

MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S IDENTITY. BETWEEN HISTORY AND FICTION: What can literature do that social science cannot?

## INTRODUCTION

Michael Ondaatje, born in 1943, is both outsider and insider in relationships with Sri Lanka, the country of his birth and very early childhood. He began his adult discovery of this country in the late seventies of the last century, and that part he was to share with the world is in *Running InThe Family* and *Anil's Ghost*. The latter book which grew out of the former appears to have been a vitally needed part of Sri Lanka's twentieth century history. The fiction of a novelist can do what social science cannot or will not do.

Most critics describe Michael Ondaatje, the poet and novelist, who for nearly fifty years has been a Canadian and an international figure, as being of mixed Dutch and Tamil ancestry.

In *Running in the Family* Ondaatje is brief about this matter:

My father always claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, though that was more valid about three centuries earlier.<sup>1</sup>

It comes from family lore that Ondaatje's ancestor, a south Indian from Thanjavur, Undachipillai Balasingham arrived in 1660 to give medical attention the daughter of the Dutch governor of Ceylon. At this point began the transformation of the Tamil into a Ceylon Burgher. He was rewarded with land, a Dutch wife and a Dutch way of spelling his old Tamil name.<sup>2</sup>

Again in *Running in the Family*, referring to some of the circles of upper middle class families that moved closely with the Ondaatjes in Ceylon, in the nineteen twenties and thirties, he says:

Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations.<sup>3</sup>

The word "Burgher" originated with the Dutch occupation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century of parts of the former Portuguese-occupied parts of Ceylon of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was the Dutch term for the townsfolk of their settlements in the East, but came to be applied, in Ceylon, to descendants of the variety of Europeans left behind by the Portuguese, Dutch and British. With all of these "Burgher" people, as would be expected, Sinhalese and Tamil blood had flowed into them over a period of five centuries.

Students of Michael Ondaatje's writing may be on acceptable grounds to consider him a Burgher, but only in the Ceylon and Sri Lankan categorization of people. Importantly, he is much less a Burgher in relation to the association of his identity with his writings on Ceylon and Sri Lanka. The various parts of this writer are an admixture of ethnic pieces but more crucially all these subsumed by a commonality that is man.

With independence for Ceylon in 1948, the Sinhalese and Tamils soon returned to struggles within their own social and economic groups which manifested in anti Tamil violence as well as wealthy and landowning Sinhalese struggles against dispossessed Sinhalese youth. The vast majority of Burghers opted for the reality of Melbourne, primarily, when in 1956 Prime Minister Bandaranaike pasted Sinhalese as the official language, over English.

Ondaatje was sent from Ceylon to England at the age of eleven in 1954, for personal family reasons, not as part of the socio-political emigration of the Burghers. This story is told in *The Cat'sTable*. There is possibly significance in *The Cat'sTable* emerging in 2011, a whole decade after he had painfully exhausted himself out of Sri Lanka in *Anil's Ghost*. It is as if he played a trick with time, getting out of that country, finally, in the innocence of a child, putting behind the torment with which he left after *Anil's Ghost*.

On his arrival in England in 1954, he joined his divorced mother and may have become an English schoolboy. He says the transformation did not take place.

I went to school in England and had every opportunity to become English, but I never felt I had the “ability”. I always felt very ironic.<sup>4</sup>

He did not see those four years in England in perspective, he says, till he saw the Pakistani-English Hanif Kureshi's film *My Beautiful Launderette*, about colonial Asians in Britain (1985)

It was very important to me. When I saw it I thought: God! That was my life in England, endlessly visiting all those Sri Lankan aunts and uncles and hearing stories.<sup>5</sup>

And then to Canada in 1962. By the time he returned to Ceylon twenty-five years after he had last seen it, the eleven year old had become an important Canadian poet and novelist, with *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), *The Man With Seven Toes* (1969), *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), *Rat Jelly* (1973), *Coming Through Slaughter* (1978), *There's A Trick With A Knife I'm learning To Do* (1979). The establishment of that country, following its readership, recognized his work with the Governor General's Award more than once.

