

The Illusion of Truth in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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Abstract

Michael Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost, a literary masterpiece, focuses on the distortion of truth. Set against the backdrop of civil unrest in Sri Lanka, the novel follows forensic anthropologist Anil Tissera as she exposes the complexities of revealing truth in a world rife with political and personal turmoil. This research abstract delves into the multifaceted layers of reality distortion portrayed in Ondaatje's work. At its core; the novel questions the notion of objective reality. Ondaatje masterfully employs fragmented narratives, shifting perspectives, and unreliable memories to diminish the lines between truth and fiction. Through Anil's investigation into the skeletal remains of victims of political violence, Ondaatje exposes the subjective nature of memory and the inherent biases that shape our understanding of past events. Moreover, the novel explores the psychological toll of living in a reality distorted by trauma and political oppression. Characters like Anil and Sarath, haunted by their pasts, grapple with the existential question of whether it is possible to reconcile personal truth with the external realities imposed upon them. Ondaatje's lyrical prose evokes a sense of disorientation, mirroring the characters' internal struggles as they confront the elusive nature of reality. Furthermore, the novel examines how power dynamics influence the construction of reality. Ondaatje exposes the ways in which those in positions of authority manipulate narratives to serve their own agendas, perpetuating falsehoods and suppressing marginalized voices in the process. Through Anil's quest for justice, the novel underscores the importance of bearing witness to the silenced truths obscured by those in power. The novel serves as a profound exploration of the distortion of reality in the face of political upheaval and personal trauma.

Key words: Orientalism, Pathologist, Trauma, Archeologist, Distortion

1. Introduction

In the captivating world of Michael Ondaatje's book "Anil's Ghost," the idea of truth is tricky and interesting. The author paints a vivid picture where what's real and what's not are woven together in a beautiful way. As we navigate through this fantastic story, we're led by the main theme: the "Illusion of Truth." It's like a subtle thread running through the entire tale. Ondaatje, a skilled storyteller known for his beautiful writing, encourages the readers to think deeply about what truth really means, especially in post-colonial Sri Lanka. The characters in the story, set against a background of political changes and historical echoes, are dealing with the idea that truth can be different for each person. The line between what's true and what might be a bit made up gets blurry. This isn't just about personal discoveries; it also extends to the whole society trying to make sense of things in the middle of all the confusion.

At the heart of this labyrinthine journey is Anil, a forensic anthropologist, whose professional pursuit becomes emblematic of the novel's thematic core. As she unearths the remnants of the past, both

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in the physical and metaphorical sense, Anil mirrors the broader societal endeavor to unravel and make sense of a truth that often seems elusive, ever-changing, and layered. The narrative unfolds with a meticulous dance of symbolism and imagery, where Ondaatje employs the power of words to create a mosaic of meaning. Landscapes and artifacts become metaphors, contributing to the novel's exploration of the illusory nature of truth. As we embark on this literary expedition, we are compelled to question not only the characters' perceptions but also our own understanding of truth and its malleable essence.

The paper aims to explore how Ondaatje navigates the delicate interplay between reality and illusion, inviting readers to accompany us on a journey into the heart of "Anil's Ghost" where the illusion of truth unfolds in its myriad shade. In the intricate tapestry of Michael Ondaatje's literary canvas, Anil's Ghost stands as a compelling exploration into the labyrinthine corridors of truth. As a seasoned author known for his nuanced narratives, Ondaatje plunges readers into the post-colonial milieu of Sri Lanka, where the quest for truth becomes a haunting odyssey. This research article meticulously dissects the thematic underpinning of the "Illusion of Truth" within Anil's Ghost, unraveling the layers of narrative complexity, cultural resonance, and character dynamics. As the narrative unfolds, Ondaatje beckons readers to confront the elusive nature of truth, challenging conventional paradigms and beckoning them into a realm where reality and illusion seamlessly intertwine. Through an advanced-level lens, this exploration navigates the intellectual contours of Ondaatje's masterpiece, inviting a profound analysis of truth's ephemeral nature in a post-colonial landscape.

