

A FLIPPANT GESTURE TOWARDS SRI LANKA: A REVIEW OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *ANIL'S GHOST*

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Novels, like all other texts, take sides. Literary orthodoxy may hold, still, that fiction must be read and evaluated on purely aesthetic grounds. But leftist literary criticism has always emphasized—and at its best demonstrated—the political consequences of fiction: it reinforces certain constructions of the social (what more colloquially would be called a worldview); such constructions always being partial to one social group or another. This is not to hold that a novel works and/or must be assessed by its content alone; its structure is equally important to understanding its emplotment. But assessing what I call the work a novel does in the world must ultimately be grounded on how it relates to the social.

Take recent Sri Lankan fiction in English: at its best—and I have in mind here just two or three novels and one play—they tell stories that contest our received and dominant constructions of the social. (The history of Kingsley Muthumani de Silva can serve as characteristic of the latter.) Ernest MacIntyre's *Rasanayagam's Last Riot*, Carl Muller's *The Jam Fruit Tree*, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*—a novel by Punyakante Wijenaikeno doubt also belongs here, but I am not sure which—all relate parts of the Sri Lankan story that conventional social science cannot accommodate. I take the same questions to reading Michael Ondaatje's latest novel, *Anil's Ghost*: does it tell us something we do not know about Sri Lanka, or does it reinforce the conventional, dominant story? In short, whose side is it on?

While a significant portion of its narrative time is granted to the United States, most of *Anil's Ghost* is set in Sri Lanka between 1989 and 1992/3. Ondaatje himself, in an author's note that precedes the narrative, affirms the following:

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the anti-government insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government. Eventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents.

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

The word to notice in the above passage is "set." The casual reader might assume that the novel is *about* this political time and historical moment. But Ondaatje, an extremely subtle craftsman, insists otherwise. The novel is merely "set" in Sri Lanka. The country and its politics may turn out, ultimately, to be incidental to the plot. Nevertheless, the careful leftist reader would expect it to take sides, implicitly or otherwise, between the three groups identified above: the government, the southern insurgents and the northern guerillas. Texts always do; they cannot help themselves—even if their authors intend otherwise.

The cardinal actants of *Anil's Ghost* are: one forensic anthropologist (Sinhala, female); one epigraphist (Sinhala, male); one archaeologist (Sinhala, male); one doctor (Sinhala, male); and one "eye-painter turned drunk gem-pit worker turned head-restorer" (also Sinhala, also male). The last, the only cardinal actant who is not a full time professional, also happens to be the sole proletarian. All of these, as emphasized, are Sinhala; and all the men have names that resonate deeply within Buddhist iconography: Palipana (a recently deceased mahanayake); Sarath Diyasena (Diyasena being the name of the prince who was supposed to rejuvenate Lanka in the Buddha Jayanthi); Gamini Diyasena (Gamini, a synonym for Gemunu); Ananda Udugama (Ananda was one of Siddhartha Gautama's closest disciples). The female anthropologist is named Anil Tissera.

Absence of Minorities

One has to search the text carefully for Tamils. There are four, in the most minor of roles: Tissera's servant's granddaughter, who appears for about a page; a nurse who appears for two or three pages; and a terrorist who appears for one paragraph. *They are not even significant enough to be given names.* The only Tamil to be named is a bridge-player, an actant completely incidental to the plot. Ondaatje, one begins to think, simply does not see minorities when he sees Sri Lanka. Indeed, there are no Muslim or Burgher actants—at all. Not that novels about Sri Lanka must feature Muslims; the Quran does not insist upon it; no *fatwas* are likely to be issued to Ondaatje for this failure. But, when all the significant actants in a story about Sri Lanka are Sinhala, when in addition all the place names noticed by the text when it sees the National Atlas of Sri Lanka are Sinhala ones (39), and when the novel's only list of the Sri Lankan disappeared contain exclusively Sinhala names (41), its country begins to seem very like that of Sinhala nationalism.

