

FROM COLONIAL BURGHER COMMUNITY TO SINHALA
BUDDHIST POLITY. INTERPRETING WRITER IDENTITY:
MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY* TO
ANIL'S GHOST

ERNEST MACINTYRE

Most critics describe Michael Ondaatje, the poet and novelist, who for nearly fifty years has been a Canadian and an international figure, as being of mixed Dutch, Sinhalese, and Tamil ancestry. In *Running in the Family* Ondaatje is brief about this matter of being Sinhalese and Tamil: "My father always claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, though that was more valid about three centuries earlier" (41).

It is family lore that Ondaatje's ancestor, a south Indian from Tanjore, arrived in 1600 to cure the Dutch governor's daughter with a rare herb. He was rewarded with land, a Dutch wife, and a Dutch way of spelling his old Indian name (Ondaatje, *Family* 64). At this point began the transformation of the Tamil into a Ceylon Burgher.

Again in *Running in the Family*, referring to some of the larger circles of families (not those classified as Sinhalese, Tamil, or Muslim) that moved closely with the Ondaatjes in Ceylon in the 1920s and the 1930s, he says: "Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations" (41). They were a small component of the citizenry of Ceylon and Sri Lanka, officially described (for example in government census, statistics, and any document requiring classification by "nationality") as "Burghers." The word originated during the Dutch occupation of Ceylon in the 17th century, which was formerly occupied by the Portuguese in the 16th century. It was the Dutch term for the townsfolk of their settlements in the East, but came to be applied to descendants of the variety of Europeans left behind by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British. As

would be expected, Sinhalese and Tamil blood had flowed into these “Burgher” people over a period of five centuries.

Students of Michael Ondaatje’s writing may be on acceptable grounds to consider him a Burgher, but only in the Ceylon and Sri Lankan categorization of people. Importantly, he is much less a Burgher in relation to the association of his identity with his writings on Ceylon and Sri Lanka. The various fragments that make up his identity, as detailed below, determine the complexity of his Sri Lankan writings.

With independence for Ceylon granted in 1948, the Sinhalese and Tamils soon returned to struggles within their own social and economic groups, which manifested in anti-Tamil violence, as well as conflicts between wealthy, landowning Sinhalese and dispossessed Sinhalese youth. The vast majority of Burghers opted for the reality of Melbourne, primarily, when in 1956 Prime Minister Bandaranaike enthroned Sinhalese as the official language in place of English.

Ondaatje was sent from Ceylon to England at the age of eleven in 1954, for personal family reasons, not socio-political as in the paragraph above. He joined his divorced mother and might have become an English schoolboy. In an interview, he says the transformation did not take place: “I went to school in England and had every opportunity to become English, but I never felt I had the ‘ability’. I always felt very ironic” (Ondaatje). He did not see those four years in England in perspective, he says, ‘till he saw the film *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985) about colonial Asians in Britain: “It was very important to me. When I saw it I thought: God! That was my life in England, endlessly visiting all those Sri Lankan aunts and uncles and hearing stories” (Ondaatje).

Then he went to Canada in 1962. By the time he returned to Ceylon twenty-five years after he had last seen it, the eleven-year-old had become an important Canadian poet and novelist, with *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), *The Man With Seven Toes* (1969), *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), *Rat Jelly* (1973), *Coming Through Slaughter* (1978), *There’s A Trick With A Knife I’m Learning To Do* (1979). The establishment of that country, following its readership, recognized his work more than once with the Governor General’s Award.

Ondaatje has probably become part of the well-known Canadian ‘mosaic’ in which a variety of cultures co-exist, inextricably mingled, yet not

homogeneous—merged but not fused, not the melting pot kind. And inside Ondaatje himself this could well be the kind of formation that has taken shape.

Victoria Cook writes about the principal female character in *Anil's Ghost*, whom I will later show to be a silhouette of Ondaatje, at times:

In the character of Anil Tissera ... Ondaatje explores the concept of "Self" as something constructed, and yet whole and realizable. In other words, Ondaatje reveals Anil's transnational nature as being a continually changing mixture of a variety of cultures, which incorporates, encompasses and contains *various fragments in one unified being* [emphasis added]. (Cooke 3)

In *The English Patient* there are four loners: one is Indian, two are Canadians, and the third, the patient who is not recognizable, may or may not be English. I was attracted to the last in association with Ondaatje's identity.

