

The Fragmented Identity of Postmodern Individuals: A Scrutiny of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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Abstract: The postmodern condition and the concomitant globalization have a great impact on the contemporary lifestyle, identity formation and the perception of life. Michael Ondaatje insinuates that the identity of the characters is a unique phenomenon in the postmodern world as it reverberates the social arena to which they belong. He adumbrates that in the postmodern age of discontinuity, fragmentation, and metamorphosis, the primarily established norms of identity have turned obsolete. In the postmodern world, the concept of identity is considered as a transitive, mutable and self-effacing entity. Ondaatje foregrounds the fragmented nature of Anil Tissera's self which is divided between the adopted Western culture and the sense of affinity towards the homeland. He examines Anil's personal and cultural metamorphosis as she migrates from one country to another. She is initially dependent upon the cultural and individual identity given to her by her parents and though she moves temporarily away from the national identity by adopting herself to a different culture, she rejuvenates her national identity by aligning herself with the homeland. Ondaatje directs the migrants living in the adopted land to preserve their identities by taking pride in their ancestry and thereby achieve a sense of belonging. He accentuates that the national identity offers the characters to transcend the notions of homelessness and wilderness by achieving a stable identity.

Keywords: Postmodern, Fragmentation, Personal Identity

In the postmodern world, the flourishing development of capitalism, the advancement of technology, the wide spread phenomenon of globalization, and the war between the different factions of society have ensued in an intense and considerable transformation in social, cultural, and economic structure as a whole. The postmodern condition and the concomitant globalization have a great impact on the contemporary lifestyle, identity formation and the perception of life. Michael Ondaatje insinuates that the identity of the characters is a unique phenomenon in the postmodern world as it reflects the social arena to which they belong. Ondaatje adumbrates that in the postmodern age of discontinuity, fragmentation, and metamorphosis, it is hard for contemporary people to ascertain who they really are. The myriad metamorphosis in the ambience of the world has counteracted the modernists' notion of forming a stable, predictable and coherent identity. Fredrick Jameson comments in the book *The Cultural Turn: The Selected Writings on the Postmodern* that "the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically

linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world..." (6). Ondaatje ascertains that in the contemporary epoch of displacement and disenchantment, the primarily established norms of identity have turned obsolete. Jameson claims that the cultural turn in the late modernity has exacted the notion that "this kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual or individualist subject is 'dead'..." (6).

Ondaatje reckons that in the postmodern world, the concept of identity is considered as a transitive, mutable and self-effacing entity. The condition of the postmodern world has actuated millions of people to cross the frontiers of their country. There are various reasons for migration – political upheaval including war, persecution, climate-related refugees, economic migrants, education, and family reunification. The transplanted migrants have the profoundest anxiety of identity crisis as they confront the jeopardy resulting from hyphenated identities. In the article entitled "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" Stuart Hall abduces that in the late modern times, the individuals do not have any unified identity, instead they are "increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to... the process of change and transformation" (4).

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje examines the hyphenated identity of Anil Tissera who emigrated from Sri Lanka. He adumbrates that the civil tensions in the country and the lack of educational opportunities has urged millions of people to migrate. The migrated people initially face cultural displacement in the foreign countries but the fear of facing the trauma of war belittled their cultural alienation. They learn to assimilate themselves to the new environment. The life in the alien land distances them from the cultural and linguistic patterns of the homeland; however, during the moments of social upheaval, the emigrants share emotional affinity with their homeland and its inhabitants. The conflict that arises between the contradictory forces of the postmodern world results in hyphenated identity. Anil migrated from her homeland at the age of eighteen to study medicine in England. She had been an exceptional swimmer as a child and had won several accolades in Sri Lanka. She was known throughout her homeland as a child prodigy. Her talent became an indispensable part of her life, so she felt alienated in England when the people around her failed to recognize the talent in her. She becomes timid and reticent as she finds it difficult to open up conversation with people. She felt lost and perceived herself to be living in far ends of the world. Moreover, the contrasting ambiance of the homeland and the host country stifles her. In the tropics, the classrooms were filled with the noises of the birds, lorries, and fighting dogs whereas the intricate geography and the serene atmosphere of the English classroom astound her. Anil experiences the problems of displacement when the ties with her homeland attenuated. Her only connection with the island was the new sarong that her parents used to send her every Christmas but with

the death of her parents, she lost all ties with Sri Lanka. She longed to have some conversation with whom she can discuss some common features of her homeland. She felt that all these trivial reliefs made some remarkable difference in the country that is too brittle. It is this desire to develop some intimacy with her countrymen that drives her to the smoke of a bad marriage. She interpreted her husband's irrepressible behaviour "as sexual jealousy, then she saw it as an attempt to limit her research and studies. It was the first handcuff of marriage, and it almost buried her" (144). She realises that she begun to love him because of her loneliness but when she found it difficult to get along with him, she decided to end their relationship. Ondaatje speculates that her decision to drop the relationship with him parallels her intention to subjugate Eastern cultural identity in favour of the West.

