

Threads of Suffering: Physical, Psychological and Emotional Trauma in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

T. Nachimuthu¹, Dr. S.K. Pushpalatha²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Government Arts College (Autonomous), Coimbatore, TN.

²Associate Professor, Department of English, Government Arts College (Autonomous), Coimbatore, TN.

Abstract

"Anil's Ghost" by Michael Ondaatje penetrates profoundly into trauma against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's civil war. Ondaatje explores the deep psychological and emotional effects of conflict through the complex experiences of its protagonists, offering a story full of layers of tragedy. This article aims to analyse the trauma's complexity and the lasting effects it has on the lives of the characters in "Anil's Ghost".

Keywords: Ondaatje - Anil's Ghost –trauma theory- exploration of trauma.

Introduction:

Michael Ondaatje, a Canadian novelist born in Sri Lanka in 1943. He is renowned for his complex narratives, evocative prose, and an in-depth examination of subjects like trauma, love, identity and memory. His multicultural background and experiences are deeply rooted in his writings. He has the ability to fetter the readers through his distinctive narrative style, non-linear storytelling with his sensual language. His hall mark of artistic composition frequently revolves around the peculiar lives of actual people, fusing reality and fancy with the lens of investigation of multicultural themes and probing into the intricacies of cultural identity and diversity.

Threads of Trauma:

Ondaatje's one of the greatest novels, *Anil's Ghost* is a profound exploration of trauma amidst the milieu of Sri Lanka's Civil War. Ondaatje plunges into the fundamental psychological and emotional ramifications of conflict and the different encounters of its protagonists, resulting in trauma in narratives. The title *Anil's Ghost* has a special significance. The novel's protagonist, Anil, is a forensic anthropologist from Sri Lanka, who returns home after living abroad. The term 'ghost' in the title alludes to several layers of meaning throughout the story. Primarily, the term represents Sri Lanka's past, notably in the recent history of civil conflict and political turmoil. Anil, looking at the remains of people who were the victims of violence during the conflict, bringing to light the ongoing effects of war and trauma. In addition, the title implies the notion of trauma, identification and belonging. Anil, a Sri Lankan diaspora, struggles with her feeling of belonging and connection to her home country. As a result, the title *Anil's Ghost* encapsulates the novel's examination of various issues including trauma, history, identity, and the pursuit of truth, creating an intricate web of meaning that runs through the narrative.

Fundamentally, trauma is defined as an extremely upsetting or stressful event that exceeds a person's capacity for coping. This event might be psychological, emotional, or physical in origin, and it frequently has a long-lasting effect on how effectively the individual functions. Numerous things, including mishaps, abuse, violence, natural catastrophes, and other dangerous circumstances, can cause trauma. Emotional anguish, intrusive memories, avoidance behaviours, elevated anxiety, and relational problems are just a few of the ways it might appear. In general, trauma ruins a person's feeling of security, safety, and self-belief in both their surroundings and themselves.

The Greek term for "wound" is trauma. Even though the Greeks only referred to physical wounds when they coined the term "trauma," emotional wounds are now equally likely to be included. We now understand that psychological symptoms from a traumatic experience can last long after any physical wounds have healed. There is now a recognized term for the psychological response to emotional trauma: post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. It frequently manifests after a really traumatic incident, such as battle in a war, a natural disaster, or physical or sexual abuse. Recurrent nightmares, sadness, and worry are some of its symptoms. It usually occurs after an extremely stressful event, such as wartime combat, a natural disaster, or sexual or physical abuse; its symptoms include depression, anxiety, flashbacks, and recurring nightmares.

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is the result of extremely upsetting events that shatter a person's sense of reality and exceed their ability to understand and communicate. The fundamental mixed emotions of trauma—the need to talk about the unimaginable while being unable to adequately express the experience—is highlighted in Caruth's theory. Caruth's seminal observations shed light on how trauma shatters linear narratives of time and memory, leading to fragmented memories and recurrent flashbacks that defy conventional storytelling techniques. Her research highlights the significance of listening to and recognizing the voices of trauma survivors, accelerating recovery and mental toughness in the face of unspeakable pain.

Some more theorists like Veena Das's theory of societal suffering basically states that pain is a deeply ingrained part of society's social, political, and economic institutions rather than just an experience that happens to an individual. It highlights the relationship between individual suffering and more general societal problems including injustice, inequality, and trauma from the past. This viewpoint extends our comprehension of suffering by acknowledging its collective and interpersonal aspects beyond personal hardships. The physiological and psychological impacts of traumatic events on the body and brain are the main emphasis of Bessel van der Kolk's theory of trauma. He focuses on how trauma can cause the neurological system to become dysregulated, which can affect feelings, actions, and thought processes. Van der Kolk's method promotes holistic methods to rehabilitation that take into account both the physical and emotional aspects of trauma, emphasizing the significance of viewing trauma as a complex interaction between biology, psychology, and social conditions.