Ondaatje possibly demonstrates (but does not claim) through his writing that this kind of open identity is more creative in exploring the human condition: "I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. ... All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries... we disappeared into landscape.... Erase nations!" (*English Patient* 138)

Against such an identity background I read *Anil's Ghost* as a progressive development emerging from *Running in the Family*.

Running in the Family

The first hundred pages of the book are shared between the researched story of his family and his getting to know parts of the contemporary country in which he did his research. In the second hundred pages the country recedes and concentration shifts closer and closer to the family, taking readers, in the end, to dark and private rooms occupied by the father and the imagination of the writer.

About his family, its Ceylon circles, and their Burgher separateness in *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje has this to say: "Actually, *Running in the Family* was a book that in many ways could have been set in Peru; the family was so set apart from the rest of the country" (Richler 2). It was "Created from asides, snapshots, poems, glimpses, in every way unorthodox and incomplete"

(Rev. of *Running* n.pag.). It was as much an unorthodox poetic form as it was a necessity, because what remained of his 1920s and 1930s family had indeed become “asides, snapshots . . . glimpses” at the time he was writing in the 1980s.

Running in the Family (1982) resulted, as Ondaatje says, from his realization that in his mid-thirties he had slipped past a childhood he had ignored and not understood (*Family* 22). It was a statement that Ondaatje was putting back a missing fragment, perhaps a large one, of his being.

It is important to recognize that Ondaatje’s statement—“*Running in the Family* was a book that in many ways could have been set in Peru, the family was so set apart from the rest of the country”—has an important bearing on his next work set in Sri Lanka, *Anil’s Ghost*. Not only had he slipped past a childhood he had ignored and not understood, which brought him back for *Running in the Family*, but, after this family work (“in Peru”!), he felt he had also slipped past a larger society (not a nation-state, as I will explain later), a largely Sinhala Buddhist society, which had contained important Burgher segments in the 1920s and 1930s. And now in 1978 and 1980, as he researched for writing *Running in the Family*, these Burghers had become fragments, thus bringing Sinhalese society so much more to the fore of his vision, a society which his family and their Burgher circles had set themselves apart from at the time of the story of *Running in the Family*. The part of his identity he was recovering was to be wider than Burgher. It was to be—Burgher in context—Burgher connected to the Sinhala Buddhist society that contained it.

His search for the larger society beyond his family’s Burghers is seen in four poems in *Running in the Family*—“High Flowers,” “To Colombo,” “Women Like You,” and “The Cinnamon Peeler”—about working men and women of the 1970s and 1980s and Sinhalese court maidens of the 5th century ACE rock wall frescoes of Sigiriya (87-97):

The woman my ancestors ignored
sits at the doorway chopping coconut
cleaning rice (87)

paddy terraces
bullocks brown men
who rise knee deep like the earth
out of the earth (90)

you long eyed women
the golden
drunk swan breasts
lips
the long long eyes (94)

They were also about the young sons and daughters of these workers:

When the government rounded up thousands of suspects during the insurgency of 1971, the Vidyalkara campus of the University of Ceylon was turned into a prison camp. The police weeded out the guilty, tried to break their spirit. When the university opened again the returning students found hundreds of poems written on walls, ceilings and in hidden corners of the campus. Quatrains and free verse about the struggle, tortures, the unbroken spirit, love of friends who had died for the cause. The students went around for days transcribing into their notebooks before they were covered with whitewash and lye ... The average age of insurgents was seventeen and thousands were killed by police and army. While the Kelani and Mahaweli rivers moved to the sea heavy with bodies, these drawings were destroyed so that the book is now the only record of them These contemporary, anonymous, works seem as great as the ancient Sigiriya art. (84)

He seems to have felt drawn, in his personal memoir, *Running in the Family*, to place his Burgher family circles (who had set themselves apart from the Sinhalese) back where they should have belonged—at least in those times. It was groundwork for *Anil's Ghost* eighteen years later, but this probably was not sensed by Ondaatje then, and unseen or unmentioned by critics when *Anil's Ghost* came out.

Though he treats the colonial fate of Ceylon with poetic economy, he does not mention the Tamil society of this island. Ondaatje was not seeking to encompass the whole nation-state of Sri Lanka when he researched *Running in the Family* in 1978 and 1980. The larger Sinhalese society that his 1920s and 1930s family ignored was the extent of his field. He makes a passing reference about his uncle Justice Sansoni “heading a commission on race-riots” (26) but says no more of that, because he is not involved with the nation-state, even though the pogrom happened just before his 1978 research visit.