Indeed, it resonates very strongly with that of that most relentless, if subtle, champion of Sinhala dominance, Kingsley de Silva. De Silva's oeuvre may not upon examination turn out to be based on much more than a mixture of half-truths and exaggerations, but its sheer volume ensures that it cannot be ignored. This is how he summarizes the consequences of 1956 in one of his more recent efforts to whitewash Sinhala nationalism:

Firstly, the concept of a multi-ethnic polity ceased to be politically viable [after 1956]... The emphasis on Sri Lanka as a Sinhalese-Buddhist polity carried an emotional popular appeal, compared with which a multi-ethnic polity was no more than a sterile abstraction. Secondly, the justification for this... laid stress on a democratic sanction deriving its validity from the *clear numerical superiority* of the Sinhala-speaking group... The minorities, and in particular the Sri Lankan

Tamils, refused to endorse the assumption that Sinhalese nationalism was interchangeable with the larger Sri Lankan nationalism. As a result, 1956 saw the beginning of almost a decade of ethnic and linguistic tensions... (25, emphasis added).

The careful reader will note that it is the Tamils who are blamed by de Silva for what he euphemistically calls "almost a decade of ethnic and linguistic tensions"; it is their refusal to suffer the consequences of the Sinhalese being the majority, their denial of the fact of number, that has caused their problems. De Silva's thesis—not only in this passage, or even this book, but in his numerous (though not necessarily superior) works on Sri Lanka—rests on a belief that "the clear numerical superiority of the Sinhala-speaking group" sanctions Sinhala nationalism, makes the Sinhala nationalist account of Sri Lanka accurate, legitimate and *ethical* (it has democratic sanction). The adjective, by the way, bears some attention: it emphasizes his point that the numerical superiority of the Sinhalese is clear, obvious, easily visible, unambiguous, indisputable, certain. It is consequent to such an understanding of the social, one sanctioned exclusively by the weight of number, that the possibility of a "multi-ethnic polity" being other than a "sterile abstraction" to the country's "minorities" does not even merit de Silva's consideration. The minorities are numerically inferior; therefore, they are ethically inferior; therefore their opinions do not matter; do not need mention even. Ondaatje's novel would appear to echo this logic.

This is quite startling because his previous fiction has been characterized by its emphasis, to take a phrase from *The English Patient*, on the "supplementary to the main argument." The cardinal actants in his first novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, are working-class Italian immigrants to Canada; that is, not of the Anglo majority or, as I prefer, the dominant. The cardinal actants in the second are two Italo-Canadians, a Sikh and a Hungarian. In de Silva's terminology they would be minorities. Hana, the nurse who appears in both, sustains a feminist reading. From which one concludes that, when Ondaatje sees the world, he doesn't look through the lenses of the dominant. *In the Skin of a Lion* tells a story of the working class who, to that text, quite literally built modern Toronto. *The English Patient*, a truly phenomenal effort, treats many subjects: war, racism, gender, love, loyalty, nationalism, colonialism, India, England, Canada; and does so intelligently, with a finely tuned politics. More importantly, it also examines the production of knowledge about these subjects. It doesn't just tell a good story; the narrator invites the reader to do some work, to meditate upon how we know what we know; and of the contribution of the disciplines to this. It allows the careful reader, if s/he follows the directions of the text, to pose searching questions, from a post-colonial perspective, of the disciplines of history, ethnography, cartography and, yes, literature too. It investigates nothing less than the contours, the construction and the confines, of western knowledge. *Anil's Ghost* also examines the problem of knowing—from an eastern, or more correctly Asian perspective; in that sense, it is *The English Patient*'s logical sequel—and is therefore better appreciated after reading that novel. But establishing the point will have to wait my conclusion. Let's get on with the plot.

The novel opens with Tissera, a UK and US trained forensic anthropologist, investigating human rights abuses in Guatemala—a framing device, to which we will also return. The narrative proper begins with her returning to the country of her birth (in March 1992).¹ Her visit is sponsored by a U.N. human rights group which wants to investigate the record of President Katugala. To even the most naive reader, this must sound like a promise to engage with the politics of that awful period. The text, amazingly enough, scrupulously avoids staging a direct encounter with Sri Lankan politics. But it does say this about the war:

There had been continual emergency *from 1983 onwards*, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them... 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 reason for war was war*' (43).

The first thing to note about this passage is the distinction it makes—a usage, by the way, that echoes de Silva—between the northern, Tamil guerillas and the southern, Sinhala ones: the former are terrorist, a criminal class of being; the latter, just insurgents, merely rebellious. (Surely, one would think, the JVP's record is as barbarous, as terroristic—if one wanted to use the term—as the LTTE's?) The Tamils are fighting for a homeland, we notice, but we are not told why. Or, rather, because they are sponsored by gun- and drug-runners. The reason for war is not political—even though there have been "racial attacks and political killings"; the reason for war is war.