Ondaatje had probably become part of the well known Canadian 'mosaic' in which a variety of cultures co-exist, inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. Merged but not fused. Not the melting pot kind. And inside Ondaatje himself this could well be the kind of formation that has taken shape.

Victoria Cook writes about the principal female character in *Anil's Ghost* whom I will later show to be a silhouette of Ondaatje, at times:

In the character of Anil Tissera Ondaatje explores the concept of "Self" as something constructed, and yet whole and realizable. In other words, Ondaatje reveals Anil's transnational nature as being a continually changing mixture of a variety of cultures, which incorporates, encompasses and contains various fragments in one unified being.<sup>6</sup>

In *The English Patient* there are four loners, one is an Indian, two are Canadians and the third, the patient who is not recognizable, who may or may not be English. I was attracted to this in association with Ondaatje's identity.

Ondaatje possibly demonstrates, (but does not claim) through his writing that this kind of open identity is more creative in exploring the human condition.

I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states.  
 .....All of us, even those with European homes and children  
 in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our  
 countries... we disappeared into landscape....Erase nations!  
 7

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Against such an identity background I read *Anil's Ghost* as a progressive development emerging from *Running in the Family*.

#### RUNNING IN THE FAMILY

The first hundred pages of the book are shared between the researched story of his family and his getting to know parts of the contemporary country in which he did his research. In the second hundred pages country recedes and concentration is closer and closer on the family, taking readers, in the end, to dark and private rooms occupied by the father and the imagination of the writer.

About his family and its Ceylon circles in *Running in the Family* Ondaatje has this to say about their Burgher separateness:

Actually, *Running in the Family* was a book that in many ways could have been set in Peru; the family was so set apart from the rest of the country.<sup>8</sup>

It was:

Created from asides, snapshots, poems, glimpses, in every way unorthodox and incomplete.<sup>9</sup>

As much an unorthodox poetic form as it was a necessity, because what remained of his 1920s and 1930s family had indeed become “asides, snapshots....glimpses” at the time he was writing in the 1980s.

*Running in the Family* (1982) resulted, as Ondaatje says, from his realization that in his mid-thirties he had slipped past a childhood he had ignored and not understood.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to recognize that Ondaatje’s statement - “*Running in the Family* was a book that in many ways could have been set in Peru, the family was so set apart from the rest of the country“, has an important bearing on his next work set in Sri Lanka, *Anil’s Ghost*. Not only had he slipped passed a childhood he had ignored and not understood which brought him back for *Running in the Family*, but after this family work (“in Peru”!) he felt he had slipped past a larger society, a largely Sinhala Buddhist society, which had contained important Burgher segments in the 20s and 30s. And now in 1978 and 1980 as he researched for writing *Running in the Family* these Burghers had become fragments, thus bringing Sinhalese society so much more to the fore of his vision, a society which his family and their Burgher circles had set themselves apart from at the time of the story of *Running in the Family*. The part of his identity he was recovering was to be wider than Burgher. It was to be - Burgher in context - , Burgher within a Sinhala Buddhist society.

The woman my ancestors ignored  
sits at the doorway chopping coconut  
cleaning rice<sup>11</sup>

paddy terraces  
bullocks brown men  
who rise knee deep like the earth  
out of the earth<sup>12</sup>

you long eyed women  
the golden  
drunk swan breasts  
lips  
the long long eyes<sup>13</sup>

His search for the larger society beyond his family’s Burghers, is seen in four poems – “High Flowers”, “To Colombo”, “Women Like You” and “The Cinnamon Peeler”. These, about working men and women of the 1970s and 1980s and Sinhalese court maidens of the 5<sup>th</sup> century ACE rock wall frescoes of Sigiriya .<sup>14</sup>