The outbreak in mid-August (1977) of the anti-Tamil pogrom (the third such outbreak in two decades) has brought out the reality that the Tamil minority problem in Sri Lanka has remained unresolved now for nearly half a century, leading to the emergence of a separatist movement among the Tamils. As on previous occasions, what took place recently was not Sinhalese-Tamil riots, but an anti-Tamil pogrom. (Samarakkody 6-7, 10)

For *Running in the Family* what was relevant were the locales and societies within which his Burgher family segments had their own ethnic formations, all within a largely Sinhalese milieu. Ondaatje lists the people that he consulted for his 1978 and 1980 research and they are nearly all Sinhalese and Burgher (*Family* 205). There is a Colombo Tamil name (Sam Kadirgamar), but an elite, highly Westernized, well assimilated one (206). From such metropolitan sources the story of the Jaffna-, Batticoola-, and Trincomalee-located, un-Westernised Tamil war would not be drawn out—at least not in 1978 and 1980.

In a family memoir, restricting the circumference of the society around the family to Westernised Colombo and the Sinhalese of the surrounding suburbs and provinces should not be a matter of any kind of contention. Locating his family in a nation-state including Tamils and Tamil-speaking Muslims or dealing politically with Sinhalese history would be an attempt by others to write a different book, not the kind of book Ondaatje worked out, as he began discovering and developing the Sri Lankan component of his identity by writing *Running in the Family*. This is the position I take. I find it not possible to appreciate the criticisms of Arun Mukherjee, Suwanda Sugunasiri, Kanishka Goonewardena, or even the more understanding one of Kanaganayakam; in sum they rebuke Ondaatje for concern with aesthetic sensibility and his own identity without the vital concern for politics and history (Goldman 3).

However, critics who consider it an issue raise it more strongly in *Anil's Ghost*. This seems more understandable because a creative work set during a period of violent state and anti-state politics tends to get overwhelmed by the political reality around the book. Also, following the Sinhala-Tamil war closely, readers do not separate the nation-state from the subject matter of *Anil's Ghost*, and the nation-state includes the Tamils and their war against that state. This issue is referred to later in the paper, when the literary form in which *Anil's Ghost* is composed is brought into the argument.

At the end of *Running in the Family*, on the last morning before his return to Canada, he is inside the room of his brother-in-law's harbour bungalow in Mutwal in Colombo, the bungalow a remnant of colonial architecture. It is the room from which he set out researching, in which he made the notes, the first rough draft for the book.

Half an hour before light I am woken by the sound of rain... but I do not turn on the light yet. I want the emptiness of a dark room where I listen and wait. There is nothing in this view that could not be a hundred years old, that might not have been here when I left Ceylon at the age of eleven ... the cassette now starts up in the next room. During the monsoon, on my last morning, all this Beethoven and rain. ("Last Morning" 203)

The book ends as it began: a personal family memoir. In between the beginning and the end, a larger sector of the society is registered, an unintended investment for *Anil's Ghost*.

Anil's Ghost

Anil's Ghost (2000) may be described as a novel in which "Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of the twentieth century" (Ondaatje, *Ghost* 300). This theme is developed through a story line about Anil Tissera, a UN sponsored female forensic scientist, who is allowed, reluctantly, by the government of Sri Lanka to investigate alleged human rights violations. She was born and bred in Sri Lanka and departed, as a young woman, to be educated abroad and to become Euro-American. Her foreignness is nearly complete. In her investigation she is paired off by the government with a forty-year old Sri Lankan archaeologist, Sarath Diyasena. The novel begins moving when Anil makes a discovery in an uninhabited area in the distant hills, reserved as an archaeological site and only accessible to the government. She finds that amidst the millennia-old bones are also buried, or rather re-buried after killings elsewhere, skeletons four or five years old. The government's apparently deliberate mismatch of archaeologist and UN forensic scientist then becomes a paradoxical match between terrible contemporary events and one of the ancient traditions of the island, Buddhist civilization.

