

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and the Aestheticization of Human Rights

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Violence draws on people's capacity to serve a cause greater than themselves, to sacrifice for the common good, to put their individual welfare at the service of the nation and the people. And these are the noblest parts of the human soul. When exploited by these terrible people, when exploited by demagogues, they turn into a nightmare that can destroy society. But unless you understand that the appeal of violence is to that something deep and noble in the human heart that desires something bigger than yourself, you cannot understand violence at all.

Michael Ignatieff "Nationalism and Self-Determination"

I.

How can we not want human rights?¹ The question may seem ethically intuitive, perhaps even *prima facie* naïve in a world where injustices and violations continue to expand with sobering, alarming inexorability. But the challenge to my opening question is that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the implementation of human rights legislation is no simple affair. The seeming universality of their ethical intuitiveness—the rights fought for through civil liberties movements and encoded in such treaties as the Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions—strikes crudely against their judicial enforcement to particular, differing cultural and state contexts. Who makes decisions about intervention? How is intervention received? Words such as the Sri Lankan “ethnic war” or “interethnic conflict” have tremendous emotive resonances, urging ethically-motivated responses from those within and without Sri Lanka. For a novelist like Michael Ondaatje, who left Sri Lanka at age 19 and has been living in Canada now for four decades,

the island nation-state demands a special attention and responsibility. Ondaatje has written “to” Sri Lanka through his 1982 memoir, *Running in the Family*, his 1998 collection of poems, *Handwriting*, and most recently in 2000, through his latest novel, *Anil’s Ghost*, the first novel-length treatment through which Ondaatje, in realist mode, represents Sri Lanka. The protagonist, Anil, is a forensic anthropologist, a diasporic Sri Lankan based in the U.S. and educated in the U.K. who returns to Sri Lanka as part of a United Nations-sponsored human rights intervention to investigate the role of the government in the continuing violence and terror that has now devastated Sri Lanka for more than two decades.

Anil’s “in-between” location facilitates the ethical problematic reflecting Ondaatje’s diasporic nationalist concerns: what is Sri Lanka, how can it be represented? It is precisely in that process of representation where there can be a rich convergence between human rights as a politico-legal discourse, the aesthetic space of the novel form, and the historical condition of postcolonial Sri Lanka. What, indeed, is the violence and terror that has been devastating Sri Lanka now for over twenty years? What is Sinhalese majoritarianism? And Tamil minoritarianism? I shall argue in this article that Ondaatje invokes the discourse of human rights in order not only to elicit political and ethical responses to Sri Lanka, but also to show how the discourse itself can break down and become frustrated by its application to a particular nation-state context. It is the constitutively polyphonous space of literature—one with which Ondaatje has continually experimented in his writing career—that allows Ondaatje to give dimension and voice to those affirmative aspects of human rights concern that may not always be able to be expressed through what Ranajit Guha has termed the “abstract univocality” of law. In his article “Chandra’s Death,” Guha meticulously describes the process by which in 1849, a young woman in a Bengali village, Chandra, dies from medicine administered by her sister to abort an unwanted pregnancy, a pregnancy that would have meant life expulsion from her village community due to the illegitimacy of the child, with her brother and two male relatives disposing of her body at night. When the “case” came before the colonial courts, however, Chandra’s death became a “murder,” with

Chandra's mother, sister, and the local producer of the medicine all becoming arrested. Guha argues:

a matrix of real historical experience was transformed into a matrix of abstract legality, so that the will of the state could be made to penetrate, reorganize part by part and eventually control the will of a subject population in much the same way as Providence is brought to impose itself upon mere human destiny. (141)

He continues:

The outcome of this hypostasis is to assimilate the order of the depositions before us to another order, namely law and order, to select only one of all the possible relations that their content has to their expression and designate that relation—that particular connotation—as the *truth* of an event already classified as crime. It is that privileged connotation which kneads the plurality of these utterances recorded from concerned individuals—from a mother, a sister and a neighbour—into a set of judicial evidence, and allows thereby the stentorian voice of the state to subsume the humble peasant voices which speak here in sobs and whispers. To try and register the latter is to defy the pretensions of an abstract univocality which insists on naming this many-sided and complex tissue of human predicament as a 'case'. (141)