The novel questions the Orientalists as they falsify the reality in the text to dominate the East. Anil Tissera, the protagonist, represents the western notion of truth for the orient. Anil, a forensic pathologist, born in Sri Lanka, and educated in the West, returns to the land of her birth for the first time in fifteen years to investigate "unknown extrajudicial execution" (18) by the Sri Lankan Government on behalf of the United Nations. She views the Orient through the eyes of the Occident, and substantiates Ziauddin Sardar's statement that "The Orientalized Oriental sees the culture of his/her origins, as the mirror of the West" (91). Anil's cultural orientation in the West has given her the occidental worldview to look at the East. She tells Sarath Diyasena, a local archeologist: "I'd like to remind you that I came here as a part of a human rights group, as a forensic specialist. I do not work for you. I am not hired by you: I work for an international authority" (274). Anil and Sarath work together to determine whether their discovery of a recent skeleton points to a government killing. Their investigation begins. Ondaatje says; "Who was the skeleton they called Sailor? Who tried to burn his bones? Who is responsible for terror? Who killed Sailor (33)?" Anil and Sarath have different interpretation over the Skelton because of their unlike mindsets. Anil epitomizes the Occident whereas Sarath advocates for the Orient. Anil upholds the Western dominant version of civil and political rights, and meddles the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. The idea of truth or universal justice, which UN believes the violation of human right, is both discoverable and at the same time desirable. As a representative of Human rights organization, Anil enforces Western philosophies of justice on Non-Western settings. Ondaatje criticizes the Human Right Organization: "human right is nothing other than a politics, on that must reconcile moral ends to concert situation and must be prepared to make painful compromises not only between means and ends themselves" (21-22).

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative method, employing literary analysis to examine Michael Ondaatje's "Anil's Ghost." Through close reading and thematic analysis, it investigates how the novel constructs and deconstructs notions of truth and reality, exploring narrative techniques, character perspectives, and historical contexts to uncover the illusionary nature of truth within the text.

3. Review of Literature

Critics like Margarate Scalin, Sandhya Shetty, Mrinalini Chakravorty, Bede Scott, and others have different views on the novel. Chakravorty, in her article “The Dead That Haunt Anil’s Ghost: Subaltern Difference and Postcolonial Melancholia,” focuses on human suffering rather than just the Tamil issue. She questions the loss of humanity and values, saying, “*Anil’s Ghost* presents us with a human problem of a different order, one that parlays collective death in generalizable terms and, by extension, vulnerability to violence into a new subjective experience (Chakravorty1). Shetty analyzes the text from an ethical standpoint, emphasizing the need to rescue and heal war-wounded people. She expresses deep concern for doctors and nurses risking their lives in hospitals, stating, “a deep regard for the doctors and nurses, specifically those laboring in the hospitals (page 1).” Babcock, in his essay “Human Rights and Specialized Bodies in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*,” interprets UN-defined human rights as a fantasy and a tool for imperialists to control the East. He asserts that the UN, along with the liberal system it represents, has struggled with legitimacy, with establishing universal laws for human rights seen as both idealistic and a cover for neoimperialist agendas. Vadde, in “National Myth, Transitional Memory: Ondaatje’s Archival Method,” describes Ondaatje’s writing trend, noting that while his novels typically focus on historical issues, “*Anil’s Ghost*” highlights conflict, specifically the World War II and Sri Lankan civil war (Vadde 1).