There are three Sinhalese families through whom the story moves. Sarath Diyasena the archaeologist has a younger brother, Gamini, a medical doctor exhausting himself in field hospitals dealing with daily killings. The brothers and their wives have troubled family histories. The two are distant; there is an unreconciled matter from boyhood. Ananda Udagama is a gem pit worker and master craftsman helping Anil and Sarath to reconstruct the face of a skeleton and thus recover its identity. Ananda is in mental and emotional turmoil due to the murder of his wife Sirissa by government death squads, and the disappearance of her body. Lastly, there is a very old and famous epigraphist who withdrew into an ancient sanctuary looking after the grown-up body of his niece, who was traumatized into an infantile condition after having to watch the squads murder her parents.

Anil's Ghost becomes political never directly, but by suggestion, and even then, the insinuation of the political into the lives of Anil and the three Sinhalese families is incremental. Then by sudden violent endings, standing for the many violent endings in that society, the main characters are stunningly replaced in the last few pages by a human-less, Sinhalese Buddhist vision of the island: a giant Buddha statue looking infinitely into distant nature. That the island becomes nearly empty of people comes as a relief after exhaustion with the fates of so many—a calming contemplation after all the terrors.

The novel seems to have had a preparatory stage, after *Running in the Family*, evident in a book of poems by Ondaatje published in 1998, *Handwriting*.

The last Sinhala word I lost
 was *Vatura*
 The word for water
 Forest water. The water in a kiss. The tears
 I gave to my ayah Roslin on leaving
 the first home of my life

More water for her than any other
 that fled my eyes again
 this year, remembering her,
 a lost almost-mother in those years
 of thirsty love.

No photograph of her, no meeting
 Since the age of eleven,
 Not even knowledge of her grave.

Who abandoned who, I wonder now. (50)

While working on *Running in the Family* Ondaatje could well have found that post-colonial privileged Sinhalese families, even allowing for professed Buddhist culture, could easily be merged in the imagination with colonial Burgher families. When Anil Tissera (Ondaatje) returns eighteen years after *Running in the Family* there are only a few scattered relatives. Her only interest is to see her old ayah of the poem. Yet social silhouettes from the first work keep running through *Anil's Ghost*.

Like Michael Ondaatje in *Running in the Family*, Anil Tissera, the returned “foreigner” in *Anil's Ghost*, uses a colonial remnant of the Colombo harbour, the cabin of an abandoned ship, the Oronsay of the old days of the Orient Line, to investigate unearthed skeletons. On her last morning in Sri Lanka she too leaves from there, though by virtue of plot and changed circumstances the feelings are different: “She wanted openness and air, didn’t want to face the darkness in the hold ... there was no wish in her to be here anymore ... be ready to leave at five tomorrow morning. There’s a seven o’clock plane” (283-84).

“I arrived in a plane but love the harbour” (133) says Ondaatje in *Running in the Family*. He does not need to say he left, long ago, from the harbour. This connection of the area of the harbour as base is organic, like many other relationships between the two works.

Running through *Anil's Ghost* is a silhouette of the family in *Running in the Family*. Sarath Diyasena’s father made the family fortunes go up and down as Ondaatje’s father did in *Running*; the mother of the Diyasena boys was a dancer in her youth who wanted to choreograph them all, like Ondaatje’s mother in his earlier work; there was in the Diyasena family too an uncle who directed amateur theatricals; and St. Thomas’ College by the sea is the college also of the Diyasena brothers. Ondaatje himself is silhouetted in Anil Tissera:

Suddenly Anil was glad to be back, the buried scenes from childhood alive in her ... As a child in Kuttapitiya Anil had once stepped on the shallow grave of a recently buried chicken ... Her weight pushed the air in the body through the beak and there was a muffled squawk which frightened Anil. (20)

Ondaatje's childhood home in Kuttapitiya, his father's tea estate bungalow, features in *Running*.

I read all these connections between the two works also as Anil (Ondaatje) continuing his research, now beyond the family into larger society, by holding on, even if minimally, to the identities he discovered earlier in *Running in the Family*. Ondaatje states: "This time, I knew very consciously that I wanted to write about Sri Lanka more generally" (Richler 2).

Anil's father died when she was young, just like Ondaatje, whose father had died, for all practical purposes, when the boy had to leave Ceylon at the age of eleven in *Running in the Family*. Like Ondaatje she regrets it: "I just wish I had been older—to learn things from him. I wish I'd had that." In the same conversation Sarath Diyasena tells Anil: "Weneed parents when we're old too" (46). There is a feeling in *Anil* of the silhouette of the writer Ondaatje of *Running in the Family* hovering between Sarath Diyasena and Anil Tissera. These connections lead to strong, culminating feelings publicly expressed by Anil Tissera as her role in the novel comes to a close. Anil shouts, "This isn't just 'another job'! I decided to come back. I wanted to come back" (200).

