

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

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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

now won the Nobel Peace Prize whether in Kosovo or East Timor. By refusing to analyze the western side of Ondaatje's novel, Ismail insists on the very oriental categorization that he condemns.

Ismail's sleight of hand that collapses Buddhist humanism with Buddhist chauvinism is deeply problematic. To do so would be to alienate important allies in the struggle for democracy and pluralism. The writings of Gananath Obeyesekere as reflected in *Buddhism Transformed*, or Senake Bandaranayake in his archaeological writings, and H.L. Seneviratne in his recent book *The Work of Kings* may be said to have sympathies for a Buddhist humanism. In some sense, by taking a defiant stance they have taken the full onslaught of "traitor" epitaphs. Gunadasa Ameresekera appears to be somewhat obsessed with Gananath Obeyesekere, and Bandaranaike is constantly attacked by the Sinhalese right. By portraying a Buddhist humanism, by celebrating an alternative Buddhism, and by attacking the hatred and corruption from within the tradition, they are seen as the ultimate traitors. In today's context, they are brave people and to alienate them with a sleight of hand is a great disservice to the struggle against racism.

Contractions in Religions

All religions have this contradiction between orthodox doctrine and the humane heterodox traditions. Ashis Nandy in his celebrated work analyzed the difference between Mahatma Gandhi's Hinduism and the Hinduism of his assassin—the Hinduism that has now reappeared in the form of the RSS, the Shiv Sena and the BJP. Gandhi's politics brought the heterodox traditions of Hinduism to the fore and they became a radical form of mobilization against colonialism. One may contest many of Mahatma Gandhi's ideas as Partha Chatterjee has done, but to say that Gandhi and Shiv Sena are one and the same would be to simplify and deny the nuances of India's post-colonial history. The same could be said of Islam and Christianity. The Liberation Theology of a Father Tissa Balasuriya must surely differ from the papal orthodoxy emanating from the Vatican, especially when it comes to the rights of women or the actions of a Father Emmanuel justifying the worst forms of LTTE violence in international capitals. Islam, too, has these contradictions. The Asghar Ali Engineers who are devout in their beliefs are the most courageous fighters against the tyrannic forms of contemporary Islam. This is not to say that a religious world view does not have its problems, especially when we are struggling for a secular society. It sets a definite contour on the debate and that must be accepted. There may come a time where the issues of secularism

may have to be confronted and then we may be on different sides. But to collapse humanism and orthodoxy at this historical juncture would be a major setback.

It is not only the religious traditions that have this contradiction. Marxism, a secular tradition, also has these tensions. To collapse Stalin with Rosa Luxemburg would be a great mistake. Luxemburg's vision of a democratic Marxism and a universalist discourse that challenges nation states, is far closer to the liberal human rights tradition than to the totalitarian orthodoxy of Stalin. The same is true with the liberal tradition. The free market, heartless liberalism of the Noziks and the Friedmans is surely different from the radical republican tradition, not to mention the social welfare tradition of Rawls and Dworkin. To collapse all these into one and to claim that Rawls is complicit in the Friedman atrocities of Pinochet's Chile is surely an absurd proposition. Luxemburg and radical liberal republicans have more in common than they have with the orthodox right of their own belief systems.

In fighting for democracy and racism in Sri Lanka, what is needed is not the constant halving of the whole but a grand alliance of all the humanistic traditions, both religious and secular, that believe in democracy, non-violence and multiculturalism, those that decry violence and fight hatred. In this struggle, Ondaatje is a powerful ally. All his books give us a humanism in poetry whether in Toronto, Northern Africa or Sri Lanka. He is an effective voice against brutality and terror, whether it takes place in Sri Lanka or the world. The person who paints the eyes of the Buddha—an image that horrifies Ismail because of the possibility of the triumph of obscurantism and chauvinism—is not a storm trooper of the Sinhala Urumaya. He is a tragic and creative man who is traumatized and pulverised by terror. He draws on his reserve energy in a monumental effort to awaken the Buddha. To see his actions in the same light as the ferocious racism of the Sinhala right is to unite the forces of good with the forces of evil—a strategy that will only marginalize what we want at this historical juncture—a grand alliance for peace, democracy and multiculturalism.

Notes

1. This is also why some residents cannot bring themselves to call their city 'Mumbai'. An innocuous term so long as it was simply the Marathi name for Bombay, it acquired a vicious edge when it became part of an ethnic cleansing drive. ■

See also pages 36-37 for the CRM statement on "*Disappearances*" as a Practice and Michael Ondaatje's comments on the files on disappearances, which he consulted at the offices of the Civil Rights Movement and Nadesan Centre.