It is the abstracting and monological voice of the state that Ondaatje challenges through the space of literature and in particular through the genre of the novel, one which—through a realist mode of narrative no less—promises the offer of the “real” and “particular.” With the thematization of human rights *within* literary space, the empire of the sign becomes coextensive with an empire of ethics, a twinning I shall express, and later elaborate upon, through the concept of the “semioethical.” The aestheticization and literarization of the letter of the law allows for a form of witnessing—characters universalize, particular identities become represented—that challenges the limits of the law's abstract uni-

vocality. That witnessing is not simply, in Ondaatje's *literary* case, specular detachment, or detached legal formulation, but rather a kind of participation. The novel presents us with, and takes us along the path of, a process. Ondaatje begins the novel with human rights on the scene of the international, by referring to human rights abuses in Guatemala, and moves to the increasingly particular: as Anil moves from the U.S. to Sri Lanka, she moves toward greater understanding of the Sri Lankans with whom she works closely, and she moves toward a deeper examination of her diasporic identity so that by the end of the novel she is able to proclaim, "I think you murdered hundreds of us" (272). Such a move allows Ondaatje to collapse the abstractness of the elsewhere and of the national-ethnic other, a thematized collapsing of boundaries consonant with the formal impulse of this novel to demonstrate the polyphonous "sobs and whispers" that defy the univocality of legal discourses.

Before offering some background on the civil war in Sri Lanka, I'd first like to offer a deconstructive moment to signal, as a political self-conscious gesture, the fraught textual and political terrain, both literal and metaphorical, one must negotiate when writing about the continuing "crisis" in Sri Lanka. The "story" that I shall tell—in giving "background" to Sri Lanka will participate in the same problematics of reference to and representation of the "Sri Lankan civil war" with which Ondaatje is faced. Val Daniel argues that "[e]very story in the press has somewhere buried in it a key sentence, intended to provide a fundamental bit of information, without which, it would seem, the story as a whole will not be adequately understood" (15). He then offers the following as a typical press sentence: "Ethnic Tamils speak the Tamil language and are Hindus, and ethnic Sinhala speak the Sinhala language and are Buddhists" (15). Daniel then concludes that:

The worldly-wise in Sri Lanka too, when called upon to describe the current turmoil in their island nation, do so by calling it an interethnic conflict. They may refine this bit of fundamental information by adding: Sinhala is a language that belongs to the Indo-Aryan family of languages, its speakers, mostly Buddhists, making up the island's majority; Tamil is a

language belonging to the Dravidian family of languages and is spoken by the island's most populous minority, who are most likely to be Hindus. One immediately senses the mighty hand of nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship beginning to cast its long shadow of the classification of languages on the political and demographic landscape. (15)

Conventional descriptions reify the war as one between ethnicities ("Tamils," "Sinhalese," that thus constitute a country, "Sri Lanka"), whereas such "ethnicities" are not so stable, homogenous, and pure as some members of both ethnicities may wish to assert—and for which they are prepared to die. The story I shall thus tell about the "Sri Lankan war" will be a palimpsest of sorts. Though useful to those readers unfamiliar with some of the politics of the conflict, the terms that such descriptions usually invoke are themselves problematic for the very reasons that Daniel so cogently discusses.