The author says that Anil's publicly addressed emotional evidence was "a citizen's evidence." The words are "I think you murdered hundreds of us... Fifteen years away and she is finally us" (*Ghost* 272)—an outsider comes back for the first time after twenty five years with only childhood memories, and comes again a decade and a half later with a firmer embrace of the island, moved by the predicament to want to be an insider.

The predicament is a paradox.

This island was a paradise to be sacked; every conceivable thing was collected and shipped to Europe: cardamons, pepper, silk, ginger, sandalwood, mustard, oil, palmyrah root, tamarind, wild indigo, deer's horns, elephant tusks, hog lard, calamander, coral, seven kinds of cinnamon, pearl and cochineal. (Ondaatje, *Family* 81)

Tea, a staple of the British occupation not mentioned, came later. Not mentioned also is the Sinhalese rebellion of 1818 during which the British categorised the native rebels as terrorists, allowing the ruling power a scorched earth policy against the peasants, and large-scale extra judicial killings which (with the exception of a smaller rebellion in 1848) finally “pacified” the island for one and a half centuries.

Ondaatje the poet covers the murders he does not mention in the poem by the angry Sri Lankan, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha:

Don't talk to me about Matisse...
 The European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio
 Where the nude woman reclines forever
 On a sheet of blood
 Talk instead of the culture generally –
 How the murderers were sustained
 By the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote
 villages the painters came, and our white-washed
 mud-huts were splattered with gunfire
 (Ondaatje, *Family* 85)

In *Anil's Ghost*, one of Ondaatje's characters describes the conception of the independent nation-state that is Sri Lanka as a sick and malignant animal. Wartime doctor Gamini Diyasena knows from a victim's photograph that his brother Sarath has been killed by the state death squads. He rushes down the hallway imagining what he has seen before of the faces of victims:

every tooth had been removed, the nose cut apart, the eyes
 humiliated with liquids, the ears entered. He had been, as he ran
 down that hospital hallway, most frightened of seeing his brother's
 face. It was the face they went for in some cases. They could in their
 hideous skills sniff out vanity. But they had not touched Sarath's
 face. The shirt they had dressed Sarath in had giant sleeves. Gamini
 knew why. He ripped the sleeves down to the cuffs. Below the elbows
 the hands had been broken in several places... (289)

(For me this is not the writing of fiction as it is too close to the way in which a well known Colombo actor, broadcaster, writer, and journalist had been dealt with by the state at the time Ondaatje was writing *Anil's Ghost*.)

Colum McCann says, “The dreadful inhumanity engendered by the politics of Sri Lanka is on full show—a man is nailed to the ground, heads are found on stakes, victims are dropped from Helicopters, women kneel at gravesides—but Ondaatje refuses to take a political stance” (12).

The evening before Anil departs from Sri Lanka she needs to explain why she cannot walk even a short distance. It happened to her inside a long underground passageway, at the “hands” of government officials. She tells Sarath Diyasena, referring to Gunesena the driver: “Tell him to take me home. I don’t think I can walk there ... I can’t walk, I was ... in there” (282); “there was no wish in her to be here anymore” (283).

Relating *Running in the Family* to *Anil’s Ghost* as colonial to post-colonial, I interpret Ondaatje’s writer identity as working creatively to discover how he can place himself between the two, to place himself inside the paradox—the paradox of liberated people without evidence of it. Ondaatje sums up the post-colonial in Sri Lanka by referring to the beginnings of Western civilization: “The darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here” (*Ghost* 11).

When I read this, I unexpectedly connected it with E.F.C. Ludowyk’s insight into Myth, Epic form, and Tragedy, and the myth that, according to the epic of the Sinhala Buddhists, the Mahavamsa, Sri Lanka was specially allocated to the religion of the Buddha. The connection was made because the narrative in *Anil’s Ghost* calls into question the long-standing ties between Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism:

Sinhalese and Pali ...there are no tragedies in either literature ... would the myth derived from an epic have lost some of its intensity, if the same material had been taken up in a form like tragedy, which sees the human being pitted against either the limits of his own humanity or what the gods have assigned to him as his proper field of activity? (Ludowyk 65)

Ondaatje’s process of recovery of the Ceylon/Sri Lanka component of his identity in *Anil’s Ghost* goes some considerable way in taking up E.F.C.Ludowyk’s idea without necessarily being aware of Ludowyk’s thoughts on this subject. It is not possible though, that Ondaatje was unaware that since the time of Ludowyk, scholarship has pointed out to us that though the novel can never be purely dramatic, it is essentially so: “it is not a narrative form

with dramatic moments, but a dramatic form within a narrative framework” (Dawson 79).