Ondaatje exposes Anil's conflict between the dichotomies of Eastern and Western cultures. He apprehends the anarchy involved in following one's tradition in alien lands. He reiterates that in homeland, one is surrounded by family order and values. There is no anonymity in one's homeland but when they migrate to the foreign lands they escape the vigilance of the customs and manners. They live a freewheeling life with no respect for their cultural heritage. He substantiates that "we take our clothes off because we shouldn't take our clothes off. And we behave worse in other countries... What is that quality in us? Do you think? That makes us cause our own rain and smoke?" (138). Ondaatje explores the effect of acculturation on individual identity. He accentuates the influence of Western countries on Anil's perspectives and life style, "[t]he island no longer held her by the past. She'd spent the fifteen years since ignoring that early celebrity" (11). Her distance from her homeland helped her in interpreting her homeland with a panoramic vision. The surfeit of violence that has taken place in Sri Lanka after her departure has in turn numbed her desire to return. She was appalled by the blood that that flown through the bridges since the war. She felt that the island has become "a more complicated world morally" (11).

Anil assimilates herself to the Western virtues of individuality and does not associate with the communal culture of Sri Lanka. She courted foreignness during her European and North American education. She loses the sense of her original self and feels at ease on Bakerloo line or the highways around Santa Fe. She is alienated from Sri Lanka to the extent that instead of coming to Sri Lanka as a return home, she sees it as an unfortunate temporary leave of absence from the West. She feels baffled when she was sent by the International Human Rights Investigation to investigate the widespread murders carried out in the island. She muses, "Oh—what do I like? Most of all I think I like that I can do things on my own terms. Nothing is anonymous here, is it. I miss my privacy" (72). She finds it difficult to work in sparse high-tech areas of Sri Lanka as she could not locate half the equipments that she needed. Anil notices a stark contrast between the advanced environment of the adopted land and the low-tech native country. The sense of detachment from the homeland coupled with the adopted culture of the new environment results in

hyphenated identities. Abhijit Gupta in his review entitled "Unearthly Beauty" reiterates that in expatriate writings, "The overwhelming theme is that of separation, of human beings fenced apart from each other, each inhabiting their personal island of pain. Cut off from the nourishing roots of family and community, all of Ondaatje's characters seem to live in a state of numbness, a shell shock of the mind" (23-24). He avers that the aloofness from the homeland disorients them from their roots – language, history, culture. The sense of rootlessness and uncertainty shared by the expatriates affect the sense of integrity of the self. Anil had many relatives in Sri Lanka, but she did not wish to rebuild an intimacy with them. She felt very glad to be alone in her own world. She had adopted Western style of dressing and manners. Her absence from the homeland in fact distances her from her mother tongue. She avers that she can speak "[j]ust English. I can write some Sinhala" (36). During her meeting with her ayah, Lalitha, she experiences a loss of language between them. She could not speak fluently in Sinhala, instead sought the help of Lalitha's granddaughter to translate the English she spoke. She is even further separated from Lalitha, the symbol of her Sri Lankan past, when the granddaughter starts talking to Lalitha in Tamil, a language which she never knew. Anil finds it difficult to speak with any non-English speaking Sri Lankans. Antoinette Burton insinuates in the article "Archive of Bones: *Anil's Ghost* and the Ends of History" that "Anil is a stock character in postcolonial fiction: the Europe-or-America-retained professional woman struggling to maintain her hard worn status against all odds" (41).

Ondaatje denies the possibility of the fixity of identity or identification by drawing attention to the ambiguity behind the transition of Anil's name. She was known throughout her life by two different names. She disliked the two entirely inappropriate names that she had been given during her childhood days, and so she desired to adopt her brother's unused second name. She tried to buy the name from him when she was twelve years old by offering to support him in all family arguments. She thereby got her name Anil from her brother and became to be known within her close circle as Anil Tissera. Her intense sense of contentment and determination to maintain her newly adopted name does not diminish over time, as "[e]verything about the name pleased her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its feminine air, even though it was considered a male name. Twenty years later she felt the same about it" (67). The inclusion of a male name with her own signifies the complex nature of her identity that manifolded with her migrant experience.

