

**Struggles And Triumphs In Search For Self-Identity: A Feminist Study Of
Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost***

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Abstract

The paper illustrates how an avant-garde woman, named Anil Tissera, has been made to live 'exclusively' veiled and put to marginal position from our mainstream society by the patriarchy. Men, despotic in nature, don't stop themselves here; they further label her as prosaic in thought and poignant in nature. She is sometimes characterized as a reverent one in her house or sometimes as a source of all evil and destructions. Due to such reasons, her social status always remains in the state of constant fluidity, and she is looked down upon as an inferior being and a cause of hindrance to social progress. She raises her voice against such social stigmas of sexism and successfully completes her education abroad in order to create her self-identity in male-dominated society. So, the paper elaborates how Anil, despite being a woman, overcomes all such social coercions and rejects stereotyping of women. The paper further elucidates how Anil, who stands for all other oppressed women, struggles hard for women's social, political, and economic rights to make the world a better place to live in.

Keywords: avant-garde woman, hindrance, marginal position, patriarchy, self-identity

To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman
Mahatma Gandhi

In general, men don't seem to have a clear perception of women's nature for they are beguiled by socially acquired false opinions of women, even if, they—men and women—have the same color of blood and live under the same sky. Women have been made to live 'exclusively' veiled; put to the marginal position from our mainstream society by the patriarchy. Due to such reasons, their social status always remains in the state of constant flux or fluidity; a woman is sometimes characterized as an angel or a reverent one in her house, or sometimes as a source of all evil and destruction. She further appears to be "a womb, an ovary" (Beauvoir 21) to man and is looked down upon as a weak and inferior being, and a cause of hindrance to social progress when the question of equality and liberty comes to the fore. But it's not natural rather a man-made delusion to see a woman as lower in status to him. Men, despotic in nature, don't stop themselves here; they further label women as prosaic in thought and poignant in nature. But such sociocultural notions and her role in the family have changed through the decades with the rise and influence of feminism. Feminism raises its voice against any unprecedented subjugation and objectification of female body being persisted in, on women by male-dominated society from prehistoric times. Feminism—being used for a wider sense with a broader meaning—rejects such coercions and stereotypical definitions of woman, and raises its voice for women's social, political, and economic rights to make the world a better place to live in.

The first wave feminism, as far as different types of feminism are concerned, deals with women's voting rights and property rights, and the second wave feminism, radical in nature, exclusively talks about women's educational right, reproductive rights, right of sexuality, and inequalities in *de facto* relationships, etc. The second wave feminism wants to create an egalitarian society through women's equality in education, and liberty of unfettered expression. Therefore, it casts off the hegemonic myth of gender discrimination, demands equal educational opportunity for women along with men. With its influence and appeal, women who have earlier been denied of any kind of education start participating in all kinds of education, especially in modern education. They slowly start earning degrees, certificates, and getting jobs like men. To elaborate this point further, the second wave feminism, which is quintessentially not just a movement rather a socio-political and ideological movement, raises its voice for equal employment opportunity and equal pay for equal work for women, rejecting gender pay gap. Besides the hegemonic belief of men on women that they could not work if they were married, their socio-economic status also gets changed over the years. The second wave feminism, having the motto of women's liberation and safety along with their legal and educational rights, is highly inspired by Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir, a French feminist, who deflates any bigoted opinion about women, truly says, "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (293), questioning men's mistreatment of women as 'back seat' to them. The movement is later extended by third wave feminism and lasted till the rise of fourth wave feminism. While the third wave feminism deals with women's freedom to control and direct their own bodies, and lives, the fourth wave deals with rape, sexual assault, violence, abuse, murder, protest, and sexual harassment at workplace, etc.

We find certain qualities of such feminisms, especially of second wave and third wave feminism in the character of Michael Ondaatje's Anil Tissera, an avant-garde woman, in *Anil's Ghost*. The novel, apocalyptic in nature, is written whilst the second wave feminism was outlining its end and the third wave feminism was on its rising state.

Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan-born Canadian novelist, is not a feminist in true sense as his novels basically develop around the lives of men, not women: "It is surprising that feminist scholars seem to neglect Ondaatje's works, because there are often a very limited spectrum of female characters in his writing[s]" (Johana 12). In *Coming through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient*, *The Cat's Table*, *Dividedero*, and *Warlight*, the plots explicitly deal with as well as develop around the lives of male characters revealing their own views and experiences while female characters are held at marginal positions, but it takes a diversion from androcentric narration to gynocentric concentration with the beliefs and behaviors of Anil Tissera in *Anil's Ghost*. The novel is basically based on the back drop of merciless Sri Lankan civil war. Here, Ondaatje mainly talks about feminine positivity, reverses traditional plot construction from male-centric to female-centric.

Anil Tissera visited Sri Lanka (her homeland) at the age of thirty-three, better to say was sent there on a seven-week project by the Centre for Human Rights of Geneva in order to excavate the truth behind the mysterious death, killing, and abduction of innocent civilians during the Civil War. It was not expected by the government as well as other organizations that a human right specialist that too a woman would be chosen and sent for the mission.

Anil Tissera faced countless impediments in her early days of life just for being an unorthodox woman but she ultimately overcame the stigmas of such sexism. Anil was expected to

be a doctor like her father but she, opposite in nature to her father, rebuffed such stereotypical patriarchal fallacy. She left her homeland at the age of eighteen and entered in the field of forensic science in England in order to recreate her self-identity as an independent woman. She, despite being an exceptional swimmer, didn't hesitate to sacrifice her most-favorite hobby of 'swimming' only to get her dream fulfilled in forensic science. It was an established belief that forensic science is generally studied by western people, especially by men but her admission in forensic science circuitously rejected such opinionated belief.

Besides her suffering from homesickness, Anil faced certain racial discrimination and cultural difficulties in her early days in England just for being an Eastern woman but she slowly overcame all such impenetrability. She gradually submerged herself into western culture and developed her love and inclination towards Western language, people, and culture without any dithering. Due to such cross-cultural effects, she could diminutively speak her own mother tongue (Sinhalese)—turned out to be a hybrid figure—characteristically having double facets (of East and West) in her character.

Struggle did not stop here; it influenced her marital life too. Anil found herself in the smoke of a bad marriage in her early twenties during her study at Guy's Hospital in London. She hid such episode from everyone whom she later met in her life. "During this time of claustrophobia and marital warfare, sex was the only mutual constant. She insisted on it as much as he. She assumed it gave the relationship some normality. Days of battle and fuck" (Ondaatje 139-140). She had such failed marriage for the interference of her father-in-law in her personal life. Her father-in-law once visited England and attempted to convince her and her husband "to return to Colombo and [had] his grandchildren" (Ondaatje 139). He expected her to carry out a role of traditional housewife along with household chores but she infringed to play such role. Anil, as an anti-patriarchal woman, wanted to live not only for procreation but also for recreation of her self-identity. Her father-in-law further "objected to her having a full-time career, keeping her own name, was annoyed at her talking back. When she described classroom autopsies during the trifle, the father had been outraged. 'Is there nothing you won't do?'" (Ondaatje 139). Her husband, with the sway of his father, also tried to delimit her study in England. But Anil, an evolved character, revolted against such gender bigotry for she did not want to be governed, better to say, to be puppet in the hands of men. Her rebellious nature urges us to bring into view some fabulous lines of bell hooks: "I will not have my life narrowed down. I will not bow down to somebody else's whim or to someone else's ignorance" (quoted in Schnackenberg, Heidi L., Simard, Denise A, 51). However, her revolt as well as denial of patriarchal imposition led her involved into continuous quarrel with her husband. She, during her retrospection of past,

...could see that she had begun loving him because of her loneliness. She could cook a curry with him. She could refer to a specific barber in Bambalapitiya, could whisper her desire for jiggery or jackfruit and be understood. That made a difference in the new, too brittle country. Perhaps she herself was too tense with uncertainty and shyness. She had expected to feel alien in England only for a few weeks." (Ondaatje 137)