Ondaatje in this passage *denies the existence in Sri Lanka of what we have become used to calling an ethnic or national conflict*; not explicitly, but implicitly. Indeed, nowhere in the entire novel do we find any engagement with the Tamil claim to being oppressed, or with the liberal/human rights/leftist argument that Sinhala (Buddhist) nationalism in Sri Lanka has an extremely repressive, criminal, perhaps even genocidal record. Surely, one would think, this period cannot be understood without some engagement with this argument? 1983 is mentioned above, but not its significance; we are not told what happened in that year, why it might be a milestone. It is, after all, axiomatic to the left that the oppression of the minorities has been carried out in Sri Lanka in the name of the Sinhala Buddhist majority—something that was brought once again to our attention by those who opposed the proposed new constitution and its emphasis on Sri Lanka as a multi-ethnic country. But that possibility, that Sinhala Buddhism may bear some responsibility for Sri Lanka's misery, does not even merit Ondaatje's consideration.

Denial of Ethnic Conflict

I am constrained to observe at this point that even the western press has done better; it certainly doesn't blame the war on gun- or drug-runners. It is also tempting to dismiss the book (for many reasons) as simply reactionary. But then, one

mustn't forget, ostensibly oppositional Sri Lankan academicians have also taken a similar position. This position, based upon a most narrow understanding of conflict, resonates with that of Sihala Urumaya, which proclaimed in a recent statement: "At present there is no problem whatsoever between the Sinhala people and the minorities who live peacefully in the 'south' without any discrimination whatsoever."³ In Ondaatje's case the denial of an ethnic conflict, the denial that the Sinhala nation-state has, under the sign of Buddhism, oppressed the minorities, might have another significance, another textual logic— as we will see.

Tissera is supposed to co-ordinate her work with a government official, the archaeologist Sarath Diyasena. Finding a suspiciously new skeleton in an ancient burial ground, her plan is to reconstruct it and identify the probably murdered person. This is the *ostensible plot* of the novel: *about* Sri Lankan politics. Even one successful identification, Tissera feels, would negate the Katugala regime's argument that it hasn't engaged in extra-judicial killings: "one victim could speak for many" is her mantra (176). Though initially reluctant to draw the attention of the government, Diyasena, the most ethically ambiguous actant in the novel, becomes her accomplice. He even brings in his brother, the doctor, as an ally in this enterprise. (The three get acquainted over lamprais, purchased at 2 o'clock in the morning, on the Galle Road, during a curfew.)

Gamini Diyasena, and the Sinhala medical profession more generally, dominate the second part of the novel, in which *Gamini gets the most narrative time, and Tissera virtually vanishes*. The foreigner, we are perhaps supposed to think, is ultimately irrelevant to the Sri Lankan story. So is the woman in a masculine world. This despite Tissera's adoption of a male name, Anil; and her stated desire to be "one of the boys" (147). Tissera's eventual disappearance is necessitated by the plot's staging of the defeat of western knowing; it also resonates with the almost unnoticeable presence of the other women actants in this novel—like the Tamils, they turn out to be quite irrelevant to the plot. Chitra, another forensic expert, briefly helps Tissera with her research, then vanishes; Lalitha, Tissera's former servant, does not even speak—she appears once in the text; her unnamed Tamil grand-daughter does speak—but doesn't say or do anything of great significance; neither does Palipana's niece or the unnamed Tamil nurse. None of these women actants contribute to the plot. Even the murder of Sirissa, Udugama's wife, takes its significance not on its own—she appears in just one unit of text—but because of the narrative impact it has on him. Meaning, in this text, is the exclusive preserve of men.

A forensic anthropologist being superceded by medical men, within the logic of the plot, given its focus on war, suggests that the former is ultimately to be read as not a preserver of life, but as a profession which needs death to function. Doctors are different; these ones get unqualified, hyperbolic praise from Ondaatje, who presents them as almost superhuman:

The doctors who survived that time in the northeast remembered they never worked harder... *Not one* of them returned later into the economically sensible careers of private practice... It was not an abstract or moral quality but a physical skill that empowered them... *They were not working for any*

cause or political agenda. They had found a place a long way from governments and media and financial ambition (228, 231, emphasis added).