Anil's Ghost is a Tragedy.

In the novel are suggestions of dramatic movement as in classical Tragedy. I could not avoid being influenced in this direction by the way Ondaatje brings to an end the rapidly built up final part of the novel's action, with the assassination of President Premadasa (called Katugala in the novel) narrated immediately after the murder of Sarath Diyasena by the state. The effect here is of the climactic dramatic. At the same time it conflates the Sinhala insurgency with the Tamil rebellion, because no word is written about who is suspected of killing Premadasa (Weerakoon 301),¹ except that the event is narrated to us immediately after the murder of the upper-middle class Colombo man, Sarath Diyasena, who exposed the atrocities of the state.² A human President is killed by human rebellions. Ondaatje describes the President just before he is dismembered by a huge bomb:

When you looked at the real image of the man ... there was compassion for him, no matter what he had done. ... He had been tense during the previous days, as if there was some kind of foreshadowing in his mind, *as if some mechanism he had no control of had been put in motion.* (291; emphasis added)

A mid-20thcentury European master of the dramatic form, Jean Anouilh, says of Tragedy: “The spring is wound up tight. It will uncoil of itself. That is what is so convenient in Tragedy” (34).

Ondaatje works the tragic dramatic to its limits within the narrative framework of the novel, giving him the pathway to what Ludowyk called “the human being pitted against the limits of his humanity” (65).

Of course the novel as a form could have looked at these times in Sri Lanka outside of Tragedy within a narrative framework. The novel as literature, in its other forms, has been known to complement social and political writing. Ondaatje takes this up: “I didn't want to write formally ... I wasn't interested in the blame element. ... The question was how to write about war without getting involved in the usual way, which is to say this man is wrong and that man is right” (Richler 7-8). In which case Tragedy suits his purposes: “In a tragedy ... everyone's destiny is known ... he who kills is as “innocent” as he who gets killed ... you are trapped” (Anouilh 35).

Whether Ondaatje himself was “trapped” into using the tragic form because of matters related to his identity is something we cannot know. I refer to this because writers of novels, those with integrity, living within Sri Lanka or in diaspora, would not have wanted to attempt this subject matter, understandably, for personal and political reasons.

But no matter. In tragedy though you are trapped, you can shout: “all you can do about it is to shout ... shout aloud; you can get all those things said that you never thought you’d be able to say ... you say them because you learn a lot from them” (Anouilh 71).

Ondaatje’s mastery of his form is such that he is able to “shout” so loud but in the very different way a tragedy within the framework of the narrative novel does; “shouting” to an individual reader is very different from the way in which a formal tragedy shouts to a community, the audience in performance. And that is more redeeming for a reader than any formal political literary form can do. Associated with the Sri Lankan state are always two possibilities—nationalistic political Buddhism or a humanistic Buddhism. Ondaatje looks to and hopes for the latter, as he works it into the novel subtly against the other, raging Buddhism. It is finally encapsulated in the epilogue to the tragedy described below. But what rides on top in *Anil’s Ghost* is the raging Buddhism; the reader is expected to see that this tragedy includes the Tamil story in a way no overt literary political writing can.

No political formal literary construction can give a reader the great tragic purgation at the end of *Anil’s Ghost*. The writer’s shouting is all over. He has learnt a lot, and readers have learnt a lot by hearing his shouting. The shouting comes to an end. And we see in a great silence a view of the tragedy-stricken master craftsman, Ananda Udugama, his final placement high up on bamboo scaffolding in a desolate field of dead and buried bodies, as at the end of a tragedy, but with two tall standing possibilities of Buddhism (two giant Buddha statues). Two different guards overlooking swirling movements in nature over large swathes of distant Sri Lanka.

It has the same feel of “A great melancholy wave of peace now settled down upon Thebes, upon the empty palace ... only the guards are left” (Anouilh 71).