Anil finally got herself freed from the handcuff of such bad marriage and emerged out beyond claustrophobic domesticity in search for her self-identity through western education unlike other South Asian oppressed women, particularly of Sri Lankan oppressed women, who were, are still, forcefully confined within the four walls of the house and not allowed to take part in any

social, political, and educational activity. The whole process of marriage and divorce appeared to be “something illicit that deeply embarrassed her” (Ondaatje 141) but Anil took the damage inflicted to her “... as some contemporary fable of warning” (Ondaatje 136). Anil did not twigherself in any confusion rather accepted the truth and started living a very normal life. She never felt nervous or lonely, slowly became a much happier soul and mentally a stronger being than earlier. She gradually strengthened her self-identity and became an independent woman.

Anil appeared to be like a cloudless entity, wouldn't wish to remember any of her past days related with her husband. She spent her valuable time only in her study. She slowly fell in love with her research work which usually continued till late night everyday. Sometimes

she couldn't bear to leave the lab, just rested her happily tired dark head on the table.

There was no curfew or compromise with a lover anymore. She got home at midnight, was up at eight, every casebook and experiment and investigation alive in her head and reachable. (Ondaatje 141)

Furthermore, Anil wished to depart permanently from her husband's sight and right, so that he could not locate her ever and she could continue her education without any mental anguish. Finally,

...she won a scholarship to study in the United States, and in Oklahoma became caught up in the application of the forensic sciences to human rights. Two years later, in Arizona, she was studying the physical and chemical changes that occurred in bones not only during life but also after death and burial. (Ondaatje 141)

“After she escaped [her husband] she would never say his name out loud. If she saw his handwriting on a letter she never opened it, fear and claustrophobia rising with her” (Ondaatje 140). In America, she became more devoted to her study as compared to England because she was very cognizant of her vision and new version of life. Her failed-marriage taught her how to work as an independent woman in adverse situation. Finally, she became a successful pathologist could only understand the language of science.

The second half of Anil's educational life evolved in the United States leading a very secluded life there. She, ever since her separation from her husband, tried to spend most of her time in her study, so that nobody could locate or disturb her. But she ultimately knelt down before the monotony of life and involved in a relationship with Cullis Wright in America. Cullis, a very compassionate fellow, was deeply in love with Anil, but Anil was not profoundly attached to him. She neither cared nor missed him with the passion of fervent love because she had lost her faith on men after her first unsuccessful marriage, which later helped her to become a matured and rational being. Moreover, she knew that Cullis had to leave her one day because he had a wife whom he would not be able to leave at any cost. For these reasons, she was too non-serious and unaffectionate towards him, and always tried to maintain a clear emotional distance with Cullis. She started living in the world of reality, not in infatuation or virtuality like him. “She would avoid thinking of him. [...] Her view of him had always been a partially blindfolded one” (Ondaatje 96). Despite these, she has enjoyed and spent intimate time, and healthier relationship with Cullis. She might be defined as an immoral woman under the ladder of morality for her second relationship with Cullis, but her desire seemed to be like a punch to male chauvinists who think that only men, not women, can go for second relationship. In addition to it, she wished to have a very normal way of sex life, did not glorify it in abnormal way because she was against any kind of defilement and objectification of female body. She, empowered by normal human

sexuality, regarded sexual encroachment as an inhuman act and accepted her second relationship with Cullis as a guiltless act.

Anil generally kept herself out from men, especially from wrathful men, while she relied on and found solace as well as true humanity only in Leaf Niedecker, a female friend from Arizona. Anil considered Leaf as a 'closest friend and constant companion' because she had beliefs on sisterhood not on brotherhood as she treated her male colleagues only as co-workers, not as friends. To Anil, "a sister [was] a gift to the heart, a friend to the spirit, a golden thread to the meaning of life" (quoted in Brawner 54). During her stay in Sri Lanka, she was haunted by her valuable past days and laudable memories related with Leaf in Arizona. "Once inside [her room in Sri Lanka], Anil emptied her bag onto the table to find the postcard. Rereading her girlfriend Leaf's message from America made her feel better. Some communication from the West" (Ondaatje 4). "In the shower she put her hair under the cold water and leaned against a corner of the stall, just letting the coolness lull her. She needed someone, Leaf perhaps, to sing alone with her. One of those dialogue songs they were always singing together in Arizona...." (Ondaatje 57)