The northeast, to Ondaatje, is Polonnaruwa; we never actually visit Tamil country. However, the point to note about this passage is not the liberties it takes with geography. (Though it is riddled with "mistakes": Havelock Road is in Kollupitiya, Ratnapura in the south; the country has both a northeast and a southeast monsoon. They signify not so much an unfamiliarity with Sri Lanka as a lack of concern with its specificity.) These doctors are of value to the text because they have no "cause or political agenda." They simply saved lives, without any heed to their own well being, current or future. Gamini, who works harder than anyone else, who even saves the lives of the Tigers whom he despises, embodies the best in them. No other actant—not Anil, Sarath, Udugama or Palipana—is depicted in such positive terms. He even gets to make the text's most significant statements.

One of the more crucial of them comes when he is kidnapped by the Tigers in Trincomalee and asked to treat their wounded. One response to this narrative unit, like many others in *Anil's Ghost*, is that it would not pass the realism test: the Tigers have had well equipped hospitals since the late 1980s, and it is stretching credulity to hold that they would trust Sinhala doctors; but that need not concern us. This is fiction; anything can happen in it; cows can jump over the moon. This narrative unit cannot be dismissed on those grounds; the careful reader must figure out what work it does for the plot. While treating them, Gamini thinks to himself:

Who sent a thirteen-year-old to fight, and for what furious cause? For an old leader? For some pale flag? *He had to keep reminding himself who these people were*. Bombs on crowded streets, in bus stations, paddy fields, schools had been set by people like this. Hundreds of victims had died... (220, emphasis added).

These are legitimate questions; the first especially. But only if accompanied by a critique of Sinhala nationalism. In the mouth of an S.L.Gunasekera, they serve a different politics—similar to that of this novel. For, the function of this narrative unit is that it demands comparison with the other in which a doctor is kidnapped—Linus Corea, by the JVP, much earlier in the plot. Its relevance is hard to figure; indeed, Ranjini Obeyesekere feels this narrative unit could've been left out. But it is the only place in the text where the JVP is described (121): though a captive, they remember the doctor's birthday, help him celebrate, take him out for a swim, demonstrate that they are playful. The JVP, in short, is portrayed as human; the LTTE, in contrast, as inhuman terrorists, killers of children.

Whose Violence

I have had occasion to term the Tigers terrorists myself; but I would extend the same adjective to the JVP too. My point, in other words, is that this novel cannot notice the senseless violence of the JVP. But the leftist cannot forget that among the many crimes of the JVP—a Sinhala racist party which has consistently stood

against justice for the Tamil people—is the murder of the family of policeman Uduampola, civilians all; and, of course, one of this country's most courageous anti-racists, Viyaya Kumaratunga. *Anil's Ghost*, in other words, takes the side of the JVP—indeed white-washes its record—and is against the LTTE; and on grounds which are inconsistent. If terror is the criterion, both should be so labelled. Thus, it does not surprise that Lakdasa, the leader of Gamini and the doctors and their “great moral force,” says at one point during their work in Polonnaruwa: “The problem here is not the Tamil problem, it's the human problem” (245). This, of course, is the JVP position: that the Tamils as such have no grievances. Given this statement—made, one must notice, by an actant whom the narrator calls the “great moral force” among the doctors—one might well ask: what makes the Sri Lankan Tamil story representative of the human, or universal? On what basis can it be compared to, say, the Sinhalese, or the Israeli, or the white American, or Saudi Arabian or Serbian? Do the dominated experience the world as do the dominant? Perhaps they do; but the question remains unanswered; the text makes no argument about the human condition.

Casual Racism

Indeed, its ultimate goal is to make a claim not about the human, but about the Asian condition. Thus, the significance of what might be called the text's casual racism or, less critically, its essentialism: its passing references to an “Asian nod” (16), to books typically found in an “Asian library” (58), or its statement that “Asian victims” of bombs don't need shoes (118). Sri Lanka has to be produced as Asian, and Asia as essentially different from the west for the novels *central thesis*—what I call its *effective plot*—to be unfolded, through the blind and retired epigraphist Palipana, who almost literally occupies the centre of the novel. He is, not incidentally, the only actant the text depicts as approvingly ideological:

The epigraphist Palipana was for a number of years at the centre of a nationalistic group that eventually wrestled archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans... While the West saw Asian history as a faint horizon where Europe joined the east, Palipana saw his country in fathoms and color, and Europe simply as a landmass on the end of the peninsula of Asia. The 1970s had witnessed the beginning of a series of international conferences... It was finally realized that while European culture was old, Asian culture was older. Palipana, by now the most respected of the Sri Lankan group, went to one such gathering and never went to another (79).

