

## Transnational Identity in *Anil's Ghost*

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### Abstract

*Anil Tessera who is portrayed as the central character in the novel seems to be like Michael Ondaatje who is a transnational Sri Lankan and Canadian writer. Like Ondaatje, Anil carries dual citizenship. On the one hand, the novel shows how Anil returns to Sri Lanka i.e. her home country in the middle of the civil war when the government armies fight with Tamil Tigers and insurgent Sinhalese. On the other hand, the novel mainly focuses on Anil's transnational identity. The novel reflects different reasons for Anil to carry transnational identity: the dissolution of boundaries and cross-border activities, her return to the home country, her connection to the home country, her sense of loss and displacement, and the conflict between national and transnational.*

**Key Words:** Transnational, identity, national, displacement, conflict, third space, boundaries, transmigration

The novel *Anil's Ghost* written by Michael Ondaatje revolves round the protagonist Anil Tessera who is portrayed as a transnational character. In one way Anil is like Ondaatje who is a Sri Lankan Canadian writer. Ondaatje who is a Sri Lankan-born Canadian novelist, poet, essayist, editor and film maker was born in Sri Lanka on the 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1943. He migrated to England in 1954 and in 1962 moved to Canada where he has been living since then. He gained higher education at the University of Toronto and Queen's university in Kingston, Ontario. Then, he started teaching at York University in Toronto in 1971. His notable works are *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), *The English patient* (1992), *Anil's Ghost* (2000), and *Warlight* (2018). Likewise, the notable awards he has received are the governor General's Award, the Giller Prize, the Booker Prize and so on. Like Ondaatje, Anil was born in Sri Lanka and left the country 15 years before to become a forensic pathologist in Britain and then she even studied in the USA on a scholarship, too. After 15 years, she returns to her homeland Sri Lanka in the middle of the civil war as a forensic pathologist and a part of Human Rights Investigation by the United Nations along with a group of people.

Because of transmigration, transmigrants belong to two or more than two nations today. On the one hand, they cross the boundaries of several nations; on the other hand they carry multiple identities such as hybrid, divided consciousness, transnational identities and so on. Basch, Linda et al. say, "Today, immigrants develop networks, activities, patterns of living, and ideologies that span their home and the host society" (4). Anil's activities such as back and forth movement between home country and host country indicate her

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transnational activities. Regarding transnational identities, Sonja Lehman argues, “They are no longer confined to a single nation-state, but also not postnational. Therefore, concerning identification and categorization, transnational individuals identify with several nations and cultures, which they feel they belong to” (306). The novel *Anil’s Ghost* uncovers how Anil is not confined to a nation, but she moves to so many nations showing her transnational activities. Anil carries transnational identity because of the dissolution of boundaries, the sense of loss and displacement of Anil, her conflict between the national and transnational, loss of national identity, back and forth movement between home nation and host nation.

Anil, who was born in Sri Lanka, but was educated in Britain and America, returns to her home country Sri Lanka after fifteen years carrying British passport, identity of United Nations and transnational identity. Ondaatje writes, “‘How long has it been? You were born here, no?’ ‘Fifteen years.’” (5) shows how she is asked at katunayake airport in Sri Lanka once she returns to her home country after fifteen years. She had left her nation 15 years before as a student, but now she returns as a forensic expert. Her journey is like that of a bildungsroman character. She has undergone a massive cultural transformation. Her identity goes on changing. For her, there is no fixity of identity as Stuart Hall says, “cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (113). Hall’s views on identity indicate fluctuating and changing nature of identity, which gets reflected in Anil’s identity. About identity Begam Tuglu expresses similar views. In ‘Transnational Identity and Imaginary Lands’, Tuglu writes, “The conception of identity has been studied through many different branches of humanities, in terms of language, ideology, psychoanalysis, sociology or history just to name a few. All theories come close in defining identity as an ever transforming, fluctuating and instable concept” (451). Basically, Anil’s crossing the borders of different nations such as the borders of Britain, the USA and Sri Lanka reveals her transnational identity. Sophia A. McClennen’s remark “transnationalism renders the borders of a nation insignificantly” (30) indicates the concept of borderlessness in matters of transnationalism.