And the young sons and daughters of these workers:

When the government rounded up thousands of suspects during the insurgency of 1971, the Vidyalkankara campus of the University of Ceylon was turned into a prison camp. The police weeded out the

guilty, tried to break their spirit. When the university opened again the returning students found hundreds of poems written on walls, ceilings and in hidden corners of the campus. Quatrains and free verse about the struggle, tortures, the unbroken spirit, love of friends who had died for the cause. The students went around for days transcribing into their notebooks before they were covered with whitewash and lye...The average age of insurgents was seventeen and thousands were killed by police and army. While the Kelani and Mahaweli rivers moved to the sea heavy with bodies, these drawings were destroyed so that the book is now the only record of them....These contemporary, anonymous, works seem as great as the ancient Sigiriya art.<sup>15</sup>

He seems to have felt drawn, in his personal memoir, *Running in the Family*, to place his Burgher family circles, who had set themselves apart from the Sinhalese, back where they should have belonged, at least in those times. Groundwork for *Anil's Ghost* eighteen years later, but probably not sensed by Ondaatje then, and unseen or not mentioned by critics when *Anil's Ghost* came out.

Though he treats the colonial fate of Ceylon, with poetic economy he does not mention the Tamil society of this island. Ondaatje was not seeking to encompass the whole nation state of Sri Lanka when he researched *Running in the Family* in 1978 and 1980. The larger Sinhalese society his 20s and 30s family ignored was the extent of his field. He makes a passing reference, that his uncle Justice Sansoni, is "heading a commission on race-riots"<sup>16</sup> but no more of that, because he is not involved with the nation state, even though the anti-Tamil pogrom his judge uncle was reporting on happened just before his 1978 research visit.

For *Running in the Family* what was relevant were the locales and societies within which his Burgher family segments had their own ethnic formations, all within a largely Sinhalese milieu. Ondaatje lists the people that he consulted for his 1978 and 1980 research and they are nearly all Sinhalese and Burgher.<sup>17</sup> There is a Colombo Tamil name too, an elite, highly Westernized well assimilated one.<sup>18</sup> From such metropolitan sources the story of the Jaffna, Batticaloa and Trincomalee located, un-Westernised Tamil war, would not be drawn out. At least not in 1978 and 1980.

In a family memoir, restricting the circumference of the society around the family to Westernised Colombo and the Sinhalese of the surrounding suburbs and provinces should not be a matter of any kind of contention for critics. Locating his family in a nation state including Tamil-speaking Muslims and Tamils, or dealing politically with Sinhalese history was not in his sights at the time, as he begins discovering and developing the Sri Lankan component of his identity by writing *Running in the Family*. I find it not possible to appreciate the criticisms of Arun Mukherjee, Suwanda Sugunasiri,

Kanishka Goonewardena, or even the more understanding one of Chelva Kanaganayakam. In sum they rebuke Ondaatje for concern with aesthetic sensibility and his own identity without the vital concern for politics and history<sup>19</sup>

How would they or even Ondaatje have known then, that his innocent a - political identity from *Running In The Family* would grow into torment and vision about the human condition in *Anil's Ghost*.

At the end of *Running in the Family*, on his last morning before return to Canada, he is inside the room of his brother-in-law's harbour bungalow in Mutwal in Colombo, the bungalow a remnant of colonial architecture. The room from which he set out researching, in which he made the notes, the first rough for the book .

Last Morning....Half an hour before light I am woken by the sound of rain....but I do not turn on the light yet. I want the emptiness of a dark room where I listen and wait. There is nothing in this view that could not be a hundred years old, that might not have been here when I left Ceylon at the age of eleven.....the cassette now starts up in the next room. During the monsoon, on my last morning, all this Beethoven and rain.<sup>20</sup>

The book ends as it began; a personal family memoir. In between the beginning and the end a larger sector of the society is registered, unintended investment for *Anil's Ghost*.

