

# 'Unanchored to the World': Displacement and Alienation in *Anil's Ghost* and the Prose of Michael Ondaatje

Brenda Glover

Though most people knew who he was, he felt he was invisible to those around him ...  
but it was his own heart that could not step into the world.

*Anil's Ghost*, 250

Michael Ondaatje's postmodern novels foreground the experiences of individuals who have been disempowered and shattered by external events, but offer his readers insight into the possibility of recovery, acceptance of difference and the bridging of cultural gulfs. In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1974), *Coming through Slaughter* (1976), *Running in the Family* (1982), *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), and *The English Patient* (1992), Ondaatje has demonstrated preoccupations with postcolonial issues of displacement and alienation.

As self-consciously constructed 'alternative' stories of peoples whose experience and contributions to documented historical events have been ignored, Ondaatje's novels challenge the acceptance of historical narratives that privilege the powerful and negate other voices. The author draws on themes foregrounded in postcolonial discourse concerning issues that confront peoples who have been affected by the imposition of a dominant culture on their own. The characters he creates suffer from the varying outcomes of this process: cultural displacement, loss of language, disempowerment, loss of a sense of identity, marginalisation and negation of voice. By acknowledging their experience and contribution, he gives his characters a voice and a place in history.

*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is a collage of Western iconography, prose, poetry, photographs, and archival material, which reveals Billy's alienation from his community and his propensity for violence as a form of self-expression. *Coming through Slaughter* is a mingling of historical fact and fiction that shows the extreme alienation of Buddy Bolden, a southern jazz musician who goes mad during a 1920s New Orleans street parade. *Running in the Family* is a genre blend of biography, autobiography and fiction that flits across time and space to illuminate Ondaatje's childhood and family life in Ceylon. This text is an experimental reconstruction of the author's identity as a member of family and community from the perspective of a man returning to the homeland he had left as a child. *In the Skin of a Lion* deals with the transformation of an isolated and alienated child into a man who is able to overcome language barriers to become a contributing member of a community of migrant workers on the Bloor Street Viaduct project in Toronto. *The English Patient* explores the alienation of a cast of four characters drawn together in an Italian villa at the end of World War 2, and the manner in which each copes with the results of extreme trauma.

By constantly re-arranging textual histories for interpretation and re-interpretation, and allowing consideration of new perspectives, Ondaatje draws attention to the very act of

writing as a construction. He grounds his stories in myth, legend, psychology, cultural practice, written and oral history and individual experience, inviting reader interpretation of events which are not presented as a factual account, but as how things might have been. Ondaatje acknowledges a range of experience in his characters and allows them a flexibility of movement towards connection with other people and the development of a sense of place for them in new environments. He demonstrates their nostalgia for homeplaces but shows how some may gain insight and strength from adjustment to new locations and the building of new communities which embrace elements from different cultures.

Some of the major themes that Ondaatje explored in his early prose are evident once more in his most recently published work, *Anil's Ghost* (2000). In this novel, Ondaatje juxtaposes fragments of a remembered past with present-time lived experience from the perspective of a young woman, Anil Tissera, who returns to Sri Lanka after fifteen years of education in America, to work as a forensic anthropologist on an investigation of human rights abuses. By observing Anil's journey, the author explores the possibility of recovery following trauma through reconnection, the re-establishment of a sense of order and community building.

Ondaatje introduces glimpses of landscape and cultural detail into Anil's consciousness as she moves through a country both familiar and alien to her, a homeland in crisis. The duality of Anil's perspective, as an expatriate returning to her birthplace, allows Ondaatje to explore themes that emerged in his earlier texts. Again he plays with ideas of the construction of history and identity through language, and the place of memory in the location of a sense of self for people who are marginalised, disconnected or displaced.

As Anil follows her quest to discover the identity of 'Sailor', the skeleton of a murdered Sri Lankan man, and to solve the mystery surrounding his death, she struggles to identify her place in the country of her birth. She is remembered by the locals for her swimming prowess in her youth, a history that has been blurred by time for her. As she applies her professional knowledge to the discovering of clues about 'Sailor' in order to reconstruct his history, Anil remembers incidents from her past that connect her to Sri Lanka and its people, uncovering aspects of her own history that reveal her sense of who she is and her place in the world. She needs to ground herself in language with familiar solid words in a world that is chaotic and violent: 'Anil needed to comfort herself with old friends, sentences from books, voices she could trust' (54).

For the previous fifteen years, Anil felt herself complete in Europe and America. In Sri Lanka her balance is lost:

... she had come to expect clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries. Information could always be clarified and acted upon. But here, on this island, she realised she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere. There was less to hold on to with that one arm. (54)

Anil has established a life for herself in the West with friends and colleagues through her work and studies. In Sri Lanka she is adrift. She has no access to the equipment she requires for her work, does not know or trust those she is obliged to work with, and is surrounded by the stresses of conflict. The very work she is doing is cast into doubt when placed in the context of a chaotic environment.

