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Colonialists' Cat's Paw, the Extension of the
Colonial Mission through Expatriate Writing: A
Critical Analysis of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's
Ghost*

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Abstract

Even through decades have been passed since the collapse of the British empire, which brutally suppressed the South Asian countries, the inferior mindset complexity of the once colonised nations tends to prevail, irrespective of their literacy of postcolonial theories. As suggested by many Marxist and Postcolonial theorists, such inferior attitudes can be caused by ideological discourse. The study, therefore, attempts to understand and exemplify

how the colonial ideology is strategically re-disseminated by the expatriate writers, with particular focus on Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. With the use of postcolonial theories of Frantz Fanon and Edward Saïd and of the critical analyses on expatriate writing by Sri Lankan scholars, the study argues that Ondaatje has extended the colonial mission by projecting a corrupted and a devastated image of Sri Lanka. Being a skillful writer, however, Ondaatje manages to evade obvious criticism as he has consciously selected a time period and a set of characters, through which he can foreground the negative image of Sri Lanka in a neutral manner.

Keywords: *Anil's Ghost*, expatriate literature, Michael Ondaatje, Sri Lankan literature.

Introduction

The term, 'post-colonialism', seems to implicitly suggest the termination of the imperial period, where the colonialist authors used their literary works to inculcate a sense of inferiority in the mindset of the colonized. The ever growing anti-colonial awareness has continued to challenge the said colonial agenda by establishing nationalistic sentiments, which tend to create a notion of cultural supremacy over the Occident. However, the so called 'cultural supremacy' built by the native intellectual is largely dependent on the pre-colonial history of the colonized. When delving into the present political consciousness of the once colonized citizens, it is

comprehensible that they unanimously agree upon the fact that their post-independent journey has been on a reverse trajectory. Capitalizing this backward journey of the liberated nations, the occident has re-launched the mission of rebuilding their reputation as the 'civilised other' of the primitive counterpart, the Orient. In their new mission, however, the Occident has been mindful enough not to depend solely on their own writings, which have been intellectually denounced by the postcolonial critics. The Occident has, thus, deployed a set of unconsciously and culturally conditioned delegates, known as 'expatriate writers', to continue their colonial mission in a much modernized and a subtle manner, making them 'colonialists' cat's paws'.

Discussion

In order to comprehend how the expatriate writing extends the colonial mission, it is essential to briefly recapitulate the essence of colonial portrayal of the Orient. As Edward Saïd logically posited in his seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), the West has intended to make perdurable attachment between the Orient and the concept of exoticism. According to Saïd the United States in 1950s have perceived the Orient either by the means of "strategic and economic importance" or by "its traditional exoticism" (26). Validating Saïd's argument, in his book, *The Imperial Imagination: Magic and Myth in Kipling's India* (1983), Lewis D. Wurgaft writes with reference to Rudyard

Kipling's projection of India that "it was Kipling's treatment of his native characters, of feverish exoticism of India, rather than his native Anglo-Indian social life, that made the deepest impression on his English audience" (130). Thus, it becomes visible that the colonialists have attempted to exoticise the Orient as a method of othering the East. It is partly through this process that they validated both their writings and their colonial mission.

By examining the novel, *Anil's Ghost* (2000), by the Sri Lankan expatriate Michael Ondaatje, it becomes visible how the expatriate writer has volunteered to resume the process of exoticising the Orient. Like many other expatriate writers, when elaborating on the ambiance, Ondaatje goes into the extent of presenting the minute details. The scene, where Anil has a bath at the well, elucidates the meticulous writing style of Ondaatje. Ondaatje writes:

She undressed by the well, unstrapped her watch and got into the diyareddha cloth, and dropped the bucket into the depths. There was a hollowsmash far below her. The bucket sank and filled. She jerked the rope so the bucket flew up, and caught the rope near the handle. Now she poured the cold water over herself and its glow entered her in a rush, refreshing her. Once more she dropped the bucket into the well and jerked it up and poured it over her hair and shoulders so the water billowed within the thin cloth onto her belly and legs. She understood how wells could become sacred. [. . .] When she had finished she unwrapped the wet cloth and stood naked in the wind and the last of the sunlight, then put on the dry sarong (86).