## ANIL'S GHOST

*Anil's Ghost* ( 2000) may be described as a novel in which "...Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of the twentieth century"<sup>21</sup> This theme is developed through a story line about Anil Tissera, a UN sponsored female forensic scientist, who is allowed, reluctantly, by the government of Sri Lanka to investigate alleged human rights violations. She was born and bred in Sri Lanka and departed, as a young woman, to be educated abroad and to become Euro-American. Her foreignness is nearly complete. In her investigation she is paired off by the government with a forty-year old Sri Lankan archaeologist, Sarath Diyasena. The novel begins moving when Anil discovers that in an uninhabited area in the distant hills reserved as an archaeological site, and only accessible to the government, amidst the millennia-old skeletons are also buried, or rather re-buried after killings elsewhere, skeletons four or five years old. The government's apparently deliberate mismatch of archaeologist and UN forensic scientist then becomes a paradoxical match, between terrible contemporary events and one of the ancient traditions of the island, Buddhist civilization.

There are three Sinhalese families through whom the story moves. Sarath Diyasena the archaeologist has a younger brother, Gamini, a medical doctor exhausting himself in field hospitals dealing with daily killings. The brothers and their wives have troubled family histories. The two are distant and there is something un-reconciled from boyhood. Ananda Udagama is a gem pit worker and master craftsman helping Anil and Sarath to reconstruct the face and thus recover the identity of a skeleton. Ananda is in mental and emotional turmoil due to the murder of his wife Sirissa by government death squads, and the disappearance of her body. And a very old and famous epigraphist withdrawn in an ancient sanctuary looking after the grown up body of his niece traumatized back into a condition of infancy by having to watch the way in which the squads murdered her parents.

*Anil's Ghost* becomes political by suggestion and never directly and even so only by incremental seepage into the lives of Anil and the three Sinhalese families. Then by sudden violent endings, standing for the many violent endings in that society, the main characters are stunningly replaced in the last few pages, by a human less, Sinhalese Buddhist vision of the island, just a giant Buddha statue looking infinitely into distant nature. A relief, nearly empty of people, after exhaustion with the fates of so many. A calming contemplation, after all the terrors.

The novel seems to have had a preparatory stage, after *Running in the Family*. A book of poems by Ondaatje published in 1998. *Handwriting*.

The last Sinhala word I lost  
was *Vatura*  
The word for water  
Forest water. The water in a kiss. The tears  
I gave to my ayah Roslin on leaving  
the first home of my life

More water for her than any other  
that fled my eyes again  
this year, remembering her,  
a lost almost-mother in those years  
of thirsty love.

No photograph of her, no meeting  
Since the age of eleven,  
Not even knowledge of her grave.

Who abandoned who, I wonder now. <sup>22</sup>

While working on *Running in the Family* Ondaatje could well have found that post-colonial privileged Sinhalese families, even allowing for professed Buddhist culture, could easily be merged in the imagination with colonial Burgher families. When Anil Tissera (“Ondaatje”)

returns eighteen years after *Running in the Family* there are only a few scattered relatives. Her only interest is to see her old ayah of the poem. Yet social silhouettes, from the first work keep running through *Anil's Ghost*.

Like Michael Ondaatje in *Running in the Family*, Anil Tissera the returned “foreigner” in *Anil's Ghost* uses a colonial remnant of the Colombo harbour, the cabin of an abandoned ship, the Oronsay of the old days of the Orient Line, to investigate unearthed skeletons. On her last morning in Sri Lanka she too leaves from there, though through virtue of plot and changed circumstances, the feelings are different:

She wanted openness and air, didn't want to face the  
darkness in the hold...there was no wish in her to be here  
anymore...be ready to leave at five tomorrow morning.  
There's a seven o'clock plane<sup>23</sup>

“I arrived in a plane but love the harbour”<sup>24</sup> says Ondaatje in *Running in the Family*. He does not need to say he left, long ago, from the harbour. This connection of the area of the harbour as base, is organic, like many other relationships between the two works.