Anil had a very limited number of companions in Sri Lanka as well. "There was a scattering of relatives in Colombo, but she had not contacted them to let them know she was returning" (Ondaatje 6) because she was glad and loved to be alone. She, as a lone fighter, denied the friendship of Sarath Dysena, an archeologist from Sri Lanka but worked with him only as a professional worker. She doubted his weird attitude and mysterious behavior throughout her investigation for his role and stance in the investigation were not clear to her. She asked herself so many questions about him: "Was the partner [Sarath] assigned to her neutral in this war? Was he just an archeologist who loved his work?" (Ondaatje 25). "She had been working with him for several days and she still had no handle on him." (Ondaatje 24)

Sarath also faced many unwanted problems and obstacles like Anil, but he had failed to win over them like her. Sarath grew up in a traditional Sri Lankan family, had to obey his parental principles even though not necessarily had belief on them. He, suspected by Anil as a shy man, failed to raise his voice against chaotic parental principles and impositions. In reality, he lacked the confidence to raise his voice against wrong parental practices. So, "in Sri Lanka, one is surrounded by family order." (Ondaatje 134). Additionally, Sarath "would not have known the realities of sexual freedom available to him, though his head might have loafed through anarchy" (Ondaatje 134). Another important fact about the Sri Lankan society is that "...most people know every meeting you have during the day, there is nothing anonymous." (Ondaatje 134)

Besides such patriarchal practices, the whole Sri Lankan society had also been involved with "...hazardous intrigues of love and marriage and an equally anarchic system of planetary influence" (Ondaatje). The society was being governed by superstitious beliefs and practices: women were considered to be devils and life-suckers. "To be born under a certain star made people unsuitable as marriage partners. A woman born with Mars in the Seventh House was 'malefic'" (Ondaatje 134). *Malefic* literary means "causing harm or destruction" (Waite ed. 628), especially by supernatural means while astrology defines it in relation "...to the planets Saturn and Mars, traditionally considered to have an unfavorable influence" (Oxford *Living Dictionary*). According to the belief, whoever a *malefic* woman would marry would die. So, such *malefic* woman would intrinsically be responsible for her husband's death. To elaborate, it's a murder in the hand of wife, which was a common thinking, still prevailing in the Sri Lankan society. Sarath's elder uncle who got married to a woman died of a harsh fever, and later

whenshegotmarried to his another uncle, hewas also died of within a year and a half due to certain illness.

It turned out, of course, that the woman was *malefic*. The only one she could have married safely was a man with the same star pattern. Thus any man who was born under such a star sought after by such woman. Men who were *malefic* also had to marry a woman with the same star, but it was believedthat women in this state were considerably more dangerous than men. When a malefic man married a *non-malefic* woman, she did not necessarily die. But if a woman did, the man would always die.” (Ondaatje 135)

Such kind of women was furtherconsidered as '*henahuru*' which literally means “a pain in the back” (Ondaatje135).Sarath's father, who had no faith on such credulous and immoral practices, got married to a woman whom he fell in love with. He did not even consult her stars.To Sarath, it appeared to be like, “...just an old wives' tale, random celestial positioning. Such beliefs seem[ed] a medieval comfort” (Ondaatje 136). Anil also had no belief on such practices because she, as a wise and rational being, denied living in fool's paradise.

