

The Theme of Buddhism in Anil's Ghost by Michael Ondaatje

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ABSTRACT

Anil's Ghost, written by Michael Ondaatje, is a riveting story that explores love, family, identity, the presence of an invisible foe, and the hunt for the mysteries of the past. It presents an opportunity to comprehend the intricate web that religion, politics, and violence form in Sri Lanka, as well as their interconnectedness. At the beginning of the book, the story is organised around a description of temples in the Shanxi region of China. This serves to introduce the reader to the religious atmosphere as well as the philosophical framework of Buddhism. In an area that can only be reached by the military, the character Anil stumbles across a newly buried skeleton in addition to numerous old ones. She has no choice but to put her life in jeopardy in order to uncover the identity of those responsible for the death of that unnamed victim as well as other information that the government intends to conceal from the general public. This paper is an attempt to trace the impressions of Buddhism in the novel Anil's Ghost.

Keywords: *Theravada Buddhism, Nibban, Detachment, Buddhist Philosophy, and Compassion.*

Anil's Ghost is a gripping mystery-driven tale of love, family, identity, the unseen adversary, and the search for the secrets of the past. But the book is not just a tale of these tags only; it is also a tale that offers the readers an opportunity to have a graphic glance at the ancient and rich cultural heritage and civilization of Sri Lanka. Besides, it gives us a chance to understand the complex web of religion, politics, and violence and its interrelationship in the specific context of Sri Lanka. Offering a comparative analysis of the novel John Bolland observes:

Michael Ondaatje habitually provides a mythic or religious framework to his narratives: the Trojan Cycle in his early poems, the Gilgamesh myth for *In the Skin of a Lion*, the biblical and grail motifs of *The English Patient*. In *Anil's Ghost* the grim record of atrocities during the civil emergency in Sri Lanka that began in 1983 is interspersed with descriptions of Buddhist icons, fragments of the philosophy and references to one of the sacred texts of Sri Lankan Buddhism, the *Culavamsa*. Early in the novel, the narrative is framed with a description of temples in the Shanxi province of China, introducing the spiritual ambiance and the philosophic structure of Buddhism. (Bolland 1)

Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* appears to be supporting the notion of a singular, timeless Sri Lankan Buddhist religion. The Miner's folk song about the "life cycle" is one of the novel's first references to Buddhism, as the melody goes like, "Blessed be the scaffolding deep down in the shaft/ Blessed be the life wheel on the mine's pit head/ Blessed be the chain attached to the life wheel" (Ondaatje 3). Here in these lines, the "life wheel" symbolizes the hoist. This device increases and reduces the miners' cage in the mine shaft. The usage of the phrase "pit

head" shows that the novel is particularly suggesting a coal mine. At the same time, the song gives reference to the universal symbol of the Buddhist religion. According to critics, there is a fundamental disagreement between the wheels of power and justice and righteousness in Theravada Buddhism.

The story of the novel is about a woman named Anil Tissera. After spending fifteen years in the West, forensic anthropologist Anil Tissera decides to return to Sri Lanka, the island country where she was born. The responsibility shouldered to her as a global human rights group representative is to investigate potential "extrajudicial killings" by the state. She decides to uncover the mystery surrounding a skeleton, after she and Sarath Diyasena, an archaeologist appointed by the government to work with her, find a recently buried skeleton among several ancient ones in a location only accessible to the government. Anil believes that this act could shed light on the disappearances of numerous people. Anil is compelled to put her life in danger to learn the identity of Sailor's murderers and other details about which the government would stop at nothing to keep the public in the dark.

If we roll back the pages of history, we will find that many Sri Lankan writers have focused on the war as a crucial historical and political event. Such research occasionally reveals the ongoing influence that past events have on the present, an effect that is sometimes hidden, overlooked, or unseen. In the case of the present novel, Ondaatje decides to concentrate on the investigations of a forensic anthropologist who has travelled back to her home in Sri Lanka from the United States to find out the role of Sri Lankan government in violation of human rights during the civil war. Not only does Anil's quest represent a new generation's effort to give voice to the voiceless victims of wars and internal conflicts, but it also offers a narrative space made of voids, gaps, and blind spots in her investigation to solve the mystery surrounding the identity of the nameless victim and learn the truth about the mass killings plaguing the region. Such narrative interruptions provide room for realities crucial in exposing those opaque interactions between social authority and symbolic formations throughout those bloody years of conflict, coupling it with overtones of Buddhist canons.

Ondaatje integrates history into his writing through depicting a variety of concepts and ideas. The author seeks to ground his identity in the past, particularly in the history of his family. He has a diasporic identity, which means that he himself experiences a condition of statelessness. As a result, he feels the need to create an outlet for himself via the recovery of history, which serves as his goal in the process of seeking for his identity and culture.