Officially gaining independence from Britain in 1948, Sri Lanka found itself marked by a postcolonial condition with each of its two dominant ethnic groups, the minority Tamils and the majority Sinhalese, enforcing their own brands of ethnic nationalism. The Sinhalese used the Sinhala language and Buddhism as markers for amplifying "their" particular ethnicity. The Tamil communities, concentrated mainly in the north and east of the island, looked to the neighboring south Indian state of Tamil Nadu for cultural and social support. Indeed, Tamils had been brought from southern India by the British in order to provide labour for the tea plantations. Sri Lanka's first Prime Minister, R. Bandaranaike, actively promoted Sinhalese nationalism. Perhaps his most aggressive move was the 1956 "Sinhala Language Act," making Sinhala the official national language (Bandaranaike had promised to do so within 24 hours of election). The Tamils claimed systemic discrimination, not just linguistically, but also socio-economically, particularly through the introduction of university entrance quotas in the early 1970s which further limited opportunities for personal advancement. Although Sinhalese-Tamil violence in postcolonial Sri Lanka has occurred since at least 1956, the greatest eruption took place in July 1983, precipitated after

the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam committed a suicide attack in the northern town of Jaffna, which killed thirteen Sinhalese soldiers. As a backlash, Sinhalese mobs stormed Colombo, burning and destroying Tamil homes. Three major actants continue to operate in the ongoing war: (1) the LTTE, concentrated in the north and the east; (2) the Government itself; and (3) the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP, or People's Liberation Front), an anti-State socialist group formed in the south to attack the government for its political and economic policies. Since September 2002, six international rounds of peace talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government have been held in Thailand, Germany, and Japan, mediated throughout by Norway. In December 2002, a Canadian group formed the Forum of Federations to help both the government and LTTE establish a federal solution.

II. The Representational Dilemmas of Human Rights

How might a novelist such as Ondaatje represent the postcolonial complexity of ongoing violence, international demands for peace, and the need for human rights? A strong challenge to the hegemony and speciousness of homogenous, "pure" ethnic identities would be a turn to some "commonality"—some measure of sameness, let us say—that disrupts and subverts the differences-promulgating ideologies which produce violence in Sri Lanka. In his family memoir *Running in the Family*, written in 1982 after a long-due visit to Sri Lanka from Canada, Ondaatje is thoughtful about the constructed nature of ethnic identities in Sri Lanka. He states: "Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations. . . . Emil Daniels summed up the situation for most of them when he was asked by one of the British governors what his nationality was—'God alone knows, Your Excellency'" (41). Ondaatje's emphasis on everyone's being related and on hybrid ethnicities challenges myths of a "pure" national identity. In the same way that hybridized identities—resulting in people's having the "same" blood in them—can disrupt polarized ethnic categories, so too can a concept of individual *human* rights stand as a challenge to the disjunctioning category of ethnicity (and the differences that category can fuel). Yet the constitutive

dilemma for a human rights discourse is that while it affirms the category of “human,” it emerges, and must function as, a legalistic response to cases so often fraught with problems and inequities because of “specific” categories—occurring “elsewhere” from the West. We may ask, then, are human rights ‘shorthand’ for representing the third world? Is violence the only western understanding of Sri Lanka?

Ondaatje’s female protagonist Anil functions as an emissary of human rights, but hers is no simple intervention. Returning to Sri Lanka, returning “home,” she undergoes a process of learning, of revising her beliefs, of developing humility. The abstract univocality that produces a signification such as “violence” becomes translated and aestheticized by Ondaatje within the polyphony of the novel form. It is the malleability of the aesthetic space of literature that will allow Ondaatje the opportunity to explore the ways in which human rights may both succeed *and* break down in differing nation-state contexts, a “literarization” that helps to address questions of law concerning precisely the application and enforcement of such rights.

The space of literature can contribute to knowledge. Literary appreciation becomes literary cognition: “representation” thus appears again. How do we know Sri Lanka? Because such ethically-charged phenomena as violence and catastrophe are particularly resistant to representation, any effort at representing them will always already be haunted by a heightened, if indeed not anxious, self-consciousness riven by both aesthetic and ethical concerns. I shall express this twin (and twinned) problem of representation and ethics as the “semioethical.” The problem becomes contiguous with its own solution: any representation will be an auto-representation, an auto-critique, launched from the domain of the semioethical itself.

