

## From Diasporic Longings to Transnational Belongings: An Analysis of the Diasporic Sensibilities in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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### Abstract

Over the years, the definition and the usage of the term diaspora has changed drastically. Keeping in line with this, the literary expressions of the diaspora has also changed. From the diasporic longings for the homeland, the immigrants seem to make a move towards belonging to many places. The diaspora, in this era of globalization, evinces a transnational belonging, characterized by the multiplicity of attachment and identification. This indicates a need for re-thinking the immigrant experience on a transnational perspective that holds many sites at the same time by forging a unique bond with each place. This paper attempts to make an analysis of the diasporic sensibilities of the protagonist in a transnational context as portrayed in the Sri Lankan Canadian author Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000), which comes under the wider rubric of the South Asian diaspora literature. It concludes on the transnational identities as being created by their multiple migrations; the phenomena that make possible a world that is more inclusive and that looks beyond the limiting borders of the nation, gender, identification and more.

**Keywords:** Diaspora literature, Transnational belonging, Multiple attachments, Diasporic sensibilities, Identity.

For a long period of time the diaspora studies have viewed the immigrants' experience as a harrowing one of uprooting; from a fixed ancestral home to a new land to deal with the issues of displacement, alienation, social acceptance, cultural, religious and lingual clashes and the crucial question of attachment and belongingness. Diaspora has been understood as the eternally dislocated community of people who can consider the host land only as a temporary place of stay. A part of William Safran's definition of the diaspora emphasize on "the ancestral home as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return — when conditions are appropriate" (83). This long-held idea of the diaspora as either assimilating to the host land, abandoning the indigenous culture or as an isolated separate unit in the host land with "ethno communal consciousness and solidarity" and collectively "committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland" and "continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another" (Safran 84) is challenged now. The newer definitions of the

diaspora incorporate "the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism" (Cohen 17). Diasporic experience can be no more explained as a linear process with unidirectional affinities but by their embeddedness in more than one nation:

Diaspora suggests belonging to both here and there, now and then. Diaspora suggests the omnipresent weight of pain of displacement from a land or society, of being an outsider in a new one. Diaspora suggests both lack and excess of loss and separation, yet also the possibility of new adventures of identity and the continued imagining of unconquerable countries of the mind. (Docker vii-viii)

By reframing the concept of diaspora in a transnational context the understanding of the term transcends the binaries – Outsider/Insider, Us/Them, Male/female etc. The increased processes and relationships across the borders of nation-states in a globalizing world render the diaspora as agents of transnational communication and cross-cultural

transaction. The preconceived and fixed representation of an individual's identity as limited to a single locale and culture is replaced by a more inclusive, tolerant and pluralistic transnational identity. Identity is not ascribed by their diasporic status; it is the individual's choice of identification that decides his/her identity. In a transnational context, identification for a diaspora can become complex because of their multiple affiliations and rootedness. The transnational migrants, both– the geographically and ideologically re-located migrants, seem to have multi-stranded social bonds in the places they link with, thereby developing an identity that is syncretic, fluid and metamorphic. The sense of attachment and belongingness is not to a fixed place but is multi locational, which is also not constant but changes with the context. Levitt and Jaworsky note that "recent scholarship suggests that multiple memberships can enhance each other and social incorporation rather than compete with or contradict each other" (137).

Diaspora writers today, with a changed perspective on being and belonging, depict the diasporic sensibilities through fictional narratives thereby shaping a renewed diasporic imaginary. Owing to the increased social mobility, the writers are active participants of transmigration and represent the sensibilities of a transnational diaspora. Michel Ondaatje is an iconic South Asian diaspora writer having mixed ancestry and multiple roots. Born in Sri Lanka, studied at England and Canada and married to a Canadian writer, Ondaatje seems to represent the transnational diaspora. After 25 years of life in the West, he goes back to his land of birth, Ceylon to experience and comprehend the country, his ancestry and the family history that are faint memories from childhood and objective truths from media. His memoir *Running in the Family* (1982) and the novel *Anil's Ghost* are fictive representations of the island, its people and life. Although the memoir inquires into his personal history, *Anil's Ghost* chronicles the doomed lives of the people in Sri Lanka during the civil war. Sri Lankan diaspora writings mainly centre on the experiences that had led to the fleeing, the ethnic tensions in the country, and also the difficulties they face in the land of arrival. Every piece of literature from this land echoes the traumas of the civil war. Essentially, the war which officially lasted for 26 years from 1983 to 2009 was a ruthless fight between the Sri Lankan

government and the guerrillas– the militant Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists who demanded on building an independent state for the Tamils. It ended up taking lives of the masses and causing a high death toll on both sides of the party. It impacted on the emotional, physical, economical and the environmental condition of the people and the nation. Arbitrary arrests, confinement and compulsory disappearances made life in the country unsettled.

From a writer who weaves profound stories of individuals grappling with their memories, history and identity complicated by conflicts and migration, *Anil's Ghost* is yet another compelling tale of a transnational diaspora, Anil. Largely, the story happens on the island except for the protagonist's recollections and memories that transport us to different places and time. Anil, at 33 comes back to Sri Lanka after fifteen years to work on a project assigned to her as a forensic pathologist from the UN. Initially, she watches the events happening in her land from a Western Outsider's gaze. Her childhood in this country had not been so frenzied and hence the agitations, manslaughtering and genocides on a rampage unsettle her. She embarks on an impractical and unrealistic mission to bring to light the hidden truths behind the murders. It is in her interaction with Sarath Diyasena, a forty-nine years old local archeologist in Colombo, who is appointed by the government to pair with her, that she gets the political realities. In such a politically volatile scenario, scientific approach, reasoning or evidence have no standing and human lives are on the threshold of pain and helplessness.