4. Analysis and Interpretation

In the text, the characters Anil and Sarah shed light on how those in power manipulate the truth, favoring the West over the East. Anil’s investigation in Sri Lanka delves into state-sanctioned killings. Upon uncovering a fresh body amidst ancient archaeological sites, Anil is eager to attribute blame to the government: “This is a recent skeleton. We can prove this, don’t see? This is an opportunity, it’s traceable. We found him in a place where only a government official could get into” (52). Sarah presents Anil with three ancient skeletons from a burial ground that has transformed into a government-controlled archaeological site, accessible only with proper authorization. While inspecting the preservation area, Anil and Sarah stumble upon a recently buried body amid the sixth-century archaeological excavations, strictly overseen by the government. Upon closer examination, Anil, through the use of a sulfur light, concludes that this particular skeleton, dubbed Sailor, is not ancient like the others and exhibits traces of lead. She is determined to establish the government’s implication in human rights violations by presenting Sailor’s case to the organization in Geneva. Anil strives to demonstrate the recent nature of the skeleton: “She began to examine the skeleton again under sulfur light, summarizing the facts of his death so far, the permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy. One forearm broken, partial burning, vertebrae damage in the neck. The possibility of small bullet wounds in the skull entrance and exit” (65). This incident shows that Anil aims to influence the thoughts of Sri Lankan civilians by appearing to do genuine work, but her real intention is to stir up conflict between the government and the rebels, pushing them towards war. Anil and Sarah manage to uncover information about Sailor’s identity, job, and when he was taken. However, their partnership starts to break down because they have different beliefs. Anil becomes suspicious of Sarah’s political agenda, leading her to take matters into her own hands. She goes to Colombo to present their evidence to military and police officials, but Sarah confronts her during the meeting. He challenges her because he knows the government won’t acknowledge any wrongdoing. Sarah tries to discredit Anil and their investigation to protect her life. Eventually, Sarah is killed for his involvement, while Anil escapes the country. The novel questions whether justice, as defined by Western institutions, truly serves the people of Sri Lanka. These institutions control the narrative of justice under the guise of human rights and fighting terrorism. Anil’s investigation is portrayed as creating a false truth about Sri Lanka, reflecting a biased view from the West.

Orientalists fabricate false narratives about the Orient to maintain their dominance over them. As Edward Said points out, “The facts they present are all imaginary but they assert the authenticity of their facts” (36). Orientalists strive to convince others that they are always right, constantly placing the burden on those from the Orient. Anil’s manipulation of the truth serves the political interests of Western human rights and capitalist societies. The information Anil spreads helps us understand why the two main ethnic groups in Sri Lanka become embroiled in political conflicts marked by daily disappearances, torture, fear, and terror. We are forced to realize that the justice provided by the West primarily benefits the West. Sarath explains: “Every side was killing and concealing evidence ... the government wasn’t the only one doing the killing. You had and still have three enemy camps - one in the north, two in the south - using weapons, propaganda, fear, and sophisticated censorship” (17). Orientalists push Orientals to engage in conflict against other Easterners by supplying them with weapons. They maintain a double standard - advocating for human rights while themselves violating human rights norms by supporting terrorist activities with arms. The war in Sri Lanka has been fought solely for the sake of war, without seeking political solutions. Ondaatje underscores this, stating:

It was a Hundred Years’ war with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun and drug runners. It became evident that political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals. The government was busy supplying weapons to armed forces rather than providing essentials for the victims in every nook and corner. (43)

Ondaatje suggests that achieving justice for the people of Sri Lanka may not be possible through the lens of human rights, as this mandate is influenced by external cultural perspectives. Justice, he argues, is not eternal or universal; rather, it is shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Anil’s initial exposure to the horrors of the Sri Lankan Civil War is just the beginning of a series of atrocities depicted throughout the novel. One such incident involves Sarath’s wife encountering a gruesome scene on her way to the village school: “She is about ten yards from the bridge when she sees the heads of the two students on stakes, on either side of the bridge, facing each other. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old ... She does not know or care. She sees the two more heads on the far side of the bridge and can tell even from here that she recognizes one of them” (174-75). Likewise, a teacher and her forty six students are picked up in the school yard by trucks with no license plate. Many atrocities have been committed by several people and groups in Sri Lanka. Sarath elaborates:

We have seen so many heads stuck on poles here, these last few years. It was at its worst a couple years ago. You’d see them in the early mornings. There was only one thing worse. That was when a family member simply disappeared and there was no sighting or evidence of his existence or his death. The relatives looking for the dead bodies or unconscious had to turn their desperate faces of uncertainty. (148)

