



UPROOTED OR HOMELESS SELVES: SHIFTING AND FRACTURED IDENTITIES IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *ANIL'S GHOST*

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The concept of diaspora is associated with dispersal and migration. Wherever there is displacement and whoever undergoes a displacement, he/ she is a diaspora. With the advent of postmodernism, the concepts like centre, root, home/homeland, origin are at stake and rather than stability, instability and hybridity have been celebrated. The term diaspora, in common parlance, signifies any people “living outside their homeland” (Anand 212). In contemporary media, diaspora is used as “a substitute for any notion of expansion and scattering away from the centre” (Tololyan 10). Very recent social issues have again broadened the shades of its meaning and now the term encompasses serious questions such as political refugees, alien residents, guest workers, immigrants, expellees, ethnic and racial minorities, overseas communities who find themselves living outside of the territory to which they are “historically rooted” (Carter 55). In the present global scenario, the very concepts like “root” and “home” are transient in nature, given the incessant movement of people from one region, country or continent to another. The diaspora in the process is psychologically dispersed to the ‘in-between’ zone called the “third space” as Homi K. Bhabha calls it (53). In the process of journey through trauma, nostalgia, memory, recollection, dislocation, desire for relocation and adjustment through torture and humiliation, the diasporic individual is reborn in the third space and the diaspora achieves a transnational, multicultural hybrid identity. There will be a shift in the identity and the resultant identity crisis brings out a fragmented existence. The continual exodus of people raise questions regarding to essential factors like nation, border, boundaries, location etc. Taisha Abraham clearly defines the significance of politics of location in her “Introduction” chapter of *Introducing*

Postcolonial Theories: Issues and Debates as the politics of location in postcolonial theories goes beyond the geographic terrain of the nation-state to include the international frame of the diaspora and migration as well....Questions of identity, politics, race, gender, journeys, memory, problems of deterritorialization and re-territorialisation in relation to exile and migrancy, the relationship between centre and periphery and notions of home and abroad, therefore, gain significance (7).

Philip Michel Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan born Canadian writer who has explored the various nuances of diasporic experiences through many of his characters. His migration to England and then to Canada explains his own experiences of geographical displacement. His sense of loss for Sri Lanka necessitates the need for relocation. He is also a product of this hybridity and a split-consciousness is very much reflected in his characters. As a diaspora, he has straddled multiple cultures-of Sri Lanka, of England and of Canada. His attempt of re-locating is signified by his revisits to the homeland in 1978 and 1980 before writing his fictional memoir *Running in the Family*. Culturally he feels torn between Sri Lanka and Canada due to the transculturation and in an interview he says, "...being Sri Lankan born and growing up there, I feel it's half my life... Sri Lanka was my culture... Canada was the culture I adopted... so these two things are important to me" (quoted in Tansley 183). The protagonists in Ondaatje's fiction too have undergone this same sense of dislocation and relocation as a part of their transcultured existence and shifting identities. Theories of diaspora bring out the hybrid and fluid nature of identity and for Ondaatje, identity is both a construct and a process. For him, identity is in constant flux and it always undergoes a process of becoming.

Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000) exemplifies the problem of identity in a severe way. Along with the crisis faced by the protagonist Anil Tissera, the novel also addresses complex ethnic and national identities that prevailed across Sri Lanka. The novel portrays identity as its core issue and its individual and national level dimensions are woven here in an unparalleled way. Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan born and western educated woman comes back to her homeland after fifteen years of expatriation. She is a UN forensic scientist who has come back all the way from USA to investigate extrajudicial executions that has happened in Sri Lanka. The novel is set in the backdrop of a gruesome civil war during the 1980s in Sri Lanka. Ondaatje writes:

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. Anil's Ghost is a fictional work set during this political time and historical moment (Author's note).

This sets the ambivalence of the country's identity and this political unrest of Sri Lanka could be read in parallel with the dislocation of Anil. The untold sufferings of the civilians and the rootlessness that they face due to the civil war are also heard in the novel.

Anil leaves the country for her studies at the age of eighteen and when she comes back to the homeland, the only link between Anil and Sri Lanka is Lalitha who was her ayah. She is a fractured self and tries to complete herself with the patches in Sri Lanka. Lalitha is the sole Tamil character in the novel and the meeting between the two was really a digging of the past and the fact is that she speaks a little Sinhala. Anil's last conversation in Sinhala was "the distressed chat she'd with Lalitha.... that ended with her crying about missing egg ruling and curd with jiggery... [and Lalitha] weeping , it felt, at the far ends of the world (141). This last, tear-soaked talk in her mother tongue is a costly one. The issue of language again problematizes Anil's identity, questioning her sense of belongingness to Sri Lanka. What makes identity problematic in the novel is that she occupies a stage of "in-betweenness" throughout the novel. She cannot forget her Sri Lankan origin, she always shares an urge to relocate herself in the island to which she cannot fully belong. 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 the discovery of the sailor. She says, "I think you murdered hundreds of us" (269). The oneness she feels with the Sri Lankans negotiates her desire to belong to the homeland. Sarath's observation at this can be seen as sarcastic : "Hundreds of us. Fifteen years and she is finally with us" (269). The desire "to come back" to the roots is a recurrent motif in Ondaatje's writings. Again the split-consciousness of Anil can be seen when she shares the feeling that she wouldn't be staying there much longer as there was no wish in her to be in Sri Lanka anymore (280). There is an unresolved question that whether she is an insider or outsider in the island. Before leaving the island she articulates this identity of hers while appreciating Sarath's and Gamini's determination to stay in the island: "No westerner could understand the love they had the island" (282) and again the fragmented self of Anil is seen.