Due to an expatriate's involvement in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka, the denizens who were not included in the official history may be considered included, at least in part. On another plane, the novel can also be seen as the chronicle of the oppressed people who died during the Sri Lankan Civil War (1980-90), it is also "in an act of reconstruction, piecing together stories and psychologies as the Sri Lankan artist, Ananda, will piece together the ruined Buddha." (Scanlan 302). Anil's Ghost has fictional references to the Buddhist ideal of Nirvana, when subjective delusion and irrationality are transcended in an experience of cosmic unity. Buddhist notions of time and mortality act as narrative patterns when the Netra-mangala ceremony artist Ananda has an outpouring of compassion for the suffering world, but at its worst, "the tension collapses either into a usurping of power by temporal authorities, normally by the state though sometimes even by elements within the Sangha [the monkhood] or into an indifference toward matters temporal through a misconceived notion of Nibban" (Obeyesekere 1).

Buddhism provides an alternative to the extremes of anger that lead to both public and individual violence with its unique fusion of detachment and compassion. The characters are involved in recreating the lives of people who went missing during the conflict in an attempt to get closure from the pain of uncertainty about the whereabouts of their loved ones. In a metaphorical sense, they reconstruct the identities of those who have vanished by giving them voices through re-assembling the idols of Buddha that were destroyed during the war. Buddhism relativizes cultural truths by contending that previous and current realities were built on illusion.

It is well-known that the path to enlightenment involves a thorough awareness of both historical and personal processes. The process of rebirth and death, also known as the wheel of life, is thought to be based on a special kind of interconnection of dependent origin. This chain of suffering which led to the current situation, psychological states, and motivations, is primarily determined by ignorance and desire. The person attains liberation when one finds oneself competent enough to unshackle from the process of birth and reincarnation since karma, or the individual's state of being relies on a series of responses depending on those conditions. At the end of the book, the Buddha's eye waking to the observer Ananda's enlightenment, has been incorporated into the specifics of the surrounding natural environment. The Buddhist idea of enlightenment is presented in these lines as a vision of the interconnectedness of all the narratives and an experience in which a person's curiosity in the world triumphs over the duality of subject and object.

In the last chapter of the novel, titled “Distance,” when one comes across the restoration of the vandalized Buddha statue, it alludes metaphorically to the restoration of historical and cultural elements of the society. The statue which was blasted by the thieves in search of treasure, has since been rebuilt. It recalls how history is being rebuilt which was devastated by civil war. When the narrative ends, it assumes a form like Ananda's rebuilt Buddha statue. It denotes both the Buddhist perspective and the story's upbeat tenor. If one follows the precepts of Buddhism, they will comprehend that a person will only experience sadness if they try to find happiness in transient things. Painful emotions, disease, and death are inevitable, and attachment causes suffering. If someone wishes to release oneself from suffering, one should make an effort to break free from the bonds since these are the root cause of sorrow. Through the eightfold way, it is possible to escape suffering. Buddha showed us how to end suffering in our everyday lives via the eightfold path of right understanding, right intent, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Thus, the renovation of vandalized statues and the ruined sites hint that the Buddhist path of transcendence, unity and wholeness should always be adhered to.

The last chapter of the novel, which centers on the craftsman Ananda's endeavour to recreate a massive Buddha statue, signifies the resurrection of human values through the spiritual regeneration. The reassembling of the statue of Buddha is a metaphor for the revival of lost cultural traditions as well. The narrative echoes the contributions of historical Ananda to the one mentioned in the novel. According to the Pali literature, Ananda was Buddha's faithful companion who was instrumental in propagating his teachings. When Buddha passed away, Ananda recited the whole Sutta Pitaka from memory.

Ondaatje's Ananda works to repair a statue whose face has been smashed into more than "one hundred pieces and splinters of stone" in a comparable elegiac gesture (Ondaatje 303). Ananda's restoration of the fragmented statue also symbolizes the emergence of broken narratives which Sarath's mentor Palipana wanted to reveal. Though his attempts were criticized as forgery in the absence of valid proofs. Palipana was an excellent researcher who was able to argue both for the past and the present. He was previously a prominent member of the first generation of Sri Lankan archaeologists, who had the goal of preserving what little of their cultural legacy was still there.

During the course of rebuilding the statue Ananda is able to make peace with the loss of his wife Sirissa through rising above the mere corporal attachments. He is able to feel the

connection with something greater than the mere existence of human beings. Ananda is able to feel a love which transcends the boundaries of attachments. We can conclude from the narrative that art has the potential to rejuvenate the tortured spirit of humanity. Art blended with spirituality can provide acceptance and fortitude, if not a permanent solution for the sufferings of humanity. The novel articulates the Buddhist philosophy of finding peace by letting go of the attachments through the characters like Ananda and Palipana, leaving a message that the human values of peace and love will always have a chance to rebuilt and revive the history.

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