The quoted section deals with exoticism at three different levels. At first, as already discussed, it presents a meticulous account of the apparently complex procedure of bathing at a well. Secondly, it tends to associate the well with a fake mysticism alluding that there is a hidden oriental sacredness. Thirdly, the writer tries to project a sensual, or rather sexual, image by making Anil stay naked in the open area for some time, before getting into the sarong, especially in the vicinity of a masculine presence. Even though it is probably a very unlikely incident to take place, it seems that the author is not hesitant to compensate a bit of realism to accommodate a bit of sensuality associated with oriental atmosphere as also advocated by E. M. Forster in his *A Passage to India* (1924).

A more unrealistic portrayal presented by Ondaatje is the sexual act that happens between the Sri Lankan siblings; Anil and her brother, which is - in a way reminiscent of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Siblings having sex with the intention of exchanging names is a highly impractical incident to occur. However, Ondaatje has provided a bi-sexual and an unfeminine appeal to the character of Anil probably to justify, at one point; the said sexual interaction, and at another; the fearless and brave approach she has towards corrupted Sri Lanka. However, when juxtaposed with writers like Roy it becomes rather obvious as to how the writers from once colonised nations still attempt to cater their works to the western readership.

In much the same manner, the author has expanded on the 'Nēthra Mangala' ceremony not only once, but twice in the course of the narration. Initially, Palipana, the former academician, explains the ceremony to Anil, who - though born in Sri Lanka - has no exposure to the traditional practices of the country of birth. The explanation is made with the intention of introducing the character of Ananda, who according to Palipana would be able to assist Anil and Sarath in recreating the identity of the Sailor. As Ananda is professionally a painter, it was made necessary to brief Anil on 'Nēthra Mangala' ceremony. It is this deliberate character selection that permits Ondaatje to deal with the exotic portrayals in a neutral fashion. Through his consciously selected characters, he makes the presence of these exotic accounts justifiable. However, the second depiction of the ceremony seems to be of less importance in relation to the story line.

It should also be comprehended that such explicit portrayals give considerable credibility to the writer as those instances suggest that the writer has sufficient familiarity with the culture and the traditions of the native country. During the colonial period, this authority was assigned to the colonialists who had spent some time in the Orient. As a consequence, writers, like Rudyard Kipling and Leonard Woolf, were recognized as authoritative figures in presenting the Orient to the West. Wilfrid Jayasuriya, in his book, *Sri Lanka's Modern English Literature:*

A Case Study in Literary Theory (1995), states the following about the so called authority:

*Though there have been many accounts of Ceylon published in Britain and Ceylon after Knox, none of them have received the favor and the fame that Woolf's *Village in the Jungle* received both in Ceylon and abroad. Woolf, like Knox, is a fascinating writer because he knows the natives well and speaks with authority about them (14).*

As clearly stated in the quotation, the credibility of the accounts made by Woolf is due to the fact that "he knows the natives" (14). Similarly, the expatriates, the modern cat's paws of the same mission, are also supposed to manifest their literacy in the native culture. When these accounts are accompanied by the fact that the expatriates have, in fact, spent some of their life time in the East, additional credibility is assigned to expatriate writers (specifically Ondaatje in this disquisition).

Some Sri Lankan critics of the expatriate writings, such as Thiru Kandiah and Walter Perera, have identified two elements that these novelists attempt to foreground in their portrayals of the Orient or their country of origin. Thiru Kandiah, writing an article to the journal, *Phoenix: Sri Lanka Journal of English in the Commonwealth*, encapsulates these two elements into one sentence as he says that Romesh Gunasekara, another Sri Lankan expatriate author, prefers "to simply juxtapose his tropical paradise and the unpleasant situation which has replaced it alongside each other" (51). While the said 'tropical paradise' stands for the exoticism, 'the unpleasant

situation' signifies the violence and the chaos in the country of origin. Even though Kandiah's reference is limited to Gunasekara, the validity of that remark becomes evident through Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* as well.

Once again skillfully justifying the necessity to be explicit about the chaotic and turbulent situation of the native land, Ondaatje has strategically selected one of the most, or perhaps 'the most', disastrous period in the modern Sri Lankan history. As per the 'Author's Note' added to the novel by Ondaatje; "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". While this choice itself indicates the author's undercurrent political intentions, it also tends to evade criticism as the protagonist, Anil Tissera, is made to arrive at her country of origin as an outcome of this turmoil.

Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist returns to her country of birth after spending fifteen years in the West. Ever since her return what she encounters is the turmoil of the country. In the morning of her second day in Sri Lanka, Anil visits Kynsey Road Hospital and observes several dead bodies with the forensic students. Though the students seem much accustomed to these observations, the writer has made the experienced Anil stunned at the sight of the tortured bodies. Ondaatje attempts to exhibit the horror of the political killings through Anil's lenses and writes: "the next corpse brought

in had flail fractures on the rib cage. It meant he had fallen from a great height – at least five hundred feet – before hitting the water belly-down. The air knocked out of the body. It meant a helicopter” (10).

A few days later, on their (Anil travels along with Sarath) way back to Colombo from Palipana's, they accidentally encounter Gunesena, a truck driver, who had been nailed to the ground in the middle of night and on a deserted road. As presented by Ondaatje the 'humanistic' United Nations' representative directs Sarath to rescue the nailed Gunesena. However, what disturbs Anil the most would be the mysterious death of the 'Sailor', whose body had been buried in a restricted land belonging to the Sri Lankan government, which is “accessible only to the police or the army or some high-level government officials” (85).

Ondaatje has not limited the presentation of the atrocities to the perspective of Anil. He has attempted to bring out how other characters have witnessed the brutality of the country. For instance, the writer describes how Sirissa, Ananda's wife, has experienced a massacre of a group of school children while walking to the school in the morning:

She is about ten yards from the bridge when she sees the heads of the two students on stakes, on the other side of the bridge, facing each other. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old . . . she doesn't know or care. She sees two more heads on the far side of the bridge and can tell even from here that she recognizes one of them. She would shrink down into herself, go back, but she cannot. She feels something is behind her, whatever is the cause of this. [. . .]

She begins running forward, past their eyes, her own shut dark until she is past them. Up the hill towards the school. She keeps running forwards, and then she sees more (170-171).

While the author has not been explicit about the responsible party of this treacherous mass murder of school children, without hesitation the writer attributes the responsibility of certain crimes to the Sri Lankan government;

In the shadows of war and politics there came to be surreal turns of cause and effect. At a mass grave found in Naipattimunai in 1985, bloodstained clothing was identified by a parent as that worn by his son at the time of his arrest and disappearance. When an ID card was found in a shirt pocket, the police called an immediate halt to the unburial, and the following day the president of the Citizens' Committee – who had brought police to the location – was arrested. The identity of others in this grave in the eastern Province – how they died, who they were – was never discovered. The warden of an orphanage who reported cases of annihilation was jailed. A human rights lawyer was shot and the body removed by army personnel (38).

The given extract does not only account the government sponsored violence but also how the government has attempted to conclude and conceal the ongoing investigations. It further shows that the administration is not being humane enough even to identify the victims and to inform the families regarding the status of the lives.

When writing on Ondaatje's portrayal of violence, it should also be acknowledged that he has not only presented the government sponsored violence, but also of the havoc created by other two parties. For instance, while

depicting Gamini's duty conscious nature, Ondaatje has penned how the LTTE – or the 'separatists guerillas' as he puts it down – had attacked "a small village beside the main road to Batticaloa" (238). The guerrillas have been involved in several brutal attacks, irrespective of the age of the victims. In this situation, amongst their victims were two nine-month-old twins who were shot. The mother of these infants was killed.

Even though Ondaatje has presented the political and ethnic atrocities committed by several groups, ultimately it comes to a point where the foreign readership generalizes all these under the umbrella term of 'violence in Sri Lanka'. Thus to the occident reader such accounts validate the historical attempts made by the colonialists to civilize the barbaric Orient.

Yet, as Sri Lankans, who have either lived through or learnt about this tragic past of the country, it is not possible to deny these accounts. Victor Ivan, a reputed Sri Lankan journalist lists several incidents that had taken place in this period in his book, titled *Arbudhaye Andharaya* (2006). Black July in 1983, slaughter at the Welikada Prison, LTTE attack near Sri Maha Bhodhiya, killing of the bhikkus at Aranthalawa and 'eye to eye – tooth to tooth retaliation series between the security forces and the insurgents are just a few of them. But what seems to be problematic is Ondaatje's choice of this historical period and the fact that he extends the political corruption into the personal spheres of the characters.

