evidence of bones which haunts the archives of violence in the twentieth century” (232) and challenges the predominantly western idea that empirical evidence leads to justice allowing for the suspension of violence and human suffering. On the last night, Anil remembers a question Gamini has asked once,

“American movies, English books – remember how they all end? The American or Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That’s it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He’s going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That’s enough reality for the West. It’s probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit “ (AG 282 –283).

In the mission of finding the truth anil fails. we are left unknown of what happens to Anil and her investigation. After examining the remains of the Sailor, she has followed Sarath’s instruction and she was headed to the plane and she took her research with her. In a twist of irony, Ondaatje’s protagonist fled from the Island, just as Gamini describes, “ the tired hero... going home “(AG 282). There is nothing she can do for her investigation, other than to deliver justice. Like many other investigations in the past, her report was just ended up on placing on someone else’s desk. Though she has identified the remains of sailor, her aim of indicating the Sri Lankan government in the extrajudicial murder has failed. It was like how the previous NGO workers have failed to bring the truth and to depict the act of

violence, Anil was failed as well. If one is able to find out just one thing from Gamini's allegation of the western hero is that, just because the "hero" leaves, doesn't mean that the war is over. As a person and as a member of NGO, she has failed to unveil the truth but she has found out. The political power has made her dump. Anil has decided to go back home to the West, but it is the Sri Lankans who have the fate of continue to live and endure the sufferings from political enemies. The war is over on the surface. But at the root, the war continues in many different fronts.

WORKS CITED

Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil's Ghost*. London : Vintage Books, 2000.