Older, I suppose, is a synonym for wiser or better; otherwise, the significance of the resort to age to establish the distinction between Europe and Asia in the latter's favor is difficult to understand. It would also be a very odd nationalist who would see Europe, which once colonized Sri Lanka, as just a landmass; see it, that is, in geographical and not political terms. But the point to notice is that Sri Lanka emerges here not as a discrete country, but as a part of Asia. We must therefore ask why: why does the logic of the plot necessitate the denial of specificity to Sri Lanka?

The most significant feature of Palipana is that he rejects western knowing and does so from a nationalist position. Western knowing is depicted in this text through Tissera, through her faith in the certainty of science, in its emphasis on transparency, demonstrability, repeatability and verifiability. She believes that “the truth shall set you free” (102). To Palipana, truth is an opinion, ultimately unprovable, something “that could only be guessed at” (82). Palipana, in other words, represents doubt, uncertainty. Simultaneously, however, he also represents a very different, instinctual way of knowing. While conversant with western epistemology—he is intimately familiar with the same texts that Tissera is dependent upon—he was also the kind of person who would ride “on bullock carts and... sniff the air or hear the hum within the gum trees and know where he was, would know there was a half-buried temple nearby...” (104). This is certainty, not doubt. Thus, while Palipana is this text's most interesting possibility, his contradictions are not fully explored for what he represents—a proto-post-structuralist way of knowing, perhaps—to become more than interesting.

Besides, he is a nationalist. And while he does not spout the *Mahawamsa*, he nevertheless retails stories from the *Chulawamsa* to Tissera. Not the militant stories of a conquering Sinhala Buddhism; Palipana's ones are of ascetic monarchs who retired from the world, like Asanga the Wise. These are not politically offensive—and this should be stressed; nevertheless, they are Sinhala and they are Buddhist stories. They are also the only ancient Lankan stories, or history, that appear in *Anil's Ghost*. Sri Lankan history, to this text, is Sinhala and Buddhist history. A more humane history than we are used to hearing, yes; but not a multi-ethnic history, either. We now know whose side this novel is on. Though I must add here that even Kingsley de Silva admits that the Tamils have a past in this country.

Palipana disappears from the text after this single appearance. But he is the *pivot* around which the plot turns. He taught both the Diyasena brothers—who admit to owing their intellectual and ethical formation to him. It is of cardinal significance that Anil and Sarath come to him for help after they fail to identify the skeleton. The plot, in other words, cannot move without him; thus, my insistence that one must pay attention to narrative structure, to what actants actually do. It is Palipana who directs the two scientists to Ananda Uduagama, the eye-painter. Like Palipana, Uduagama represents an Asian way of knowing; unlike him, *Uduagama is uncorrupted by western knowledge*. It is, therefore, extremely crucial to notice that Uduagama succeeds where Tissera fails: he puts a face upon the skeleton where Tissera cannot; and he does so by means that are innate, perhaps even esoteric—we have no access to his epistemology, it is not described or available in books. Uduagama is not educated in the western sense; Tissera considers him “uncertified”; nevertheless, he betters her. It is his work that helps the two scientists succeed where they failed and establish the identity of the skeleton. In terms of the novel's effective plot, *Uduagama represents the defeat of science, of the western way of knowing, by the Asian*.

Armed with this evidence, Tissera accuses a group of government officials in Colombo, including the military, of organized murder. They refuse to let her make her case and steal all her evidence. For

assisting her, Diyasena is killed—presumably by the government. We are left uncertain of Tissera's fate, whether she remains in the country or not; the text enables both readings, is deliberately ambiguous. The narrative ends with Udugama restoring a Buddha statue.

Obeyesekere has suggested, in her review of the novel, that Ondaatje is "non-judgmental." That he presents different approaches to truth, through his five cardinal actants, without adjudicating between them. This, however, is not how narrative works; one must pay attention, as I have been stressing, to its structure in order to properly grasp its content. The position within the narrative of actants is as important as what they do: thus the significance, for instance, of Palipana being at the centre. Likewise, actants whose stories get continuity are ultimately more important to the text than those who don't. It is no coincidence that Tissera, the forensic anthropologist, virtually vanishes from the text after the middle, as does Palipana the epigraphist; and that Sarath Diyasena, the archaeologist, is killed: they all represent ways of knowing associated with death or dead things. Their stories are denied narrative continuity; the "truth" they stand for must be deemed of lesser significance to the text. *Anil's Ghost*, in other words, does not endorse the search for certainty of western science (Tissera), nationalism (Palipana) or moral vacillation (Sarath Diyasena—the least sympathetic actant, who can be killed without consequence; nothing, after all, happens as a result of his death). Gamini Diyasena, the doctor, and Udugama, the eye-painter, restore life. It is no coincidence, either, that they remain at the end; that Gamini dominates the text from his first appearance; that Udugama gets, as it were, the last word—though he doesn't really have a speaking part. It is their truths that ultimately matter to this text.