Anil has been portrayed as a transnational character who due to western education, training and job has been a forensic pathologist and is sent to her homeland along with a team by United Nations to investigate a series of politically caused murders on the island. Ondaatje’s statements “Anil Tessera was chosen as the Geneva Organization’s forensic specialist to be teamed with an archaeologist in Colombo. It was to be a seven-week project. Nobody at the Centre for Human Rights was very hopeful about it” (12) indicate that Anil comes to her own homeland not as a Sri Lankan having nationalism, but as a westerner or a transnational person. She has to work with a government official and anthropologist Saratha Diyasena to discover the truth of the skeleton of a recently killed man who is nicknamed as Sailor along with the skeletons of other murders. As United Nations wants to know the truth about the killing of human beings in Sri Lanka whether they are killed by government

armies or by Tamil Tigers or insurgent Sinhalese during the civil war which started in 1983 and ended in 2009 taking so many people's lives. Ondaatje writes about the terror of the Civil War, "Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. Every side. This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign powers" (13). Perhaps United Nations has given her this responsibility thinking that she is a Sri Lankan/ a native citizen who can carry out this responsibility successfully. But, she finds her national identity weaker than her transnational identity. The Civil war has engulfed the nation in such a way that neither her transnational identity nor her national identity appears to be effective to enable her to do her assigned project. Transnationalism appears to be a threat to the host nation. However, in this novel, transnationalism or Anil's transnational identity appears to be a threat to Sri Lankan government. Lehmann's view "Transnational migration can even lead to changes in the political structure of both sending and receiving countries" (305) shows how transnational identity of transmigrants can bring political changes. Apparently, Anil's coming to Sri Lanka during the Civil War seems to help the government to establish peace, but she has been sent by United Nations as a forensic expert to prepare genuine report, which appears to be against the positive image of the nation in the novel. Steven Vertovec's argument "Transnational(ised) identities may also, indeed, form the basis of homeland or receiving country-focused political engagement" (578) does not seem to be suitable here as Anil's transnational identity should help the nation to have a good relation with her host land, but instead her transnational activities act as an apple of discord between the two nations.

To have connection with the root country transcending the border and living in the transnational setting is one of the features that indicate one has the transnational identity. Lehmann's claim "Anil, the protagonist of *Anil's Ghost*, faces similar questions and likewise returns to her country of origin to reconnect with her past in war torn Sri Lanka" (281) indicates that transnational people who live in the diaspora or in the transnational setting time and again visit the homeland showing their connection with the homeland like Anil. From the transnational lens, Anil's activities reflect transnational activities. Hence, the transnational approach is applicable here to uncover Anil's transnational identity in the novel. In his book 'The Cross-Border Connection: Immigrants, Emigrants and Their Homelands,' Roger Waldinger writes, "The appeal of the transnational approach is easy to see because it reminds us that to say international migration is to say cross-border connections" (12). Waldinger focuses on the cross-border connections of the immigrants between two nations. In 'Samultaneity in Transnational Migration, Ozge Bilgili writes, "Transnational migration theory is one that aims to accommodate the new realities of migrants' lives more satisfactorily, such that we can understand how they live in the host country while maintaining meaningful relationships with their home country" (31), which means that transmigrants keep connection with the homeland living in the hostland. In this context, Basch, Linda et al. write, "Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect

them simultaneously to two or more nation-states” (8). Anil’s transnational identity does not exactly reflect as Basch, Linda et al. say, but Anil’s connection to her root nation, Sri Lanka reflects her transnational activities. Bradatan, Cristina et al.’s argument “They are transnational as they navigate between two worlds, the origin and the host country, and they belong to both countries” (171) is very contextual in case of transnational people like Anil.