Out of all the personal accounts of the characters in the novel, it is difficult to find an individual who is content with their family life. Sarath's wife has never been satisfied with her marriage. And apparently, she has had genuine reciprocal sentiments towards her own brother-in-law, Gamini, whose wife, Chrishanti, has been an object of fascination to Sarath. And surprisingly, the brothers communicate this even to a stranger in a casual manner. Referring to Sarath and Chrishanti, Gamini says: "[h]e thinks my ex-wife was the best thing that happened to me. He probably wished to fuck her. But didn't"(188-189). Even though Chrishanti's feelings towards Sarath are not presented with clarity, tired of her unsatisfactory marriage, she decides to divorce Gamini. On another layer, Palipana, the former academic was never able to find a partner for himself, and now spends a life in isolation looking after her niece, Lakma. Importantly, according to the presentation of Ondaatje, it is not possible to conclude that these break downs of domestic spheres are results of the existing chaos of the country. Therefore, the reasons are manifested as mostly personal.

Howbeit, the writer has not failed in alluding to the domestic failure caused by the political violence. For instance, Lakma's parents were killed in front of her and she had to undergo an extremely difficult period of Post-traumatic Stress. In addition, Sirissa has been disappeared and ever since, Anandahas never received any news regarding her. It was during such a situation that he was

assigned the task of reconstructing the face of the Sailor. As Ananda later attempts to commit suicide and as Anil and Sarath were also convinced that Ananda's creation is not an authentic production, but something within him being expressed, it can be assumed that throughout the process of face reconstruction, Ananda has been contemplating about his own wife and what might have happened to her. Freudian concept of 'sublimation', which is one of Freud's original defense mechanisms, would also justify the mentioned claim as that concept suggests that certain artistic works are produced in order to cope with the internal agony. However, the suffocation buried within the artist was of such unbearable intensity that the work itself made him to select death instead of life.

The failure in personal life of the Sri Lankans transcends the geographical boundaries as both Anil and her ex-husband, who is also a diasporic Sri Lankan, fail to maintain a healthy relationship. As the critics of expatriate writing posit, being first generation expatriates both the said characters simply needed a sense of belonging. In them, each other could find a portal to reconnect with the native country. Ondaatje captures this and 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 . . ." (137). Thus, Ondaatje concludes that the relationship was not initiated out of real affection, but out of the necessity to relate to their

origins. But the marriage turns out to be utterly bitter that Anil would never even mention the name of her ex-husband. Consequently, Ondaatje has left the reader also uninformed about the name of the character, who is referred to as 'he'. Even after this break up, Anil fails to find a proper partner. She, then, ends up in the hands of a married man named, Cullis and later gets involved in a relationship with a trustworthy girl, named Leaf, who turns out to be suffering from dementia.

What is striking here is that the western readership will never make any identification with the expatriate Anil. For them, Anil is another, but a different, manifestation of the 'Sri Lankanness'. As Homi K. Bhabha suggests – a hybrid. When observing the generalizations made by the author, this relationship failure is suggested to have inherited from the corrupted native culture. This can be concerned as one of the irrational over generalizations made by Ondaatje with the intention of directing further colonialist criticism towards the country of origin.

Another significant presentation of the colonialist fiction is the portrayal of women. According to Pramod K. Nayar, the author of the book, *From Text to Theory: A Handbook of Literary and Cultural Theory* (2017), the colonial discourse has produced an image of an "oppressed and vulnerable native woman" (205). Nayar further claims that the native woman has not been portrayed "as somebody who can question or raise doubts about the validity of [. . .] cruel laws" (206).

However, the prominent female figure of the novel, Anil can be understood as the exact opposite of this phenomenon. Anil questions the authority and the government, especially in a period, where government sponsored violence is omnipresent. In a situation, where the male of the country has decided to maintain silence, Anil tries to voice for the political victims, even though spivakian arguments would challenge her authority to do so. However, it becomes clearly visible that her real intention is not to speak on behalf of the victims, but to gather evidence against the government under the pretence of assisting the victims. Convincing Sarath to initiate investigations on the skeleton, Anil says "[t]his is an opportunity, it's traceable. We found him in a place that only a government official could get into" (48). The fact that she sees this as an 'opportunity' underlines her real intention.