In her forthcoming piece, “Aestheticizing Catastrophe,” Mieke Bal argues that it is the catastrophic nature of an event—and the resulting trauma—that creates a special interest in viewers toward the work of art and, ultimately, toward the artist. In contradistinction to Kant’s and Shaftesbury’s insistence on the “disinterestedness” necessary in forming aesthetic judgment, Bal argues for an “interestingness”: an interest in the suffering caused by the catastrophe, an interest that undermines the

public-private divide. Such commitment results in a form of witnessing, or sharing of the trauma, and it is precisely the catastrophic, overwhelming quality of the initial “event” that elicits and rivets such committed interest.

Thus we can think of the discourse of human rights as a form of “witnessing” the other, so often the third world. The challenge for Ondaatje, with a novel like *Anil’s Ghost*, is not simply to reproduce the asymmetries suggested by “witnessing,” thus reifying Sri Lanka as simply the other of the west. Instead, the challenge becomes how Ondaatje can work to enable some kind of insight and knowledge, so as to move away from impressionistic understandings that uncritically equate “violence” with “Sri Lanka.” It is precisely the dense complicity between the concept of “violence” and “Sri Lanka” that will serve as the starting point for theorizations by Sri Lankan intellectuals on the nature and deep problematics of what I shall term “nation-writing.”

For instance, Qadri Ismail argues for lending a certain “subjectivity” to Sri Lanka so as to avoid anthropological and anthropologizing descriptions which represent the country *as such* for largely western audiences. He writes, “thinking of Sri Lanka insists upon the (special) responsibility of postcolonial scholarship not to continue to address the west exclusively; to insist upon the distinction between addressing the west and interrogating eurocentrism; and in so doing to ‘finish’ (Mowitt 1992) the critique of anthropology” (“Speaking” 298). The semiotic implications of such anthropologizing rest on “representation” as both description and substitution, so that what may be seen as simply a representation of Sri Lanka becomes a *de facto* substitution, effectively “subalternizing” the nation:

while representation, whether in anthropology or elsewhere, might depict itself as engaged in the innocent activity of description, retransmission, or portrait, it often becomes proxy, a substitute for the other: who is then replaced, effectively suppressed, “cannot speak.” (300)

Such “speaking” stems from Gayatri Spivak’s questioning of whether the subaltern is able to “speak” (metaphorically), and the institutional

forms of power and misrepresentation that thwart both the subaltern's ability to represent herself, and also the ability of those "outside" her context to "listen" to her. Whereas Spivak questions representability by framing her concerns through the terms of an individual, Ismail frames his concerns by figuring an entire "country"—Sri Lanka—as a sort of subaltern. Ismail's admirable reminder of the "responsibility" of postcolonial scholarship may help us conceptualize Anil as a figure of the postcolonial intellectual or critic. As I mentioned earlier, Anil's is a process of negotiation through learning, revision, understanding.

Ismail draws a subtle and potent distinction between Sri Lanka as "country" and Sri Lanka as "place." When I stated above that my "story" about postcolonial Sri Lankan violence would be a palimpsest, it is (1) the idea of Sri Lanka as "country" and Tamil and Sinhala as uncontested "ethnicities" that becomes reified through press and conventional descriptions; but it is (2) a more critical reading of Sri Lanka, attendant to its historical complexities, that can palimpsestually re-signify "Sri Lanka," "Tamil," or "Sinhala" so as to restore some unhegemonic referentiality to those, and similar, signifiers. It is in this sense that conceptualizing Sri Lanka as *place* allows Ismail to apply to Sri Lanka the Barthesian concept of text as "productivity," thus rescuing Sri Lanka from existing as passive, subalternized object subservient to any and all conventional, uncritical representations. Ismail's distinction:

Sri Lanka, the *country*, is to be understood as this debate: between Tamil and Sinhala nationalism, liberalism and the left; and containing a multiplicity of other positions. To put this differently: as *place*, Sri Lanka is best understood as a text in the strict Barthesian sense. Indeed, the above might be clarified by turning to Barthes and his conceptualization of text as a 'productivity,' as the meeting place of reader and written. Sri Lanka, to the post-empiricist, is a reading; it emerges when the reader (Ismail) responds to written (De Silva, Kennanayake, Jeganathan, Scott, Tiruchelvam). From which it follows that, since De Silva and others are also readers, they too will pro-

duce the country; thus no single Sri Lanka can, by definition, succeed in capturing or encompassing the infinitude of its significance; thus no two Sri Lankas are likely to coincide, though some will overlap. This relation, between reader and writer, is in one sense reciprocal: to read textually is to deny the written authority, primacy or priority over the reader. This is why Sri Lanka, as productivity, can be thought of as subject. (304)

Positing such a “subjectivity”—the productivity of place—to Sri Lanka conceives of the island with an agency from within, an “internal” logic resistant to easy translations—misrepresentations, innocent descriptions—within the discourse of an orientaling anthropology, or indeed *any* form of representation that seeks to fix one authoritative meaning for readers. Ismail argues that “culture” and “violence” are not categories central to the Sri Lankan debate. For him, the debate:

does not turn around culture or violence, but the terms nation, majority, minority and democracy. (Indeed, the debate could be summarily caricatured as pivoting around the significance—value—of one word: majority.) To speak to the question of peace in Sri Lanka in the current conjecture is to address their relation. (306; italics in original)

What may be configured from outside Sri Lanka as “culture” and “violence” can easily become, in Ismail’s view, inaccurate ways of understanding those phenomena that are manifest because of the specific categories of nation, democracy, majority, and minority. Pradeep Jeganathan succinctly notes that “[v]iolence is an analytical name for events of political incomprehensibility” (41). Jeganathan’s analysis of the historical rise of “violence” as a distinct category of Sri Lankan anthropology would mark Sri Lanka, in Ismail’s terms, as *country*:

[U]nlike ritual, violence is not a well worn, firmly canonized category in anthropology. In fact, the concern with violence in Sri Lankan anthropology is extremely recent, arising only after the massive anti-Tamil violence of July 1983. This event produces a profound rupture in the narration of Sri Lanka’s mo-

dernity. Even as it does that, it becomes the historical and conceptual condition of possibility of an anthropology of violence. In other words, 1983, taken as a totality, makes available the category "violence" to the anthropology of Sri Lanka. (41)

Jeganathan's concern is that the category of "violence" will *precede* actual observations on and writings about Sri Lanka so that indeed "violence" becomes "a flippant gesture"—a conceptual and designative shorthand for the incomprehensible—standing in place of more careful, subtle understandings of Sri Lanka, ones that may in fact be able to acknowledge an infinitude not just of significance but of phenomena, away from anthropologically-authorized readings that not only delimit signification, but mask—and at times forget—their readerly status. "Violence" thus commits its own violence, as a form of sealing off, at a distance (usually western, usually orientaling), the incomprehensibility of the national and "Asian" other. Jeganathan is concerned with the textual productions of Sri Lanka, particularly anthropological ones. His deconstruction of the discursive and perceptive hegemony of "violence" is guided by Arjun Appadurai's notion of the "gatekeeping concepts" of anthropological theory which, according to Appadurai, "seem to limit anthropological theorizing about the place in question and that define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in that region" (357).

Ismail and Jeganathan urge a restoration to Sri Lanka of some self-determination, some agency outside of the strictures and conventions of western (anthropologizing) representations. Hence Ismail's concept of a "subjectivity" of Sri Lanka: can this subject speak? It is precisely the generativity of its sentences—texts—that gives Ismail's Sri Lanka a presence and identity that is not simplistically the "other" of the west (the violent, the horrific, the non-European). It is that malleability of production that will connect with the literary "craft" of a writer like Ondaatje. The aesthetic space of literature will allow Ondaatje to present a certain subjectivity as opposed to a static objectivity—most obviously through the phenomenon of "characters" so that individual voices can be placed against one another. The emergence, along the temporal narrative axis, of a human identity for the skeleton "Sailor" could be read as a meta-

phor for the emergence throughout the novel of gestures toward the humanistic, those values consonant with the values of human rights. If, according to subaltern studies scholars, the law (and in particular colonial law) is univocal, then in contrast to such univocality stands the polyvocality represented by literally numerous characters. Though the voice of the state, in Ranajit Guha's example, could not record the "sobs and whispers" of those translated into "judicial evidence," the aesthetic space of literature can surely encompass such a range of expression. So given the insistence of Sri Lankan intellectuals such as Daniel, Ismail, and Jeganathan on certain forms of representation, coupled with being faced with such a possible infinitude of significance of Sri Lanka, how can Ondaatje respond in ways that will permit the exploration of humanistic values?