The entire novel shows how Anil’s personal identity is not only fluid and changeable but his transnational identity is also fluid. In course of Anil’s journey of life her name has undergone a drastic change. Her identity is firstly cultural and then transnational. Hall rightly says, “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (112). In ‘Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*,’ Victoria Cook states, “For Ondaatje, names and identities are not fixed entities, but cultural and ideological constructions. Through choosing a name for herself, Anil takes on a new identity; she becomes a stranger to her past “self” - - to the person she was before she became “Anil”” (4). On the one hand, she chose the name of a male despite being a female; on the other hand, she chose the name of her brother’s second name and grandfather’s name. Both she and her brother had not known that her grandfather’s name was also Anil. For her this new name she had to pay and sacrifice, which Ondaatje writes “She gave her brother one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favour he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse” (63-64). Cook’s statement “but it is also a liberating and self-creating action that affirms her identification with her ancestry and assimilates her origins into her new persona” (4) appears to be the reason behind her choosing the name at the cost of losing her chastity.

One important aspect of transnational identity is hybrid identity. Transnational people carry hybrid identity as they leave the homeland and migrate to the hostland where their national identity and international identity get mixed or national culture and international culture get mixed in the third space (Bhabha) to make the hybrid identity or hybrid cultural identity. According to Homi Bhabha, hybrid cultural identity is formed in the third space. Bhabha states, “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity” (211). Lehman relates hybrid identity of an immigrant to transnational identity, which becomes clear from his remark “it is inevitable to address it in connection with transnationalism, since hybridity also speaks of the migrant condition in terms of space” (301).

When the immigrants live in the diaspora, they have a strong sense of loss, displacement and nostalgia. Anything that appears to be the emblem of home or homeland becomes very delightful to the immigrants or transnational people. At the age of twenty, she met a Sri Lankan man in London whom she loved as she suffered from homesickness and he represented home for her. Ondaatje writes, “He too was from Sri Lanka, and in retrospect she 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 jaggery or jakfruit and be understood. That made a difference in the new, too brittle country” (137). So, both of them married, but as his father wanted her to return to Sri Lanka along with her husband and she could not, her marriage ended in divorce, which Anil wants to hide from others. Anyway, transnational people have feelings of displacement due to leaving home and adopting hybrid identity. Anil feels displaced as Ondaatje does. Lehman’s statement “In a somewhat ironic reversal of other forms of migrant writing both Ondaatje and Anil feel most displaced and unsure about who they are only upon their return to their ‘homeland’ which is by now much less of a home than their Western countries” (315) indicates Anil’s feelings of displacement.

Besides, Anil’s transnational identities are fragile, fragmented and political. Her transnational activities seem to weaken the culture and politics of Sri Lanka. Her job of investigation shows it in the novel. Anil returns to her homeland as a transnational person rather than just a national citizen returns to homeland being a transnational person. Carrying a British passport and having the designation of a forensic expert of United Nations, she visits Sri Lanka when the nation has a civil war combating with both Tamil Tigers/separatists and Sinhalese. Julie Spergel writes, “Transnationalism recognizes identity as a process and embraces fragmented identities that can cross geographic, cultural and political borders where they continually mix and blend culture” (48). Anil’s identity appears to be fragmented as Spergel says. Her mission is to investigate the murderers of Sri Lankans whether they have been caused by the government armies or Separatists or Sinhalese insurgents. Saratha Diyasena is a local official who is to assist Anil, but she is not sure where she can trust Diyasena or not. Her duty is to identify the victims so that she can do justice to the innocent Sri Lankans on behalf of the United Nations. However, both she and Saratha face difficulty in their investigation because of the violation of civil rights on behalf of the government. Anil as a transnational expert feels for the nation too, but does not like the way government violets human rights. What Anil discovers is:

In a fearful nation, public sorrow was stamped down by the climate of uncertainty. If a father protested son’s death, it was feared another family member would be killed. If people you knew disappeared, there was a chance they might stay alive if you did not cause trouble. This was the scarring psychosis in the country. Death, loss, was ‘unfinished’, so you could not walk through it. There had been years of night visitations, kidnappings or murders in broad day and night. The only chance was that the creatures who fought would consume themselves. All that was left of law was a belief in an eventual revenge towards was those who had power. (52)

The above quoted lines indicate both dangers and difficulties for international organizations such as the United Nations to do investigation genuinely. In this context, Laxmi A. K. and W. S. kottiswari regard Anil’s investigation as transnational activity. They argue, “The political aspect of transnational migration can be perceived in *AG* where the very act of Anil’s investigation by a non-governmental international agency becomes an attempt to transcend state-borders” (311).