Running through *Anil's Ghost* is a silhouette of the family in *Running in the Family*. Sarath Diyasena's father made the family fortunes go up and down as Ondaatje's father did in '*Running*', the mother of the Diyasena boys was a dancer, in her youth, who wanted to choreograph them all, like Ondaatje's mother in his earlier work. There was in the Diyasena family too an uncle who directed amateur theatricals, St. Thomas' College by the sea is the college also of the Diyasena brothers. Ondaatje himself is silhouetted in Anil Tissera:

Suddenly Anil was glad to be back, the buried scenes from  
childhood alive in her... As a child in Kuttapitiya Anil had  
once stepped on the shallow grave of a recently buried  
chicken... Her weight pushed the air in the body through the  
beak and there was a muffled squawk which frightened Anil.<sup>25</sup>

Ondaatje's childhood home in Kuttapitiya, his father's tea estate bungalow, features in '*Running*'.

I read all these connections between the two works, also as Anil (“Ondaatje”) continuing his research, now beyond the family into larger society, by holding on to, even if minimally, the identities he had discovered earlier, in *Running in the Family*.

This time, I knew very consciously that I wanted to write about Sri  
Lanka more generally<sup>26</sup>

Anil's father died when she was young, just like Ondaatje whose father had died for all practical purposes, when the boy had to leave Ceylon at the age of eleven in *Running in the Family*. Like Ondaatje she regrets it: “I just wish I had been older – to learn things from



him. I wish I'd had that." In the same conversation Sarath Diyasena tells Anil: "We need parents when we're old too"<sup>27</sup> There is a feeling in *Anil* of the silhouette of writer Ondaatje of *Running in the Family* hovering between Sarath Diyasena and Anil Tissera.

These connections lead to, and end up as Anil Tissera's publicly expressed, strong culminating feelings, as her role in the novel is coming to a close.

'This isn't just "another job! I decided to come back. I wanted to come back', shouts Anil.<sup>28</sup>

The author says of Anil's publicly addressed emotional evidence, that it was 'a citizen's evidence'. The words are, 'I think you murdered hundreds of us'. 'Fifteen years away and she is finally us'.<sup>29</sup>

An outsider coming back the first time after twenty five years, with only childhood memories. Coming in again a decade and a half later, with a firmer embrace of the island, moved by the predicament, to want to be an insider.

The predicament is a paradox.

This island was a paradise to be sacked, every conceivable thing was collected and shipped back to Europe: cardamoms, pepper, silk, ginger, sandalwood, mustard, oil, palmyrah root, tamarind, wild indigo, deer's horns, elephant tusks, hog lard, calamander, coral, seven kinds of cinnamon, pearl and cochineal...<sup>30</sup>

Tea, a staple of the British occupation not mentioned, came later. Not mentioned also, is the Sinhalese rebellion of 1818 during which the British categorized the native rebels as terrorists, allowing the ruling power a scorched earth policy against the peasants, and large scale extra judicial killings which (With the exception of a smaller rebellion in 1848) finally 'pacified' the island for one and a half centuries.

Ondaatje the poet, covers the murders he does not mention, in the poem by the angry Sri Lankan, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha:

Don't talk to me about Matisse...

The European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio

Where the nude woman reclines forever

On a sheet of blood

Talk instead of the culture generally –

How the murderers were sustained

By the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote

villages the painters came, and our white-washed

mud-huts were splattered with gunfire <sup>31</sup>

In *Anil's Ghost*, when Sri Lanka is an independent nation state, an example of the conception of such a state, as a sick and malignant animal is described by one of Ondaatje's characters. War time doctor Gamini Diyasena knows from a victim photograph that his brother Sarath has been killed by the state death squads. He rushes down the hallway imagining what he has seen before, of the faces of victims.