I shall demonstrate that facets of *Anil's Ghost's* gestures toward humanistic values—learning, knowledge, regeneration—reside in and are enabled by the discourse of a universal human rights, which allows Ondaatje simultaneously to bring in—via Anil as emissary of human rights—the thematics of the east-west relationship (though here Ondaatje variously glosses "east" as "Asia" or "Sri Lanka"). Concomitant with this relation is the notion of the "true" as an epistemological issue, one that Ondaatje thematizes along the Sri Lanka/west divide by showing Anil's and Sarath's differing views on what constitutes truth. Within the world thus of *Anil's Ghost*, the space of the aesthetic becomes inextricable from the space of the ethical: from human rights and from humanistic values, both of which emerge as responses to violence. The semioethical thus comes to be constituted by the aestheticization of human rights, a literarizing gesture that allows for a critique of the law of human rights, a critique launched within a polyphonous semiotic space quite different from the abstract univocality of an interpellating law that produces pre-inscribed "cases."

III. "Universal" and "Personal" Human Rights

The National Atlas of Sri Lanka has seventy-three versions of the island—each template revealing only one aspect, one obsession:

rainfall, winds, surface waters of lakes, rare bodies of water locked deep within the earth.

. . . The old portraits show the produce and former kingdoms of the country. . . The geological map reveals peat in the Muthrajawela swamp . . . Another page reveals just bird life. . . There are pages of isobars and altitudes. There are no city names. . . There are no river names. No depiction of human life.
(40; italics in original)

For Ondaatje, the discourse of human rights also becomes a way of structuring violence in *Anil's Ghost*. A paradigm of “universal” human rights enables the structuring of the novel’s plot in a form similar to that of a detective novel. The narrative motor driving the novel forward thus becomes an investigation, a search for the truth of the circumstances of Sailor’s death. Anil’s official intervention allows for multiple significations within the text: (1) comments on the “West” and how it may differ from “Asia” (Ondaatje tends to prefer the latter term to “Sri Lanka”); (2) reflections on what constitutes “truth” and the “true”; and (3) the various forms of epistemology that stem from there. These three facets of Anil’s intervention allow for the intersections between an international or “universal” value (or culture) of human rights and a “regional” ethnic culture, a space of intersections within which Ondaatje can explore and gesture toward affirmations of such humanistic values as regeneration and renewal from within the midst of crisis. Some of this affirmational sense is captured in the Preamble to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which states that the recognition of the “inherent dignity” of all members of the “human family” is foundational to “freedom, justice and peace in the world” in the promotion of “social progress.” Upendra Baxi eloquently expresses the vision of such a discourse as it operates “elsewhere” than in Euro-America:

No phrase except a romantic one—*the revolution in human sensibility*—marks the passage from the politics of human rights to the politics for human rights. . . The struggles which [the voices of the tortured and tormented] name draw heavily on cultural and civilizational resources richer than those provided by the time and space of the Euro-enclosed

imagination of human rights, which they also seek to innovate. The historic achievement of the ‘contemporary’ human rights movements consists in positing peoples’ polity against state polity (41).

It is the positing of a people’s polity—Baxis’ visions of “human future”—over state polity that enables a western intervention via Anil. When Baxi describes the politics *for* human rights in “romantic” terms, it invokes an affirmational tone: “revolution” implies a total, sweeping change in social conditions; “human” captures a sense of the universal, that which inheres in everybody (and which everybody inheres in) beyond particular, local identities; “sensibility,” with its connotations of feeling, stirs people by invoking the register of affect.