Majoritarian Perspective

We are now, therefore, in a position to answer the question I began with. My findings will not by now be surprising. Since its cardinal actants are all Sinhala and Buddhist, since it minoritizes the Tamils by denying them effective voice in a story explicitly set in Sri Lanka, since it cannot even name its Tamil actants, since it denies therefore the multi-ethnicity of Sri Lanka, since it presents the JVP sympathetically but not the LTTE, since it depicts the state's brutalities in the south and not the north, since the only Lankan history it presents is Sinhala history, *Anil's Ghost* is clearly on the side of the enemy, or Sinhala nationalism. It accepts, in other words, the majoritarian perspective; it is produced by and reinforces this story; it significantly echoes the Kingsley de Silva version of Sri Lanka. In other words, the work performed by *Anil's Ghost*—whether the author intended it or not doesn't really matter—is to whitewash the criminal record of Sinhala nationalism.

But this leaves unanswered some other concerns. What is the significance of it being set in Sri Lanka but not necessarily being of it? Of the novel opening in Guatemala? Of Sri Lanka being seen as Asian? What is the significance of Ananda Udugama, the only actant untouched by the west, closing the novel? Of the text ending with a Buddha statue coming to life? Given the politics of this text, it is fitting that Udugama closes the novel by painting the eyes of a

Buddha statue—clearly a metaphor for restoring a pure Buddhism—in war torn Sri Lanka. Ananda Udugama is a native and a Buddhist artist, with a way of knowing and doing not available to the rest of us. This too resonates with de Silva. Not Kingsley this time, but Nalin.

By opening the novel in Guatemala, as said before, we are provided with a frame: this is how Sri Lanka is to be seen: not on its own terms, but as a part of a larger problem. By placing that narrative unit at the very beginning of the text, it is supposed to determine our reading of all of it; by combining Sri Lanka with Guatemala, the country is denied specificity. Which also explains why the novel is set in Sri Lanka, though not necessarily of it: the device enables Ondaatje to write about the country without engaging substantially with any of its concerns. Sri Lanka makes sense to him not on its own, but only when made part of something larger. Thus, Ondaatje also doesn't bother, often, to get his "facts," as it were, right: there is no textual evidence whatsoever of any concern for Sri Lankan specificity.

The same logic compels Sri Lanka to be identified with Asia. Early in the text, Sarath Diyasena thinks that:

Anil would not understand this old and accepted balance. Sarath knew that for her the journey was in getting to the truth. But what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead... to new vengeance and slaughter (157).

Human rights work, Tissera's project, is identified as a "flippant gesture" by Sarath Diyasena, the texts most morally ambiguous actant, yes; but given that he and Tissera fail, given that the narrative is consistently ironic towards the anthropologist's earnestness, one can read the text itself as endorsing this position. *Anil's Ghost*, in other words, wants to make a substantial gesture, indeed to represent something more than a gesture, towards Asia.

But there is nothing redeemable in the Sri Lankan present, except the hardworking doctors. The state is horrible; the Tamils, terrorist; and the JVP, though human, also violent. So the text turns—almost pathetically, I am constrained to find—to the past. In that lampraised conversation on Galle Face, Gamini Diyasena reflects on Sri Lanka: "This was once a civilized country. We had halls for the sick four centuries before Christ... by the twelfth century, physicians were being dispersed all over the country to be responsible for far-flung villages... there were villages for the blind" (192). Gamini is not a traditional physician; he is trained in western science; but in his commitment to service, he clearly represents the continuity of this ancient and noble Sinhala civilization into the present.