Anil's investigation in war torn areas of Sri Lanka enables her to acquire a panoptic view of the predicament of the people in her homeland. She realises that during the civil war, millions of people were found missing and hundreds of them were dead, "people just started disappearing, or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition. There is no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are" (42). She gets repulsed by the civil war that has torn the country apart and fostered an aura of fear, suspicion and almost impalpable evil on the citizens of Sri Lanka. Anil mediates her understanding of the traumatic condition of

the country, “the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent when compare with what was happening here” (11). Her investigation made her to realize that the accumulating horrors connote an insane sense of delirium that had enveloped the country. She longs to utilise all her skills to resolve the extensive murders that is carried out in the island, “She believed that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear, but she saw that those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic” (55).

Ondaatje demonstrates the personal experience of trauma and the way trauma is experienced both as a physical and psychological event that affects the psyche of the individual. Anil had worked in several wary places like Oklahoma but her stay with the Sri Lankan victims gives shock to her intimate knowledge of self and world. The political trauma that she witnessed since her entry to Sri Lanka disorients her. She had her food along with the exhuming bodies and gradually she became much thinner as she gets more and more involved in her work. She was exhausted by the widespread murders and the physical condition of the survivors who are affected by various diseases like dysentery, hepatitis, dengue fever. Anil realises that she was besieged by the uncertain laws and fear that was everywhere. She was not able to have any solid ground to which she can hold onto with one arm, “Truth bounced between gossip and vengeance” (54). She struggles to have a definite path leading to the source of mysteries around her. She avouches to bring out some changes in the island instead of composing a political writing that would give her financial gains but her hyphenated identity in turn creates distrust in the minds of the natives like Sarath and Gamini, “You know, I'd believe your arguments more if you lived here,' he said, 'you can't just slip in, make a discovery and leave’” (44). Ondaatje posits that the unassailable love that Sarath and Gamini felt for their homeland inspite of the massacres that is carried out in the island, epitomises the love that natives had for their land.

Anil's dislocation and sense of being out of place in her mother country is overcome when she is finally able to identify the victims of civil war not as strangers, but as her own people, “I think you murdered hundreds of us.' *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally us” (271). Her life in Western countries has influenced her customs and manners, but when she witnessed the trauma experienced by the people of her homeland, she once again identifies herself as a citizen of Sri Lanka. Silvia Albertazzi in her review on the novel observes that “her progressive awareness of the political situation of the island coincides for her with the emergency of a new sense of identity, in which her Asian past is no more at odd with her Western present” (74). The physical displacement of the emigrants does not repress their love for their nation. They are emotionally and psychologically attached to the social conditions of the country and consequently advocate for the welfare of the nation at the time of crisis. Ondaatje ascertains that Anil's experience in her homeland has changed her attitude towards the country. She develops an emotional affinity with people of her

homeland. She takes up the conviction to bring about peace by projecting the plight of the country to the International Human Rights authorities. She takes up the resolution to maintain the same intimacy even after leaving Sri Lanka, “if she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be a part of her life? Would she talk to intimates about them, the two Colombo brothers?” (285). Her desire to identify herself as the sister of Sarath and Gamini exemplify her intention to be identified as a Sri Lankan. She rejuvenates her national identity by aligning herself with the homeland. The emigrants' struggle to reconstruct the other half of the identity actualizes only when they develop an intimacy with their homeland. They achieve a sense of rootedness when they renew and rebuild some attachment with their homeland. Salman Rushdie in his book *Imaginary Homelands* comments that the expatriates' impulse to maintain ties with their homeland is due to their notion of being “haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt” (10). Ondaatje directs the migrants living in the adopted land to preserve their identities by taking pride in their ancestry and thereby achieve a sense of belonging.

Ondaatje considers that the growing interconnectedness of the various places of the world hastens the need for developing an understanding of wide variety of cultures along with the knowledge of the native culture. He accentuates that the national identity offers the characters to transcend the notions of homelessness and wilderness by achieving a stable identity. The ability to perceive one's cultural condition and the tenacity to cope with the changes will enable an individual to form a composite identity.

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