The aftermath of war in Sri Lanka is harsh, and international investigations often interfere in the nation’s internal conflicts. Anil, representing the Orientalist perspective, fails to grasp the true complexity of the situation. She focuses solely on obtaining raw facts, disregarding the emotions of Sri Lankan civilians and rebels. Ondaatje emphasizes: “In a nation filled with fear, public grief was suppressed by an atmosphere of uncertainty. If a father spoke out against his son’s death, there was fear that another family member would be targeted... This deep-seated fear permeated the country. Nevertheless, people clung to hope for peace in the days to come, yet it felt as though an ironic darkness was enveloping everything” (56). Anil’s investigation aims to uncover evidence of government misconduct. She asserts, “We are an independent organization, we make independent

reports” (274). Anil focuses on revealing a specific type of wrongdoing to hold the government accountable. However, Sarath argues that the truth of Sri Lanka is more complex than Anil’s findings. Gamini tells Anil that in Sri Lanka’s civil war, “Nobody’s perfect; Nobody’s right” (132). Palipane shares a similar sentiment, stating, “There was nothing to believe in with certainty. They still didn’t know what the truth was; we have never had the truth. Not even with your work on bones... most of the time, truth is just opinion” (102). Palipane believes that truth is subjective and cannot be definitively known. The novel suggests that the domestic and political situations of Sri Lanka are intricate, and Anil’s ignorance prevents her from uncovering the facts. Sarath warns Anil, “I want you to understand the archaeological context of a fact. Otherwise, you will be like one of those journalists who report superficially from the Galle Face Hotel. That false sense of empathy and blame... that’s how we are perceived in the West. Emotional manipulation in pursuit of what’s deemed authentic news information goes against public sentiment” (44). Ondaatje questions the political neutrality of internationally funded human rights investigations. By emphasizing forensic science in identifying the sailor, the West attempts to create a “truth” while disregarding history, culture, and politics.

The forensic truth about Sailor’s death mirrors a political truth about Sri Lanka’s human rights record. Even Anil cannot distinguish between the two. Anil emphasizes, “you’re an archaeologist. Truth comes finally to the light. It is in the bones and sediment” (259). Anil is no longer discussing just Sailor’s death but rather the broader truth of the situation. However, Sarath offers a different perspective: “That is what governs us in our lives that are not the truth” (259). As a representative of the Orientalists, Anil’s pursuit of justice is intertwined with global politics; she does not have a specific mission to serve the interests of the Sri Lankan people. Anil and Sarath emerge as opposing characters within the same framework. The tension lies in how the West perceives truth from its own perspective, which Anil embodies, and how Sarath challenges this Western notion of truth and justice. This dynamic is depicted as ironic or contradictory to the Western mission. Ondaatje emphasizes that Sarath understood Anil’s quest was to uncover the truth. However, he questioned where this truth would lead them. He likened it to a flame igniting a lake of petrol, implying potential danger. Sarath had seen how the truth was distorted by the foreign press, often accompanied by irrelevant images. This careless portrayal of Asia could spark new conflicts. There were risks involved in exposing the truth in an unstable environment. As an archaeologist, Sarath valued truth, but he believed in sacrificing himself for it only if it served a meaningful purpose.

According to Sarath, turning objective truth into a solution for social and political issues is not straightforward. He warns that the timing of revealing the truth matters, and Anil’s disclosure about the Sri Lankan government is seen by him as a reckless move. Sarath doesn’t trust Anil, as he believes her perspective is influenced by the Western justice agenda. While Anil insists on the importance of “truth,” Sarath responds, “I believe in a society that has peace, Miss Tissera. What you are proposing could result in chaos. Why not investigate the killings of government officers?” (275). Anil disregards the idea that revealing the truth at the wrong time can be more dangerous. She boldly announces the sailor’s murder to Sri Lankan officials towards the end of the novel. In the days or hours following her announcement, civil violence erupts, resulting in Sarath’s death. This situation highlights the irony of the Western interpretation of terrorism, branding others as terrorists while portraying themselves as advocates for a terror-free world. It also underscores how the West, under the guise of investigating and addressing human rights violations, can unintentionally fuel terrorism in non-Western countries.