.....every tooth had been removed, the nose cut apart, the eyes humiliated with liquids, the ears entered. He had been, as he ran down that hospital hallway, most frightened of seeing his brother's face. It was the face they went for in some cases. They could in their hideous skills sniff out vanity. But they had not touched Sarath's face. The shirt they had dressed Sarath in had giant sleeves. Gamini knew why. He ripped the sleeves down to the cuffs. Below the elbows the hands had been broken in several places ... <sup>32</sup>

(For me this was not the writing of fiction, it was too close to the way in which a well-known, Colombo actor, broadcaster, writer and journalist had been dealt with by the state, at the time Ondaatje was writing *Anil's Ghost*.)

The dreadful inhumanity engendered by the politics of Sri Lanka is on full show – a man is nailed to the ground, heads are found on stakes, victims are dropped from Helicopters, women kneel at gravesides – but Ondaatje refuses to take a political stance <sup>33</sup>

The evening before Anil departs from Sri Lanka she needs to explain why she cannot walk even a short distance. It happened to her inside a long underground passageway, at the “hands “ of government officials. She tells Sarath Diyasena, referring to Gunesena the driver:

Tell him to take me home. I don't think I can walk there.....I can't walk, I was ....in there.....<sup>34</sup>

.....there was no wish in her to be here anymore..<sup>35</sup>

Relating *Running in the Family* to *Anil's Ghost* as colonial to post-colonial I interpret Ondaatje's writer identity as working creatively to discover how he can place himself between the two, to place himself inside the paradox. The paradox of liberated people without evidence of it.

Ondaatje sums up this post colonial in Sri Lanka by referring to the beginnings of Western civilization:

The darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here.<sup>36</sup>

When I read this I unexpectedly I connected up with E.F.C. Ludowyk's insight into Myth, Epic form and Tragedy, and the myth about Sri Lanka being specially allocated to the religion of the Buddha according to the epic of the Sinhala Buddhists, the Mahavamsa . The connection was made because the narrative in *Anil's Ghost* calls into question the long-standing ties between Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism.:

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#### Sinhalese and

Pali....there are no tragedies in either literature..... would the myth derived from an epic have lost some of its intensity, if the same material had been taken up in a form like tragedy, which sees the human being pitted against either the limits of his own humanity or what the gods have assigned to him as his proper field of activity?<sup>37</sup>

Ondaatje's process of recovery of the Ceylon/Sri Lanka component of his identity, in *Anil's Ghost*, goes some considerable way in taking up E.F.C.Ludowyk's idea without necessarily being aware of Ludowyk's thoughts on this subject. It is not possible though, that Ondaatje was unaware that since the time of Ludowyk, scholarship had pointed the way to show us that though the novel can never be purely dramatic, it is essentially so. "...it is not a narrative form with dramatic moments, but a dramatic form within a narrative framework"<sup>38</sup>

*Anil's Ghost* is a Tragedy.

There are suggestions of dramatic movement as in classical Tragedy. I could not avoid being influenced in this direction by the way in which Ondaatje brings to an end the

rapidly built up final part of the novel's action, with the assassination of the head of state President Premadasa (called President Katugala in the novel) narrated immediately after the murder by the state, of Sarath Diyasena. The effect here is of the climactic dramatic. At the same time it conflates the Sinhala insurgency with the Tamil rebellion, because no word is written about who is suspected of killing Premadasa,<sup>39</sup> except that the event is narrated to us immediately after the murder of Sarath Diyasena the upper middle class Colombo man who exposed the atrocities of the state.<sup>40</sup> A human President killed by human rebellions. Ondaatje describes the President just before he is dismembered by a huge bomb.