A notion of a “people’s polity” would seem to beg—and problematize—the question of what constitutes “people” and, indeed, what constitutes the human. Ondaatje seems aware of this also, and once again employs the character of Anil as a site through which to enact differing notions of the human, almost always cultured along the east/west divide. Ondaatje develops and emphasizes such east-west tensions by pairing Anil’s forensic work in Sri Lanka with a “local” archaeologist, Sarath Diyasena. Anil and Sarath collaborate to discover the identity of the skeleton they come to name “Sailor.” They discover the skeleton in an ancient burial ground, but the condition of the bones indicates the remains are anything but ancient. By reconstructing the identity of the person—likely to have been murdered—Anil and Sarath may have evidence for a governmental crime. Consider the equation of Anil with “west” and “western humanism” and the subsequent exposing of that westernness by implicating it with the problem of epistemology:

Anil needed to comfort herself with old friends, sentences from books, voices she could trust. “*This is the dead-room,*” said *Enjolras*. Who was *Enjolras*? Someone in *Les Misérables*. A book so much a favourite, so thick with human nature she wished it to accompany her into the afterlife. She was working with a man [Sarath] who was efficient in his privacy, who would never unknot himself for anyone. . . . In her years abroad, during her European and North American education, Anil had courted for-

eignness Information could always be clarified and acted upon. But here, on this island, she realized she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere. There was less to hold onto with that one arm. Truth bounced between gossip and vengeance. (54)

Accoutrements of Anil's westernness include a western literary classic, her education, and her methods of tackling information by "clarifying" it and "acting" upon it. In contrast, Ondaatje establishes the Asian other, through Sarath, as someone inscrutable, in a "knot," in a land native to him that is accessible by Anil only through one arm of language, an overall climate in which truth is vexingly unascertainable. The notion of "truth" is divided along cultural lines even more in this exchange between Anil and Sarath, beginning with the latter:

"I don't think clarity is necessarily truth. It's simplicity, isn't it?"

"I need to know what you think. I need to break things apart to know where someone came from. That's also an acceptance of complexity. Secrets turn powerless in the open air."

"Political secrets are not powerless, in any form," he said.

"But the tension and danger around them, one can make them evaporate. You're an archaeologist. Truth comes finally into the light. It's in the bones and sediment."

"It's in character and nuance and mood."

"That is what governs us in our lives, that's not the truth."

"For the living it is the truth," he quietly said. (259)

The problem of epistemology is not solely a rarefied intellectual one. Rather, it has serious local repercussions: misrepresentations of Sri Lankans by the foreign media can add fuel to the persisting violence. Aesthetic space here is implicated as a sanctuary from such presentist violence. Indeed, the violence has become so familiar that there can be an easy shift for Sri Lankans between the present and the "timeless" presented by art, a shift which remains incomprehensible to Anil: "Let's lock up," [Sarath] said. 'I promised to take you to that temple. In an

hour it's the best time to see it. We'll catch the dusk drummer.' Anil didn't like the abrupt switch to something aesthetic" (52). Anil's unfamiliarity with such a switch reflects her (western, diasporic) removal from the thickness of the location. It may even reflect her arrogance and naiveté: her positivist philosophical arguments fall short against character, nuance, and mood. In a later section, Palipana takes Sarath to see rock paintings, using rhododendron branches for light. And then this reflection:

Half the world, it felt, was being buried, the truth hidden by fear, while the past revealed itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush. 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, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter. (157)

Ondaatje develops his contrast between the aesthetic and the violent through the seme of a common image: burning. "Burning rhododendron bush" is set against a sleeping lake of petrol; the visual similarity of the morphemes in the former phrase (the symmetry of "b/r/b" creating an aesthetic nicety) and its alliteration establish it as a unit of signification against the petrol, itself established as a unit by metaphorization of it as sleeping. Whilst the former is a cause, the latter is an effect, reactive; whilst the former is static, the latter has agency. The space of the aesthetic is thus something "unchanging," a sanctuary outside of history and materiality. The latter—violence—is a fantastic "other," a sleeping agent of petrol that can be easily ignited into ferocity, like the unfolding of "vengeance and slaughter" whose causal flame can be a flippant photograph from abroad. Of course, Ondaatje is ethically saying here, "But my gesture is not flippant." His wish is for *Anil's Ghost* to be illuminating.