But in the midst of such events, she realised, there could never be any logic to the human violence without the distance of time. For now it would be reported, filed in Geneva, but no one could ever give meaning to it. She used to believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear. But she saw that those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection for the self. (55)

In order to continue to function and do the job she has chosen, Anil is required to find some perspective that will give her work meaning in Sri Lanka, that would be of some use to the people she strives to assist. She pulls the horror of the situation—'years of night visitations, kidnappings or murders in broad daylight'—down to a level with which she can deal, attempting to find one answer that will stand as a symbol for all the victims of random violence and death.

Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest. (56)

To find out what had happened to 'Sailor' and who had committed the crime, Anil needs to identify him and reconstruct the events surrounding his death: 'The central truism in her work was that you could not find a suspect until you found a victim' (176). She remembers the counsel of a teacher in Oklahoma who spoke on human rights issues in Kurdistan: 'One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims' (176). Anil finds ongoing value in her forensic work by believing that it will assist those who have lost family or friends through disappearance. It is lack of closure that causes unbearable grief for the families of the lost:

Wrapping them in their shirts or just cradling them. Someone's son. These were blows to the heart. There was only one thing worse. That was when a family member simply disappeared and there was no sighting or evidence of his existence or his death. (176)

Anil's use of language, connection with others, and reduction of life to a simple level in order to rebuild her sense of self as whole and stable in a chaotic world, is a process similar to that which the character of Hana undergoes in *The English Patient*. Hana has been emotionally scarred by her own experience of war and attempts to heal herself through reading, writing and connecting with the small community in the half-bombed Villa San Girolamo. Almasy (the burned patient she nurses) gets Hana to read to him in an attempt to encourage her to connect and communicate with others again. By opening her to the world of words in literature, he provides a base for her to begin the process of recovering her own sense of identity. Hana finds practical use for books as she makes steps to the upper levels of the villa. The library, though bomb-damaged, contains books written in English, which she reads constantly. She is able to lose herself in these books, to enter other spaces, for they become 'landscapes to be walked through' (93).

For Hana, the books provide an escape from her pain and access to knowledge of the wider world: 'This was the time in her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became half her world' (7). Reading becomes part of the process of self-healing and self-discovery. Through exposure to language, she begins to regain her subjectivity and situate herself in the world amongst others.

what has happened and where the remains of their loved ones lie. He confronts the reader with the horror and pathos of such situations. Anil's memory becomes a memory for the reader from which to make further deductions about the ways in which people might manage their traumas. *Anil's Ghost* outlines many individual and collective traumas and reveals the manner in which those who are involved break down, become alienated and remove themselves from community interaction, or remain functional to operate within the community to improve the situation, even if only in very small ways.

Gamini, the brother of Sarath (Anil's archaeologist colleague), is a surgeon at the North Central Province hospital. His experience of the war is shown from the perception of one whose life revolves around an attempt to heal the physical damage of an endless stream of casualties. Gamini is part of a team of medical personnel that must deal with broken bodies on a large scale. In order to manage the casualty influx whenever a bomb goes off in a public place, a triage system of care is put in place. People are reduced to labelled bodies according to need, a hierarchy of imperatives, colour-coded for departmental use: 'Red for neuro, green for orthopaedic, yellow for surgery' (126). The dying are given morphine to reduce time spent on them. The patients are dehumanised for the sake of expediency: 'Everyone was emotionally shattered by a public bomb' (126).

To cope with the frustration and constant horror of his position, Gamini becomes addicted to speed, a substance that allows him to continue working beyond exhaustion:

The hospital would run out of painkillers during the first week of any offensive. You were without self in those times, lost among the screaming. You held on to any kind of order—the smell of Savlon antiseptic that was used to wash floors and walls, the 'children's injection room' with its nursery murals. The older purpose of a hospital continued alongside the war.  
(118-119)

The children's ward becomes a retreat for Gamini, the only place where he can rest and find solace from the demands placed on him to heal and repair the wounded. It is here that he reflects on the place of women as the primary source of security and comfort available in the world:

Fifty yards away in Emergency he had heard grown men scream for their mothers as they were dying. 'Wait for me! I know you are here!' This was when he stopped believing in man's rule on earth. He turned away from every person who stood up for a war. Or the principle of one's land, or pride of ownership, or even personal rights. All of those motives ended up somehow in the arms of careless power. One was no worse and no better than the enemy. He believed only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care, so the children would be confident and safe during the night.  
(119)

In each of his novels Ondaatje creates an extreme situation with a small cast of central characters, through whom he is able to explore the dynamics of displacement, isolation and alienation, as well as strategies for survival. Through the recognition and acceptance of their own differences as they connect with, and are reflected back through, one another, they re-define themselves and their place in the world. Central to these texts are several issues: the importance of language as a catalyst for the gaining of self-awareness and self-actualisation;

connection with others as a way of gaining a sense of self; and the possibility of healing through a healing reconstruction of identity after trauma.

BRENDA GLOVER  
FLINDERS UNIVERSITY

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