When you looked at the real image of the man ....there was compassion for him, no matter what he had done.....He had been tense during the previous days, as if there was some kind of foreshadowing in his mind, as if some mechanism he had no control of had been put in motion.<sup>41</sup>

A mid 20<sup>th</sup> century European master of the dramatic form says of Tragedy:

The spring is wound up tight. It will uncoil of itself. That is what is so convenient in Tragedy.<sup>42</sup>

Ondaatje has worked the tragic dramatic to its limits within the narrative framework of the novel, giving him the pathway to what Ludowyk called "the human being pitted against the limits of his humanity..."<sup>38</sup>

Of course the novel as a form could have looked at these times in Sri Lanka outside of - Tragedy within a narrative framework - . The novel as literature, in its other forms has been known to complement social and political writing. Ondaatje takes this up:

I didn't want to write formally...I wasn't interested in the blame element. ....The question was how to write about war without getting involved in the usual way, which is to say this man is wrong and that man is right.<sup>43</sup>

In which case Tragedy suits his purposes:

In a tragedy ....everyone's destiny is known.... ...he who kills is as "innocent" as he who gets killed..... you are trapped...<sup>44</sup> (continued after the next paragraph)

Whether Ondaatje himself was "trapped" into using the tragic form because of matters related to his identity is something we cannot know. I refer to this because writers of novels, those with integrity, living within Sri Lanka or even distributed outside as Diaspora would not have wanted to attempt this subject matter, understandably, for personal and political reasons.

But no matter. In tragedy though you are trapped, you can shout:

all you can do about it is to shout....shout aloud; you can get all those things said that you never thought you'd be able to say.....you say them because you learn a lot from them....<sup>45</sup>

Ondaatje's mastery of his form is such that he is able to "shout" so loud but in the very different way a tragedy within the framework of the narrative novel does, "shouting" to an individual reader, very different to the way in which a formal tragedy shouts to a community audience in performance. **(See some of it, about the state, on pages 10 and 11 above)** And that is more redeeming for a reader than any formal political literary form can do. Associated with the Sri Lankan state are always, two possibilities – nationalistic political Buddhism or a humanistic Buddhism. Ondaatje looks and hopes for the latter, as he works it into the novel subtly against the other, raging Buddhism. It is finally encapsulated in the epilogue to tragedy described below. But what rides on top in *Anil's Ghost* is the raging Buddhism and the reader is expected to see that this tragedy includes the Tamil story in a way no overt literary political writing can.

And no political formal literary construction can give a reader the great tragic purgation, at the end of *Anil's Ghost*. The writer's shouting is all over. He has learnt a lot, and readers have learnt a lot, by hearing his shouting. The shouting comes to an end. And we see in a great silence a view of the tragedy stricken, master craftsman, Ananda Udugama, his final placement high up on bamboo scaffolding, in a desolate field of dead and buried bodies, as at the end of a tragedy, but with two tall standing possibilities of Buddhism ( two giant Buddha statues). Two different guards, overlooking swirling movements in nature over large swathes of distant Sri Lanka.

It has the same feel of:

A great melancholy wave of peace now settled down upon  
Thebes, upon the empty palace.....only the guards are  
left.....<sup>46</sup>

There has been no other work, of comprehensive reportage or creative, about this era, that can occupy the position of *Anil's Ghost*. It is fiction and not fiction; it is the writer's identity, full blown.

This work of "fiction" will endure as a history of these  
times.....<sup>47</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 41
2. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 64
3. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 41

4. Interview with Michele Field, Australian Broadcasting Commission radio, December 19, 1992.
5. Interview with Michele Field, Australian Broadcasting Commission radio, November 1992.
6. Victoria Cooke, *Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost* ( Toronto: [CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal](#) ISSN 1481-4374 [CLCWeb Library of Research and Information ... September 2004](#) ) [Contents 6.3](#)
7. Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 138
8. Noah Richler, *Ondaatje on writing* (Toronto: National Post, 1 April 2000), 2
9. New Statesman, *Review* (London: July 1983)
10. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 22
11. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 87
12. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 90
13. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 94
14. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 87-97
15. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 84
16. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 26
17. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984) 205
18. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 206. Sam Kadirgarmar is the name.
19. Marie Goldman (University of Toronto), *Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost* (Toronto: CLCWeb: Comparative Literature

and Culture: A WWWeb Journal ISSN 1481-4374 CLCWeb Library of Research and Information...CLCWeb September 2004), Contents 6.3

20. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 203
21. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2000), 300
22. Michael Ondaatje, *Handwriting* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 50
23. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 1984), 283-284
24. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984)
25. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2000), 20
26. Noah Richler, *Ondaatje on writing* (Toronto: National Post, 1 April 2000), 2
27. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2000), 46
28. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2000), 200
29. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2000), 272
- 30 Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), **81**
31. Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984), 85
32. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2000), 289
33. Colum .McCann, *On Anil's Ghost* (Toronto: Canadian National Post, Saturday April 15 2000), 12
34. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2000), 282
35. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2000), 283
36. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2000), 11
37. E.F.C. Ludowyk, *The Story of Ceylon* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1985), 65
38. S.W.Dawson, *Drama and the Dramatic*, (London: Methuen, 1984), chapter 7 beginning 79.

39. Bradman Weerakoon, *Rendering Unto Caesar* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2004), 301. It is commonly believed that the LTTE (the Tamil rebel group included secondarily in this novel) assassinated President Premadasa (Katugala, in the novel). As there have never been police investigated cases filed with the courts in such political killings, a practice of the quarter century old war that has come to be accepted by the public is the pronouncement of the government that either the Sinhalese rebels or the Tamils were responsible. Ondaatje's placing of the assassination of the President in a climatic way of chapter arrangement, immediately after the murder of Sarath Diyasena can make a reader think of dramatic justice (re. Richard de Zoysa, see note 40 below) as in Tragedy. In page 301 of Weerakoon's book, he says "It looked to me then and even today, that there was no great desire on the part of those in authority to probe the matter further. It was good enough that the LTTE had done it...The authorities were satisfied and so were the media." Weerakoon then goes on to describe from a photograph, "a dark tall man with tousled hair with his crumpled bicycle was also among the dead. Something like a tape recorder with detached wires still appeared strapped to his upper chest. Who was this man and what was he doing on a bicycle in a foot procession so close to Premadasa at the moment of his death? His face was not that of Babu (the LTTE accused) that the media was showing. "Weerakoon concludes by referring to the killing, one week before the assassination of the President, of the President's arch rival minister Athulathmudali and belief amongst some that the President was responsible. Richard de Zoysa, whose murder was more than a year before, had been Athulathmudali's friend and assistant in the process of undermining the President. It is in this connection that I refer to "dramatic justice", above.

40. At the time of Ondaatje's writing Richard de Zoysa was a upper middle class Sri Lankan who was murdered by government death squads. He, as a journalist was exposing death squad activities. At least in the aspect that Sarath Diyasena, of the same social status, in the end, exposed the same crimes, there is a parallel to de Zoysa. The descriptions of violations of a living body at the hands of squads, as feared by Sarath's brother Gamini on page 13 above, added to my feelings that the death of de Zoysa and reports of his torture had influenced the writer.

Regarding this note and note 40 above, my argument is that in not referring at all to the LTTE in the assassination of the President, Ondaatje has worked against the beliefs of his general Sri Lankan readers and his international readership that usually accepts what is put out by the Sri Lankan media and government. The part of his identity that is Sri Lankan had deepened enough since *Running in the Family* to be able to penetrate state and media structures. Weerakoon's book was published four years after *Anil's Ghost*.

41. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, (London: Picador, 2000), 291

42. Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976), 34

43. Noah Richler, *Ondaatje on writing*, (Toronto: National Post, April 1, 2000) 7-8

44. Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976), 35



45. Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976), 35
46. Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976), 71
47. Ernest Macintyre, *Humane re-telling of terrible times* (Colombo: The Sunday Times, 3 September 2000)