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The Enigma of Identity: A Study in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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Abstract:

Philip Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan born Canadian writer with Tamil roots, is a prolific poet and award-winning author of great calibre and rare literary charm. He is regarded as one of the most celebrated and versatile diasporic writers of Canada since the 1960s. In his works, Ondaatje focuses on the internal lives of his characters and exhibits an appeal with extraordinary personality types, the changing aspects of family life and the consequence of wars in the lives of individuals and homelands. Ondaatje's writings reveal the postcolonial power dynamics and postmodern self-reflectivity from a multicultural perspective. Here by mixture of both frontier life and our position within the world themes are framed in the novel of *Anil Ghost* .It provides an enquiry into identity reflective of the cultural clashes that are inevitable consequence of such an interweaving of nationalities, histories, and border divisions. *Anil's Ghost* is set amidst Sri Lanka's civil conflict, focused on a period in the mid 80s and early 90s when the government was combating both Tamil separatists and Sinhalese insurgents. Ondaatje is quick to point out that the novel is not only about his native Sri Lanka. It is a harrowing, tough and lush narrative driven by the search for truth. It is about all cultures that try to obliterate or bury the truth.

Keywords: identity ,travelogue, history, nationality, cultural clashes

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Philip Michael Ondaatje was born in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1943, in a privileged family of mixed Burgher, Tamil, and Sinhalese origins. He spent his childhood in Colombo, moved to England with his mother, and finally relocated to Canada, where he became a Canadian citizen . According to Douglas Barbour, Ondaatje returned to Sri Lanka only once or twice, and these journeys formed the background for his novel *Running in the Family (1982),* which provides a fictional account of his family history. It is in *Anil's Ghost* that Ondaatje first engages in a fictional treatment of his homeland and its ongoing civil conflict.. He can be described as a poet, a novelist, an anthologist and a filmmaker, and the range of his subject matter includes literary, political, cultural, and ethical topics. If we dip into the wealth of his poetic material, we come up with titles such as *The Dainty Monsters (1967), The Man with Seven Toes (1969), The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-handed Poems (1970), Rat Jelly (1973), There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do (1979), Secular Love (1984), All Along the Mazinaw: Two Poems (1986), Woodland Pattern (1986), The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems (1989), Handwriting (1998) and The Story (2006).* His novelistic work includes the award-winning novels *Coming Through Slaughter (1976), Running in the Family (1982), In the Skin of a Lion (1987), The English Patient (1992), Anil's Ghost (2000) and Divisadero (2007).* As a filmmaker, he was involved in the writing and S directing of documentaries and films such as *Sons of Captain Poetry (1969), Carry on Crime and Punishment (1972), The Clinton Special (1972) and Love Clinic (1990).* His editorial and anthologist work is equally extensive. The two main titles to be mentioned here are *The Long Poem Anthology (1979) and From Ink Lake: An Anthology of Canadian Short Stories (1990).*

Philip Michael Ondaatje is a diasporic writer who have addressed problematic of identity in many ways. His *Anil's Ghost (2000)* is decidedly significant in so far as it interrogates the diaspora's sense of belonging to the homeland. The novel deals with identity as the core issue and again it treat identity in the contexts of some conflict. Perhaps more than any other Canadian novel, *Anil's Ghost* (2000) highlights the role of the body in confronting experiences of war and

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trauma. Here Ondaatje explores, in depth, the conflicts and contradictions of people having a colonial past and post-colonial present. Reflecting the cultural clashes resulting from the interweaving of nationalities, histories, and border divisions, *Anil's Ghost* provides an examination of transnational identity as the central theme.

The novel *Anil's Ghost* opens in the Guatemala. Like Sri Lanka, Guatemala was also colonized country and a place of fear double edged. Chosen as "the Geneva organization's forensic specialist" (16), Sri Lankan born Anil Tissera travels from the U.S. to Colombo and is teamed with archeologist Sarath Diyasena to investigate the increasing number of deaths in Sri Lanka. She epitomizes the problematic of ethnicity and identity and tends to integrate her individual identity with Sri Lankan ethnicity to establish her role in the history of Sri Lanka. She articulates her sense of belongingness when she says to Sarath, "This isn't just "another job"! I decided to come back. I wanted to come back"(196). She positions herself with the island when she tries to make her case to the government on her discovery of the "sailor". She says, "I think you murdered hundreds of us"(269). But immediately after the dialogue with the government officials when Anil senses danger, she concludes that she wouldn't be staying there much longer.