In the context of Sri Lanka's civil conflict, Michael Ondaatje's "Anil's Ghost" offers a comprehensive examination of trauma. Anil arrives in Sri Lanka after living abroad for fifteen years. She is accompanied by Sarath Diyasena, a native archaeologist, and together they embark on their investigation. Anil has an inquisitive mind and a sharp brain. She employs a rigorous scientific methodology in her work, utilizing her proficiency in forensic anthropology to examine human remains and extract information regarding their identities and causes of demise. Anil's past is progressively disclosed throughout the book, providing insight into the experiences that have moulded her identity. She remembers how, when she was a teenager, her family decided to leave their native country and go to Canada in search of security and stability. Deep

psychological wounds from migration and cultural alienation are reflected in Anil's struggle to reconcile her dual identities as a Western-educated professional and a Sri Lankan expatriate, as well as her feeling of separation from her family.

During her investigation, Anil meets conflict survivors, who relate to her terrible stories of violence, displacement, and loss. As she hears their accounts of being tortured, kidnapped, and having their homes and villages devastated, she observes first-hand the human cost of the conflict. As Anil pursues her investigation, she comes across harassment and threats from powerful organizations attempting to conceal the reality about the atrocities of the conflict. She receives anonymous threats to stop asking questions and pressure to give up her pursuit of justice. When Anil discovers that some of her friends and co-workers may not be who they seem to be, she feels deceived and mistrusted.

Like Anil the other character Gamini endures a number of horrific incidents that have a lasting effect on him. Like many Sri Lankans, Gamini has first-hand experience with the atrocities of the civil war. He might have witnessed violent crimes that leave a permanent psychological scar, such as bombings, shootings, or massacres. Gamini might lose loved ones, friends, or family as a result of the fighting's violence. The unexpected and violent deaths of those close to him bring him great sadness and trauma. Young men like Gamini may be coerced into joining armed groups or may willingly enlist during times of crisis. He might experience severe trauma if he is forced to enter a conflict zone and engage in acts of violence. Gamini might be subjected to unlawfully detainment or torture by rebel or government forces.

Like many Sri Lankans, Sarath had direct experience with the horrors of the civil conflict. He might have witnessed acts of violence committed by different warring factions, such as bombs, shootings, or massacres. He is psychologically scarred for life by witnessing death, destruction, and pain. Sarath might be forced to take part in the fighting by being coerced into enlisting in the military or by joining armed organizations on his own volition. Being thrown into a conflict zone and either seeing or taking part in violent activities has a negative impact on his psychological and emotional wellness. Sarath's experiences during the Civil War have left him scarred. He struggles to deal with the recollections of horrors he has seen or heard about as a witness to violence and cruelty.

Soma, another important character, faces the relentless assault of Soma's hamlet by either rebel or government forces as one of the most horrific experiences she has had. She watches the chaos of the attack, the screaming of the injured, and the destruction of houses while she cowers in fear. Long after the bombing is over, she is still plagued by nightmares and a severe phobia of loud noises due to the sound of explosions and the smell of smoke and burning debris. Soma is compelled to watch while armed groups or government troops execute innocent citizens or suspected rebels. She is taken aback by the sight of people being drawn up and shot in cold blood, and she is left with vivid memories of murder and blood. Government agents or rebel organizations examine and torture Soma because they believe she is working with the enemy. As interrogators attempt to get information from her, she is subjected to verbal, physical, and mental torture, including beatings and electric shocks. She is traumatized by the event and has long-lasting mental and physical scars that impair her self-esteem and her capacity for trust.

Conclusion

In "Anil's Ghost," by Michael Ondaatje, trauma is a major issue that is investigated via the experiences of the protagonists in war-torn Sri Lanka. Based on Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, which highlights memory fragmentation and the difficulty in adequately articulating traumatic events, we observe how the characters, especially Anil, find it difficult to reconcile their history and the horrors they have experienced.

Michael Ondaatje investigates the complex layers of pain in "Anil's Ghost," weaving together intimate stories with larger societal and political settings. The novel shows how trauma is deeply embedded in society and is not limited to individual experiences, as seen through a view of Veena Das's idea of communal suffering. The hardships of the characters—especially Anil's—reflect the damage that war and political turmoil have imposed upon Sri Lanka as a whole. Bessel van der Kolk's theory of trauma, which highlights the significant effects of trauma on the body and mind, adds even more depth to our comprehension. In "Anil's Ghost," we see how trauma affects the individuals both physically and psychologically, influencing their interactions with one another and how they see the outside world. The examination of trauma by Ondaatje in "Anil's Ghost" ultimately highlights its complex nature, which includes aspects related to the individual, society, and body. Through the weaving together of diverse viewpoints, the narrative asks readers to consider how personal pain and larger social turmoil are related, provoking contemplation on the lasting effects of trauma.

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