Anil's migration can be described as multiple migrations because she first moves from her homeland Sri Lanka to England at a young age for pursuing medicine. Later she shifts to Arizona to take a career as a forensic pathologist which keeps her travelling from one place to another and after a gap of fifteen years, she visits Sri Lanka again on an official assignment and then goes back to the West. Her multiple migrations and cross-cultural encounters initially traumatize and confuse her but finally, she negotiates an identity that looks beyond the delimiting factors. She feels displaced and completely lost during her initial days in England. Unfamiliarity with the language and culture of the people keeps her from interacting with others. In the first few days she finds difficulty in locating her classroom in Guy's hospital and misses a few lectures and

later falls into embarrassment when she follows her professor expecting to reach the classroom but lands up at the gent's toilet. Fear, alienation, lack of communication, humiliation and embarrassment further estranges her from the hostland. With no one to talk to, Anil feels lonely. Desperate to talk to someone, she skips a few meals to save money and calls home. Keeping some sort of linkage to the home and homeland gives her a vague sense of belongingness. As a result, she falls in love with the young Sri Lankan classmate whom she marries soon. The marriage binds her more to her homeland for being able to share the ethnic experiences with no effort of explanation. But as the bindings get personal and more stifling the marriage falls apart. With that, her last and only link with the homeland is severed. She consciously stops speaking in the Sinhala language.

By distancing herself from the painful and nostalgic memories of home and the past, Anil develops a conscious strategy of estrangement. More than forgetfulness she engages in an act of erasure and cancellation of home and past from her life. Both emotionally and geographically she disengages herself from the past. Like her decision to stop speaking Sinhala, she chooses not to return to Sri Lanka after her parents' death. And also refuses to be identified as the swimmer— an image from her teenage. Migrating to unknown countries and engaging herself completely in her profession helps her to evade the pain of rejection and ousting. She then, “court[s] foreignness” and tries to commingle within the society during her European and North American education (Ondaatje 37). In a tone of surety she tells, when she is asked about her Sinhala background that: “I live here... In the West” (Ondaatje 25). This shows her disposition to be identified with the country she currently lives in. Her admiration for Cullis, a European could be a reflection of her desire to be one with the Western world. Their physical union symbolizes the coming together of two cultures; the cultural confluence of the East and West. However, Cullis being a married man makes it unable for her to fully possess him, which symbolically hints at her ambivalent relationship with the West. Anil consciously maintains a safe distance from the people and places she associates with for the fear of getting hurt, at the same time she keeps an emotional connect with them.

However, in the guise of an official assignment, Anil returns to the island with a hidden desire to establish her lost connections with home and homeland. On arriving at Sri Lanka, Anil feels the same sense of displacement and strangeness that she had experienced earlier in the West. She is perceived with prejudice as a Westernised outsider when she makes an attempt to re-track the places she has visited as a child. Her desire to drink some toddy and get a head massage is treated as a luxury of the diaspora returnee. The instinctive wish of an immigrant to relive the memories from the past is ignored and derided. A sense of betrayal and guilt for abandoning their homeland to live in better conditions, especially if the land is in some crisis, haunts every diaspora. Sarath dismisses Anil's opinions on the war, identifying her with the West that understands reality from the outer periphery. The image of the outsider within one's place of birth re-inscribes the diaspora's rootlessness at all places. Her arrival is not well received by the natives and even Sarath, the person with whom she spends most of her time on the island doubts the integrity of her intention.

Despite all this, Anil makes efforts to understand the people and the place more intimately and forges a bond with them. She writes a new meaning to the experiences, which are coloured by her syncretic understanding of the world. Anil balances her communication gap, challenged by her limited command over the Sinhala language, by the universal language of touch and compassion. She communicates to Ananda, Gamini, Lalitha and other some characters through her sympathetic gestures. Nostalgic memories neither fix her to any particular place nor interferes with her everyday life, but only keeps her emotionally connected to all those people or places. While in Sri Lanka she repeatedly reads her American friend Leaf's letter, they share their agonies through the phone. Likewise, as the title of the novel suggests, even after leaving the island Anil will be carrying a part of Sri Lanka in her as Sarath, Gamini or Ananda. For Anil, the concept of a home does not relate to the idea of fixity; it is to have a sense of belongingness. In her continual process of belonging and unbelonging, she emerges out as a multi-rooted individual. She is both— the one who assertively declare that “I live here..In the West” (Ondaatje 25) and the one who considers herself one among the Sri Lankan society, when she addresses as “hundreds of us”

(Ondaatje 193). However, the process of inclusion in both the places and the shift as well from the 'exiled' to the 'participant' happens only gradually.

As a transmigrant, Anil starts examining her identity as well as her perceptions about the country she is a part of. In Sri Lanka, she takes steps away from her objective image of a "woman from Geneva" (Ondaatje 49) and develops an empathetic subjective bond with the country and its people before she leaves. And simultaneously she feels "completed abroad" too (Ondaatje 37). Victoria Cook describes Anil's process of acculturation as tri-phasic; dependent, independent and interdependent (7). Her childhood marks the stage of dependency which she soon starts to rebel against in her teenage. Anil asserts her independence by procuring a male name for her after a series of family drama and compromises from her side. She even manages to move out of the country to pursue higher studies. The final stage of her individuation is her growing into an interdependent individual; an identity that she develops from her multiple migrations and multi-cultural encounters. She emerges out as a transnational individual who transgresses all boundaries of nation, gender and ethnicity. Anil does not identify herself with a single place but rather feels home at all the places she

lives in. The conflicts posed by the immigrant status finally resolve into a transnational status of belongingness that embraces multiple roots and attachments.

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