Anil and Sarath have found three skeleton in the government protected archaeological preserves in the Bandarawela region. One of the skeletons which Anil has found in ancient burial site is in fact more recent, its bones are still held together by dried ligament, partially burned. It is not prehistoric- a new proof of a murder by the government. Anil tells Sarath, the skeleton has been moved from somewhere else and reburied in this government protected area to make sure the skeleton is not discovered. According to Anil it's not an ordinary murder or burial. They named it 'Sailor' and other three as 'Tinker,' Tailor,' and 'Soldier.' Upon the discovery of a recent skeleton in a government protected zone, Anil and Sarath attempt to ascertain the identity of the skeleton, whom they name Sailor, in order to have condemning evidence of state involvement in the war. During their travels, they meet with his teacher Palipana, who lives in a small glade close to the ruin. Palipana is the character who most frequently compares the current

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situation with examples from Sri Lanka's history, whom gives them the idea to meet the former miner and artisan Ananda, with whom they spend some time together in an old farm surrounded by buildings, hidden from the eyes of the government. Palipana refers Ananda's name to reconstruct the sailor's head .Ananda reconstructs the face of his wife Sirissa for Sailor with a calm he had known in his wife, he peacefulness he wanted for any victim. Sailor represents all the other unnamed war victims and all the other lost voices and stories hidden underneath the surface of Sri Lankan life: "Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest." (56) Anil wants to recall and reclaim the nation's disappeared citizens and restore the war and its proceedings to clarity and transparency so that the Sri Lankan people might start working toward a solution.

The descriptions of the 1983 to 1993 period are stamped by the civil war, in which some of the important characters in the novel appear, namely the miner and artisan Ananda Udugama and his wife Sirissa.In connection with the portrayal of Gamini several passages occur that are immediately linked to the civil war in the form of descriptions from various hospitals As long as the problems are not made visible , the war cannot be denounced. Furthermore, the full proportions of the conflict remain unknown. In the same way Anil pursued a name for herself, she wants to pursue a name and a history for the victims. It is stated that she has adopted the masculine name Anil from her brother; that she was a well-known swimmer when she was young and resists being called/identified by that label when she is back in the island. Anil adopted the masculine name to rebel against categorization and blur the gender lines.The name 'Anil' is said to have a stripped-down quality (68), which further refers to her professional stripping down of layers of evidence. By choosing a new name for herself, Anil takes a new identity; she becomes a stranger to her past self . We are untold of the name she was known by for the first twelve years of her life. In fact, prior to becoming Anil, she remains un-identified; missing a name, she is akin to the nameless skeleton "Sailor." In acquiring her name Anil snaps the boundary between the self and the Other. She does not merely take on a new mask or

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disguise, but recreates hersel. This practice enables her to reconstruct a victim's identity and establish the cause of death.

Anil and Sarath discover sailor's identity and conclude that sailor is a victim of government murder, a minor Ruwan kumara, a toddy tapper who belongs to the third Plumbago village. His name is enlisted in a list of government undesirables. Anil wants to return west and present her report to UN government. Sailor's body is literally removed from sight and secretly taken away by government officials before Anil present her evidence to the government. When she gives her presentation for the assembly, Anil feels insecure due to the removal of Sailor's visual presence. Her forensic report was confiscated by Sri Lankan government and she is forced to leave the island. But it's only Sarath who disobeys the government and has helped Anil in finding the truth. Finally Sarath is killed by the Sri Lankan government officials for his involvement with Anil's investigation. He sacrifices his life for the sake of the truth and to give the voice and justice to the victims of the Sri Lankan Civil War. Finally Anil doesn't wish to stay in Sri Lanka any longer.

Integrating various ideologies and cultures Anil represents multicultural identity. Ondaatje's basic concern seems in the novel about the problematic of individual identity which he studies in the context of ethnic war. And he seems to dissociate himself from Sri Lanka. Anil looks to the West to centre her. Anil, even though she has delinked herself from her root language and has to face danger in her native land, is in no danger in the West; rather she has risen from her subalternity. Thus Ondaatje has shown in the novel that identity is sometimes constructed with deliberate intention.

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