Yet, when considering Nayar's argument, Anil is obviously not the passive and oppressed native woman. Anil has been depicted as a strong female figure by Ondaatje, who tries to make a visible distinction between the traditionally portrayed native woman and the expatriate woman, who comes back to the country with the western influence. In fact, Anil has never been culturally located in her country of origin with its common masses. Even during her childhood, she has spent a comfortable and a seemingly anglicized life in Colombo metropolis. Thus, Ondaatje seems to suggest how anglicization or the western

influence can guide a female individual towards an independent life style.

Even though the facts elaborated above elucidate that the discussed text is nothing but an extension of the colonial mission, it would be a simple understatement, if it is not examined how the author has attempted to dilute the intensity of othering by offering some counter-criticism on the Occident through his novel. Like Romesh Gunasekara, as being condemned by critics like Walter Perera and Thiru Kandiah, Ondaatje does not paint a purely negative image of Sri Lanka. As a strategic writer, whose conscious choices have already been discussed, he has selected several well educated Sri Lankans, who would be called as 'native intellectuals' by Frantz Fanon, through whom the writer can present the counter discourse of the orientalism.

Introducing the role of the native intellectual, Fanon writes in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), that:

the native intellectual who takes up arms to defend his nation's legitimacy and who wants to bring proofs to bear out that legitimacy, who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body, is obliged to dissect the heart of his people.... To fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation . . . (154)

Though Fanon writes from a psychoanalytical perspective and talks about dissecting the heart, his argument clarifies that the responsibility of the native intellectual is to safeguard their native culture and traditions from the hegemonic discourse of white supremacy, which tends to portray the Orient as the barbaric other.

Ondaatje, perhaps with the intention of making parallelism with this Fanonian concept, has featured a series of native intellectuals, such as: Sarath and Gamini, who – on one hand – are aware of the state sponsored violence, but – on the other – are skeptical about the latent intentions of the mission that Anil has undertaken.

Criticising missions similar to that of Anil, Gamini elaborates how random westerners either from United States or England abruptly visit an oriental country, capture some footages from a camera and present it to the entire west. He denounces these practices, saying “[t]hat’s enough reality for the West. It’s probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing” (283). Gamini has acknowledged the fact that the Occidental political sphere maintains its image by tarnishing the reputation of the Orient.

Another significant incident of counter-orientalism occurs when Anil presents her research report to Sri Lankan government officials at the Armoury Auditorium in Colombo. Sarath, being seated in the audience, observes how Anil, who has been away from her country of origin, now tries to reconnect with Sri Lanka as if she has always been a part of it. “[H]e heard her say, ‘I think you have murdered hundreds of us.’ *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally us” (269). Here, Sarath is critical how Anil tries to offer extra validity to her claims by pretentiously identifying herself with the victims.

Conclusion

By incorporating some such anti-colonial sentiments, Ondaatje has attempted to avoid the criticism of projecting a mono-dimensional portrayal of Sri Lanka. On another side, Ondaatje has given himself some space within the story to express his own guilty consciousness as he, himself, like the novel's protagonist, visits Sri Lanka occasionally and attempts to project the country with the authority of its permanent residents. It can, thereby, be understood that the writer is ironizing himself for being another Anil, in real life. Nevertheless, it should not be neglected that he has presented some anti-colonial discourse in the story.

But, when these sentiments are juxtaposed with the previously discussed colonial agenda, these sentiments will be reduced to mere implicit suggestions, whereas the violence is explicitly projected throughout the novel. Thus, it becomes comprehensible that the author's main objective has been to present an account of the Sri Lankan turmoil to the Western readership. By doing so, Ondaatje has also assured to claim that it is the barbarity of the native that has converted a paradise like island into an utter chaos. As the depiction contains the post-independent brutality, the novel subsequently vindicates the colonial mission of civilizing the Orient. Thereby, it can be concluded that the modern day expatriate writing, which is exemplified by *Anil's Ghost* in this disquisition,

seems to differently expand the colonial agenda with the renewed authority of the 'once natives'.

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