The horizon against which Ondaatje situates such thematics foregrounds the problem of “perspective” and “framing.” Ondaatje takes pain to show us he is aestheticizing “both ways”: toward Sri Lanka, and also toward the west, especially given his insertion of passages of “westerns” as a genre of film watched in the United States by Anil and her girlfriend Leaf. It is this distancing strategy that is consonant with his ethical subject-position: it is constitutively a semioethical gesture, with particular aestheticizations in the text becoming metafictional indications of this background generative and structuring paradigm. Human rights serves as a powerful trope for this ethico-structural relation, and its particular narrativization and thematization *into* the text allows Ondaatje just enough space to tell us so, or at least for criticism to illuminate it as such.

The attractiveness of the universal is, precisely, its universality—the revolutionary potential of affirmations of hope, the future, goodwill. Ondaatje’s ethical wish for *Anil's Ghost*, of course, is for it not to be a flippant gesture to Sri Lanka. He thus attends fastidiously—a commitment heightened perhaps by his diasporic location—to aestheticizing the “lush” particularity of Sri Lanka, and he lets us know it. It is not only Anil who brings the human rights of the west to Sri Lanka: so does Ondaatje. Yet Ondaatje also brings Sri Lanka to the west, prompting some kind of relation (not necessarily dialogue) between the west and those states that are the “beneficiaries” of globalization, particularly when human rights problems can so often become ‘shorthand’ for representing “the third world.” And it is Ondaatje’s aestheticization of human rights—formal and also thematized [says Gamini: “those arm-chair rebels living abroad with their ideas of justice—nothing against their principles, but I wish they were here. They should come and visit me in surgery” (132)]—that precisely allows for the happening of, the revealing of “that” “particular” “system” “of” “rights,” whose autonomy from the “universal” (global) but also semantic and ontological interdependency on that system—the global may be able to illuminate the local, but the local can also contain the global—I resort to expressing through scare quotes.

IV. Conclusion

Sri Lanka involves not just the question of human rights, but also of minority rights and state sovereignty. It is an attentiveness to and concern for the particular that allows Ondaatje's gaze in *Anil's Ghost* to shift from the public/political to the private/personal, from such large, encompassing narratives as nationalism to such local, intimate narratives as those concerned with love between two people. Such movement would suggest a "humanization" of the political: to show that "big" phenomena can find their parallels, or even origins, in the "small": the problems of unrest in the state in the problems of unrest in the family; the violent in the personal; the traumatization of a peoples paralleled in the traumatization of one girl, who has witnessed the murder of both her parents. Perhaps such humanization would suggest a humanism in Ondaatje's gaze, to show (yes, to the western readership to whom he is mostly famous) that "they" are just like "us" (and that "we" are just like "them") and, concomitantly, that "I" am just like "them." In a discussion of *The English Patient*, Ondaatje states that he was working with "four characters in a very small corner of time and place" (Brown 17). It seems that in *Anil's Ghost*, ironically, he wishes to work in a kind of timelessness: he visits a particular time, a particular place, but his craft—framed through the discourse of human rights—wishes to universalize identities embedded within this locus. A memory that Ondaatje donates to Anil: "Clyde Snow, her teacher in Oklahoma, speaking about human rights work in Kurdistan: *One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims*" (176; italics in original). Such a humanistic affirmation is given a special urgency when framed by Ondaatje within the context of an ethnic civil war, that awakening—his, ours—to such catastrophic violence can have a catalytic effect on ethical response. The "semioethics" I advance in this article could thus apply particularly cogently to contexts that demand close, "witnessing" attention, that invoke within us the most noble of responses to the tropics of the Real.

Note

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