Gayatri Spivak has theorized this kind of position as representing a "nostalgia for lost sovereignty." Crudely put, her point is: we got hammered by the white man; nothing's going to change that; get over it. Michael Ondaatje cannot. Since there is nothing but war in the Sri Lankan present, he turns to the past, to Sri Lankan history, literally embodied in this novel in Gamini Diyasena and Ananda

Udugama, not only to redeem Sri Lanka, but to stage a victory for Asia over the west (embodied in Anil Tissera). The place where Udugama quite literally resurrects a Buddha at novels end, says Ondaatje, were "fields where Buddhism and its values met the harsh political realities of the twentieth century" (300). Once again, we note that Buddhism is denied a role in the politics of Sri Lanka, in the Sinhala oppression of the minorities—it is separated from "the harsh political realities of the twentieth century." Otherwise, it cannot be posed as a worthy and pure counter to the west; it must be whitewashed, its criminal record in Sri Lanka denied, in order to be effectively aligned with Asia against the west. Contemporary realities of the country, therefore, disappear from the effective plot of this novel, which simply refuses to engage with them, with the specificity of Sri Lankan politics. Making *Anil's Ghost*, in the final analysis, both a Sinhala Buddhist story and, paradoxically enough, not much more than the typically flippant gesture towards Sri Lanka so often produced by the west.

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IN DEFENSE OF HUMANISTIC WAY OF KNOWING: A REPLY TO QADRI ISMAIL

Radhika Coomaraswamy

Qadri Ismail's review of *Anil's Ghost* deals specifically with the political consequences of fiction. It is a refreshing and incisive presentation that is both provocative as well as coherent. His basic thesis is that *Anil's Ghost* reinforces the conventional dominant story of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in a political context where there is a progressive struggle for multiculturalism. Ismail concludes that by doing this Ondaatje is siding with the enemy. Secondly, He argues that *Anil's Ghost* posits a difference between eastern and western ways of knowing and eventually sides with the eastern, essentially celebrating a Buddhist way of understanding the world. He is convinced that in today's context this must mean a Buddhist chauvinist way, exclusive of minorities and in defiance of the west.

When I initially read the book I did not perceive the sinister presence of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism. However, Ismail's reading is somewhat valid in the sense that the book does not aim to foster a multicultural alternative for Sri Lanka. Since it concentrates on the JVP-type insurrection, there is a non-presence of Tamils as well as other minorities. In addition, Ondaatje does give a certain humanity to the JVP insurgents which is not present when he speaks of Tamil terrorists. By focusing on the war as a vicious cycle of violence he does not really attempt to deal with the political roots of the conflict, and as a result may play into the chauvinist belief that there is no ethnic problem, only a terrorist one. All these aspects give some credence to Ismail's thesis. Nevertheless, despite the validity of some aspects of this reading, I feel that the Buddhist presence in the book is a benign one. *Anil's Ghost* celebrates the non-dominant forms of Buddhism reflected in the heterodox traditions of Buddhism. Ondaatje highlights a monastic Buddhism as well as a Buddhist aesthetics. Ondaatje's Buddhism is not the political Buddhism of burning flags and stomping on minorities. He yearns for a

Buddhist humanism that in some ways radically challenges the very dominant forms represented in Ismail's critique.

Buddhist Humanism

The problem with Ismail's thesis is that it collapses Buddhist humanism and Buddhist chauvinism into one category. This is conceptually unfair to Ondaatje. In addition, it may turn out to be very bad politics. His approach will serve to marginalize the multicultural movement and debase its humanistic impulses. One could say that humanism is the doctrine that privileges concepts of human rights and human dignity as being more important than ideological doctrine and structures. One could easily argue that the political construct of Ondaatje's novel is very different. It posits a story of unaccountable state and group terror. The only challenges to that terror come from western humanism i.e. Anil, The Centre for Human Rights, the United Nations, Doctors Without Frontiers etc., and eastern humanism in the form of monastic Buddhism and Buddhist aesthetics. The polarization in the novel is not between west and east but between humanism and terror. The Buddha's eyes do not represent only an eastern way of knowing, they are meant to reflect the humane traditions wherever they are found. In this context, it is Ismail who is imposing the oriental categorization. The view of Buddhism is romanticized, but so is the view of western humanism. Human rights activists and doctors without frontiers are not always as noble or as genuine as Anil or Gamini. Ismail ignores the western aspect of Ondaatje's novel. I will agree with him that it is neither as seductive nor as majestic as the eastern—but it is there and it is central to the story. Gamini—the epitome of the doctor without frontiers, a metaphor for the values of the ICRC and Medecins Sans Frontiers—takes over the novel according to Ismail's own reading. He is the real hero. His is a western science that has