The novel clearly reflects the conflict between Anil's national identity and transnational identity. Generally, the immigrants' transnational activities affect the politics of the host country. The political structure of the host country or the home country can be changed by transnational activities. Levitt and Glick Schiller state, "Migrants bring ideas about governance with them that transform host country politics, they reformulate their ideas and practices in response to their experiences with host states, and they communicate these social remittances back to those in their homelands or members of their networks settled in other states" (205) which indicates how transnational people's activities change the political scenario of the host country. So, in this case, transnationalism appears as a threat to the host country. But, this novel shows how transnational people's activities appear to be a great threat to the home nation. Anil who works as a transnational authority or as a transnational forensic expert becomes a great threat to the security system of Sri Lankan government during the civil war because if the government shows transparency, the human rights violence of the government will be exposed to the international authorities, which will be bad for the government although she seems to feel for the innocent victims. Anil with the help of Saratha discovers that the Sailor's death is a recent one and is caused by armies. Anil's discovering the real cause of the death of the Sailor creates a cause of conflict between the government authority and Anil, which indicates the conflict between the national and transnational, too. Anil's statements "Mr Diyasena, I'd like to remind you that I came here as part of a human rights group. As a forensic specialist. I do not work for you, I'm not hired by you. I work for an international authority" (271) reveals the conflict between the Sri Lankan government authority and the authority of the United Nations. Anil's prepared report accusing the government of getting involved in murdering the Sailor gets lost and even Sarath gets killed, which increases Anil's suspicion towards the government and it indicates a great threat to the transnational authorities like Anil. The government authority's order "Don't attempt to return for these things. Just leave the building. We'll call you if we want you" (273) indicates a great threat and danger for transnational authorities like Anil as the government finds Anil's transnational activities as a threat to the government as well.

The novel shows Anil's identity crisis. Her identity gets fractured and fragmented. After she returns to her home land after fifteen years, she appears to be only a transnational not a national figure because she can speak neither Tamil nor Sinhalese. Instead, she can only speak English. One reason why Anil cannot speak her national or mother tongue is that transnational people's priority is the language of the host country, which they must learn because they regard the host nation as their destiny and they become more loyal to this nation rather than the home nation. David Fitzgerald's statement "Transnational migrants often live in a country in which they do not claim citizenship and claim citizenship in a country in which they do not live" (10) seems to be contextual. On the one hand her report is confiscated by the government; on the other hand, she is forced to leave her own nation. So, her identity appears to be very fragile, fragmented and flexible. She seems to

be successful in negotiating in the west as the western or British society is a multicultural society which easily becomes the third space for negotiation. Bhabha's views: "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity . . . hybridity to me is the third space" (211) indicate that cultural negotiation takes place in the form of hybrid identity in the third space. My reason why Anil fails to negotiate in Sri Lanka is that her mother land is not the multicultural nation like Britain where she can negotiate, which means that Sri Lankan society does not appear to be like British society or the third space for Anil. However, it does not mean that all transnational people become successful in the host country to do negotiation and all of them become failures in the home land like Anil.

In this way, Anil who is Ondaatje's protagonist in the novel seems to have identity crisis. Since she was born in Sri Lanka and studied in Britain and America, she does not carry only Sri Lankan identity. Instead she carries British identity when she returns to her home country after fifteen years. The novel revolves round Anil who carries transnational identity. There are so many grounds that indicate Anil's transnational identity in the novel. Firstly, the novel shows Anil's movements across the borders of the different nations indicating the dissolution of boundaries. Secondly, the novel shows Anil's return to her home country as a forensic expert representing the United Nations from the host country. Thirdly, the novel reveals her connection to her home country as she feels for the innocent Sri Lankan victims during her investigation. Fourthly, her sense of loss, homelessness and displacement get reflected in the novel. Finally, the novel reflects the conflict between the national and transnational and her loss of national identity. So, Anil carries a transnational identity.

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