Crossing the borders or boundaries of a nation also has a significant role in moulding the identity of diasporas. Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* provides an examination of identity reflective of cultural clashes that are inevitable consequences of such an interweaving of nationalities, histories and border divisions. Sophia A. McClennen suggests that "transnationalism renders the borders of a nation insignificant" (30). Also, Robert Gross considers there to be a need for "transnational thinking" (384). In several ways, Anil is a dislocated person who was born in Sri Lanka, went to the USA and became a member of UN Forensic department and as a forensic anthropologist, she is constantly on the move. Thus she transgress the boundaries of nation and state, also crosses the conventional notions regarding gender and position. Hers is a transnational and postmodern perspective: that she crosses and re-crosses many ideological boundaries, but it does not mean that she is devoid of any national identity at all. She is a blend of many identities and her multiculturalism demonstrates the fact that identity is a construct and at the same time, it is in constant flux. In other words, "Anil's transnational nature as being a continually changing mixture of a variety of cultures, which incorporates, encompasses and contains different fragments in one unified whole" (Cook 3). In a single entity, there are diverse factors to assert its identity.

The process of naming in *Anil's Ghost* accentuates the crisis of identity faced by the characters. Clearly, names and namelessness are central to Ondaatje's problematizing of identity. He points out in the acknowledgments of his semi-autobiographical work *Running in the Family*, that the use of names "may give an air of authenticity" (206). To be named, therefore, is to be located and thus to assert the identity. Ondaatje confronts this 'denied identities' through the representation of the 'murdered and the disappeared ones' during the civil war in *Anil's Ghost*. Anil feels that by establishing the identity of the lately discovered skeleton "Sailor" and finding out the family to whom he belongs, she will be locating all those who sailor represents: "who was this skeleton?...this representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest" (56). The 'lost voices' are found out and named in the novel and 'called back' into existence. Naming as positioning the self is more reflected in the case of Anil when she chooses her brother's name for herself. It was stated in the novel that she was a good swimmer and she adopted the name of her brother deliberately and thus questioned and resisted the conventional notions on gender and names. For Ondaatje, names and identities are not fixed entities, but cultural and ideological constructions. Through choosing a new name for herself, Anil takes on a new identity making her first name oblivious. In other sense, it was a shedding of the past and assertion of a new one, emphasizing the shift in identity and a fracture (break up).

Ondaatje's construction of identity parallels Stuart Hall's notion of identity: "... identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but is an ambivalent point...we cannot speak for very long about one experience, one identity without acknowledging the other side- its ruptures and discontinuities" (13). Ondaatje also presents the problematics of situating a homeland. *Anil's Ghost* represents the instability of personal and national identities.

As Anil has multiple identities, the title of the novel can have multiple connotations. What does the ghost refer to is a question that turns up with different possible answers. The ghost may refer to Anil's past- her bygone days in the island and the memories associated with it, which always follow her. The ghost may also refer to 'Sailor' and other unnamed victims of civil war, the murderer of sailor, the driving force for Anil to investigate "the extrajudicial executions and to Sarath Diyasena, the local archaeologist. As Ondaatje writes: "He (Ananda) and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena (301).

However, *Anil's Ghost* clearly paints the picture of the civilians' life during the civil war in Sri Lanka. So many people have been murdered and they have been silenced. *Anil's Ghost* renders a space for these 'voiceless' and thus they are located as Anil turns out to be the spokesperson for these marginalised ones. Obviously, *Anil's Ghost* exemplifies the terror behind terrorism and the trauma of the common people. The country too shares a fractured identity as Anil Tissera. *Anil's Ghost* is set amidst in Sri Lanka's civil conflict, focused on a period in the mid 1980s and early 1990s when the government was combating both Tamil separatists and Sinhalese insurgents. The chaotic political scenario in Sri Lanka and civil war indicated that national identity within its geographical boundaries was in danger and could be challenged as it was divided in "North" and "South" where one can experience the transnationality within Sri Lanka. People like 'Sailor' are deprived of their identity, nationality and culture and were imposed to go unnamed and unidentifiable. In the opening, *Anil's Ghost* appears to encourage the idea of a united Sri Lankan Buddhist belief. It is initiated in "the minor's folk song, Sri Lanka" referring to the "life wheel"

In search of a job I came to Bogala
I went down the pits seventy-two fathoms deep
Invisible as a fly, not seen from the pit head
Only when I return to surface
Is my life safe...
Blessed be the scaffolding deep down in the shaft

Blessed be the life wheel on the time's pithead

Blessed be the chain attached to the life wheel (01)

The concept of life wheel echoes the concepts of roots or origin. The intense desire to relocate oneself in the homeland is evident in these lines and it resonates the pain of fractured identity in the diasporas. In true sense, Anil is a dislocated person- with regard to her name, to her family and to the nation. The dislocation of Anil reverberates the fragmentation of the nation due to the civil war and it also addresses the unheard voices of the murdered ones. Though *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje problematizes notions of individual or national identity as being fixed and immutable, adopting instead a perspective that considers such boundaries as both flexible and permeable.

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