We have also to be acquainted with how the name 'Anil Tissera' had been coined as far as Anil's quest for self-identity is concerned. Anil was very unhappy for her traditional female name given by her family. “Her name had not always been Anil. She had been given two entirely inappropriate names and very eagerly began to desire Anil, which was her brother's unused second name” (63). She had firm beliefs in her own ability, challenged the traditional way of naming women by men. The demand and quest for changing her name created anger and family war within the household. Consequently, she, as a determined woman, “stopped responding when called by either of her given names, even at a school” (Ondaatje64). Anil, as a stubborn woman, never knelt down before her parents, but they had to relent and kneel down before her. They, on her behalf, tried “to persuade her irritable brother to forfeit his second name” (Ondaatje64), but her parents failed to convince him and finally threw their hands up. Anil neither surrendered nor lost her hope; “she knew herself to be, and was known to others as, a determined creature” (Ondaatje63). She herself tried hard to buy the name 'Anil' from her brother “when she was twelve years old, offering to support him in all family arguments. He would not commit himself to the trade though he knew she wanted the name more than anything else” (Ondaatje 63). Finally, she convinced him and bought it from him at the age of thirteen on certain terms and conditions: both the siblings worked out a trade and reached on a conclusion. She decided to “give her brother one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eying for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found and a sexual favor he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse” (Ondaatje64). This is how she bought her first name 'Anil' from her brother. “Everything about the name pleases her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its feminine air, even though it was considered a male name.... Twenty years later she felt the same about it” (Ondaatje64). “Later, when she recalled her childhood, it was the hunger of not having that name and the joy of getting it that she remembered most” (Ondaatje64). After that, she did not allow any other first name except 'Anil' either on her passport or school reports or application forms. Anil's addition of 'Tissera' (a loaned title from west) with 'Anil' revealed her enthrallments towards the western culture. Her first name 'Anil', which gave her more power, deflated traditional way of naming the south Asian women.

But name changing episode didn't stop here as she had to face another obstacle. Anil had another stage to go through before it settled down. “By the time Anil was sixteen, [and] she was

taunt and furious within the family” (Ondaatje133). Her parents were very unhappy and worried for her such unnatural behavior. They brought her to an astrologer in Wellawatta, Sri Lanka, in order to modify and eradicate these aspects of her nature. “The man wrote down her birth hour and date, subtracted and fractioned them, considered her neighboring starts and, not realizing the involved commerce behind it, said the problem resided in her name” (Ondaatje133). He was not aware; “her tempestuousness could be harnessed with a name change” (Ondaatje133). He was not also aware of her struggle, and the deal of the Gold Leaf cigarettes and rupees which she had paid to her brother. The astrologer “spoke with a voice that approached serenity and wisdom in the small cubicle, behind whose curtain other families waited in the hall hoping to overhear gossip and family history. What they heard were loud insistent refusals from the girl” (Ondaatje 133). The astrologer-soothsayer found a solution to her stubborn nature; her name had to be changed with the addition of an *e* with Anil, and so she would be *Anile* which “would make her name more feminine; the *e* would allow the fury to curve away. But she refused even this” (Ondaatje133). “The family wars continued to reside in her, and hadn’t left her when she went abroad to study medicine” (Ondaatje133).

In the forensic labs she made it a point to distinguish female and male tsarists as clearly as possible. She witnessed how women were much more easily discomfited by the personal slights of an over-protective husband; but they were better at dealing with calamity in professional work than men. They were geared to giving birth, protecting children, steering them through crisis. Men needed to pause and dress themselves in cold-ness in order to deal with a savaged body. In all her training in Europe and America she saw that again and again. Women doctors were more confident in chaos and accident, calmer in dealing with the fresh corpse of an old woman, a young beautiful man, and small children. The times Anil would slip into woe were when she saw a dead child in clothes.

A dead three-year-old with the clothes her parents had dressed her in. (Ondaatje133)

All kinds of social obstacles and malevolencies forcefully enforced on Anil by male-chauvinists proved to be fraudulent. Anil, solely but fearlessly, dared to challenge such indifferent attitudes of men towards women, and proved herself equal to her counterpart. She successfully completed her education abroad and established her self-identity in male-dominated society. She, despite being a woman, has also demystified the truth behind mysterious killings of innocent civilians during the Sri Lanka Civil War. She, in point of fact, stands for all those women who are being caged within the four walls of claustrophobic domesticity.

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