Anil, despite being a woman, has been given a male name, which is ironic. In non-Western contexts, the name Anil is usually used for males. She is a competitive Sri Lankan protagonist living in the

West, and her identity seems to have been crafted to promote specific beliefs rather than allowing her to independently seek truth, justice, and investigate human rights violations and terrorism. As a UN Human Rights Investigator, she has been allowed to return to her homeland for seven weeks. The UN International Human Rights Commission (IHRC) has selected Anil to investigate and report on human rights violations. After attending medical school in Britain and receiving Western training, Anil identifies more with the West. Her mission in Sri Lanka is to uncover truth, making her a Westernized insider in this regard.

Anil works as a forensic anthropologist for the UN Human Rights Commission, and it's helpful to understand the role of a forensic anthropologist in connection with the UN. The main goal of the UN is to establish universal laws and truths, creating a globally protected set of human rights that all nations can agree to follow. Anil uses scientific techniques for her investigations. She digs up a skeleton from an unmarked graveyard and concludes that government personnel were responsible for killing Sailor. The body is found in a location accessible only to government officials. Anil believes that the truth can be discovered, searching for permanent truths in the chemical traces preserved in bones. However, her rival, Sarath, argues that truth is inseparable from life. Forensic experts, including Anil, follow proper scientific procedures during the exhumation. They analyze the remains to examine the physical characteristics of the victim and determine the cause, manner, time, and place of death, aiming to establish the victim's identity. This involves using various techniques such as pathology, ontology, radiology, and anthropological studies to determine factors like the age at death, sex, and race of the skeleton. Like all forensic experts, Anil employs these techniques to uncover the truth, guided by Western methodologies. The solution to the crisis in Sri Lanka should come from internal social unity and agreement among its people, rather than adopting Western-based human rights norms and values imposed by Orientalists for political purposes. Westerners often aim to assert their dominance over Sri Lanka by creating misleading narratives.

Edward Said in his book "Orientalism" suggests that Westerners deliberately create misunderstandings among the people, government, and minority groups by amplifying issues related to caste, religion, and community. They intrude into the territories of countries and communities, disrupting mutual understanding in the name of human rights, civil rights, and social welfare. Their perspective tends to be dominating and interfering, especially towards the Eastern and Asian masses. Said also emphasizes that Asia is often portrayed through the lens of European imagination, depicting Europe as triumphant over Asia, leading to feelings of emptiness, loss, and disaster in Asian cultures. Every nation has the right to achieve sovereignty and retain its independence, and even acts of violence may be justified for this cause. Mitchell Foucault in his book "The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language" adds that if terrorists aim to establish a national state or expel a foreign power occupying their country and succeed, they should be recognized not as terrorists but as an established government.

5. Conclusion

In Michael Ondaatje's "Anil's Ghost," the theme of the illusion of truth is intricately woven into the narrative, challenging conventional notions of reality and perception. Through the characters of Sarath and Anil, Ondaatje explores the complexities of truth in the context of Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape. Sarath's skepticism about the timing and consequences of revealing truth contrasts with Anil's unwavering pursuit of uncovering hidden realities. However, the tragic events that unfold following Anil's bold revelations serve as a stark reminder of the dangers inherent in seeking truth without considering its broader implications. The novel's conclusion underscores the paradoxical nature of truth, revealing how its pursuit can lead to unforeseen consequences,

including violence and chaos. Ondaatje's exploration of the Western interpretation of terrorism and its impact on non-Western societies highlights the intricate power dynamics at play in the quest for truth and justice. Ultimately, "Anil's Ghost" prompts readers to question their own perceptions of truth and the ethical implications of its pursuit in a world fraught with political tensions and conflicting agendas. Through its richly layered narrative and complex characters, Ondaatje's novel offers profound insights into the elusive nature of truth and the blurred boundaries between reality and illusion.

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