There has been no other work, comprehensive reportage or creative, about this era, that can occupy the position of *Anil’s Ghost*. It is fiction and not fiction; it is the writer’s identity. “This work of ‘fiction’ will endure as a history of these times” (Macintyre).

Notes

1. It is commonly believed that the LTTE (the Tamil rebel group included secondarily in this novel) assassinated President Premadasa (Katugala, in the novel). As there have never been police-investigated cases filed with the courts in such political killings, a practice of the quarter century old war that has come to be accepted by the public is the pronouncement of the government that either the Sinhalese rebels or the Tamils were responsible. Ondaatje's placing of the assassination of the President in a climatic way of chapter arrangement, immediately after the murder of Sarath Diasena can make a reader think of dramatic justice (re. Richard de Zoysa, see note below) as in Tragedy. In page 301 of Weerakoon's book, he says, "It looked to me then and even today, that there was no great desire on the part of those in authority to probe the matter further. It was good enough that the LTTE had done it... The authorities were satisfied and so were the media." Weerakoon then goes on to describe from a photograph, "a dark tall man with tousled hair with his crumpled bicycle was also among the dead. Something like a tape recorder with detached wires still appeared strapped to his upper chest. Who was this man and what was he doing on a bicycle in a foot procession so close to Premadasa at the moment of his death? His face was not that of Babu (the LTTE accused) that the media was showing." Weerakoon concludes by referring to the killing, one week before the assassination of the President, of the President's archrival minister Athulathmudali and belief amongst some that the President was responsible. Richard de Zoysa whose murder was more than a year before, had been Athulathmudali's friend and assistant in the process of undermining the President. It is in this connection that I refer to "dramatic justice," above.

2. At the time of Ondaatje's writing, Richard de Zoysa was an upper middle class Sri Lankan who was murdered by government death squads. He as a journalist was exposing death squad activities. At least in the aspect that Sarath Diasena, of the same social status, in the end, exposed the same crimes, there is a parallel to de Zoysa. The descriptions of violations of a living body at the hands of squads, as feared by Sarath's brother Gamini as described above, added to my feelings that the death of de Zoysa and reports of his torture had influenced the writer.

Regarding this note and note 1 above, my argument is that in not referring at all to the LTTE in the assassination of the President, Ondaatje has worked against the beliefs of his general Sri Lankan readers and his international readership that usually accepts what is put out by the Sri Lankan media and government. The part of his identity that is Sri Lankan had deepened enough since *Running in the Family* to be able to penetrate state and media structures. Weerakoon's book was published four years after *Anil's Ghost*.

Works Cited

- Anouilh, Jean. *Antigone*. London: Methuen, 1976. Print.
- Cooke, Victoria. "Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.3 (Sept. 2004): 1-8. Web.
- Dawson, S.W. *Drama and the Dramatic*. London: Methuen, 1984. Print.
- Goldman, Marie. "Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.3 (Sept. 2004): 1-9. Web.
- Interview with Michele Field. *Australian Broadcasting Commission Radio*. 19 Dec. 1992.
- Interview with Michele Field. *Australian Broadcasting Commission Radio*. Nov. 1992.
- Ludowyk, E.F.C. *The Story of Ceylon*. New Delhi: Navrang, 1985. Print.
- Macintyre, Earnest. "Humane re-telling of terrible times." Rev. of *Anil's Ghost*, by Michael Ondaatje. *The Sunday Times* 3 Sept. 2000: n.pag. Web.
- McCann, Colum. "On *Anil's Ghost*." *National Post* 15 Apr. 2000: Pages. Print.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil's Ghost*. London: Picador, 2000. Print.
- . *The English Patient*. New York: Knopf, 1992. Print.
- . *Handwriting*. London: Bloomsbury, 1998. Print.
- . *Running in the Family*. London: Picador, 1984. Print.
- Rev. of *Running in the Family*, by Michael Ondaatje. *New Statesman* July 1983. Print.
- Richler, Noah. "Ondaatje on Writing." *National Post* 1 Apr. 2000: B1, B2-B3. Print.
- Samarakkody, Edmund. "Behind the Anti-Tamil Terror: The National Question in Sri Lanka." *Workers Vanguard* 7 Oct. 1977: No. 176 6-7, 10. Print.
- Weerakoon, Bradman. *Rendering Unto Caesar*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2004. Print.