

# Mapping Massacre and Restorative Justice: A Study of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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## Abstract

The research article delves into human emotions, particularly during Sri Lanka's civil war, and it is analysed through the lens of *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje. It investigates the country's tumultuous condition caused by various separatist organisations, as depicted in *Anil's Ghost*. The focus of the research is to analyse the series of historical events that occurred in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of colonisation. The study explores the historical intricacies of the Civil War as reflected in the novel's primary narrative. The main emphasis is on the author's factual presentation, which increasingly emphasises the values of peace and solidarity of humanity. This examination analyses Gregory H. Stanton's final stage of genocide denial. It investigates the government's practice of concealing the corpses of deceased people's remains during armed conflict. The concept of mapping is brought with regard to the Massacre during war. The overarching goal of this research is to uncover the shortcomings of the Human Rights Commission within a nation embroiled in conflict. This endeavour brings attention to the inherent dangers faced by members of human rights organisations during the tumultuous period of Sri Lanka's civil war.

**Keywords:** civil war, genocide, conflict, human rights violations, violence

## 1. Introduction

Michael Ondaatje, a Canadian-born Sri Lankan writer, is a mainstream postcolonial writer who fictionalises the past and contemporary realities of his native nation. Ondaatje's renowned novel *English Patient*, honoured with the Booker Prize, delves into World War II's events, revisiting the era's misinterpreted truths and multifaceted intricacies. As a result, *Anil's Ghost* serves as a delicate portrayal of the reconstruction of Sri Lanka's marginalised communities' ethnic and factual narratives. The novel reconstructs the history of marginalised populations from island nations that were excluded from the documented records of the country. Furthermore, the fiction represents the historical records and traditions of the marginalised group that had cruelly slain in warfare between 1980 and 1990. During the 1980s, there was increased tension between the government and groups that supported separatism.

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) critically analyses the civil strife on an Island, particularly during the 1980–1990 revolt. The novel provides a unique perspective on a tumultuous period through the lens of Anil Tissera, a skilled pathologist and forensic specialist. As she returns to her native land, Anil undertakes a formidable mission of conducting a Human Rights inquiry. *Anil's Ghost* depicts the socio-political strife in Sri Lanka and the complexities that emerged in the aftermath of colonial rule. At its core, the novel's narrative revolves around the journey of esteemed anthropologist Anil Tissera.

*Anil's Ghost* depicts the country's internal crisis through the lens of racial supremacy and cultural prejudice. During the 1980s, heightened tension existed between the governing authorities and factions advocating separatism. Anil courageously heads back to the island nation during a violent ethnic conflict, equipped with her newly acquired skills to actively participate in a human rights investigation led by the United Nations. Anil has been selected as the forensic specialist for the Geneva organisation and was assigned to collaborate with an archaeologist in Colombo for seven weeks. She confidently teamed up in this noble endeavour. Sarath, a renowned archaeology expert, provided invaluable assistance during their travels to ensure the expedition's success. Anil discovered an enigmatic and ambiguous assemblage of skeletal remains during her investigation in a government-protected Area. Anil's unwavering commitment drives her to fight for justice and advocate for all the nameless victims of the civil war. During her investigation, Anil successfully unravels the mystery behind the insurgent or governmental killings, leading to a better understanding of her native soil, culture, and crisis. It also describes the involvement of the Human Rights Commission in an ongoing conflict.

### 1.1 Gregory H. Stanton's Final Stage of Genocide Denial

In 1944, Polish-Jewish philosopher and jurist Raphael Lemkin coined the term "genocide". He invented the term genocide to protect vulnerable citizens. Lemkin further explains the meaning of genocide in his book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*.

Gregory H. Stanton formulated the ten stages of genocide. The denial stage is a constant occurrence after genocide and persists indefinitely. This event serves as a highly reliable indication of impending genocidal massacres. Perpetrators of genocide engage in the exhumation of graves, the incineration of victims, the concealment of proof, and the intimidation of evidence. They refute all crime accusations and often blame the victims affected by the events. During ongoing military conflicts or civil wars, genocide can be camouflaged as counter-insurgency. According to Stanton (2016), Perpetrators who commit heinous crimes tend to obstruct investigations into the atrocities and continue to rule until they are forced from power until they are forcibly evicted.

Following the act of genocide, the initial phase of psychological response is characterised by denial, wherein the individual declines to acknowledge accountability for the heinous actions perpetrated. Matulewska (2022) suggests a range of strategies that can be employed to address the issue of genocide. These strategies encompass blame-shifting, blame reduction and outright denial of the occurrence of genocide events.

## 2. Review of Literature

Kanimozhi (2022) investigated the role of violence as a critical component in the setting of massacres. Furthermore, the study investigates a widespread reputation as a hidden use of fatal force. The study examines the overt depiction of veiled large-scale eliminations in Michael Ondaatje's novel "Anil's Ghost." The study methodically examines the hypothetical burial sites portrayed in the novel, revealing connections to genuine sites discovered in Sri Lanka. Deogharia's (2021) article analyses the historical elements of the Civil War as they are portrayed in the primary narratives. The study's central focus is to examine the importance of human connection and preserving harmony.

Chakravorty's (2020) article delves into the difficulties of a novel that examines the island's civil conflict and the contradictions that come with postcolonial literary images of global cruelty. The research explores the themes depicted in war novels that represent an independent zone as a bleak and dismal landscape. The article investigates the connection between aggression and historical occurrences. It investigates the use of fictional portrayals to raise critical problems concerning the grief process, communal action, and postcolonial cultures' marginalisation.

Jayasuriya's (2016) work investigates the three decades of conflict between the Sri Lankan government and extremist groups. The study focuses on examining the significance of violence. It also explores various approaches, such as witnessing the acts of violence, expressing mourning for such actions, and articulating revolt against the people.

Shrivastwa (2013) discusses a detailed account of the lost cultural heritage and ethnic backgrounds of individuals who fell victim to the Sri Lankan conflict, with a particular focus on those who were marginalised and oppressed. This article explores the profound anguish and suffering experienced by individuals affected by war, focusing on bone restoration. Furthermore, it examines the emergence of a concealed and unnoticed historical background.

Pillainayagam's (2012) paper delves into the fundamental drivers behind the conflicts attributed to the influence of colonialism, which heightened the rifts between the two opposing groups. It also investigates how the rise of race and ethnicity concerns on the island led to significant disruptions, shedding light on the impacts caused by these elements.

### 2.1 Research Gap & Research Question

From the above review of literature, it can be observed that most of the researchers have focused on genocide, the reflection of civil war and its violence, the sufferings, and suppression based on race and ethnicity, which forms the root cause for the civil war. The current research focuses on the genocide of ethnic minorities, the failure of the Human Rights Commission during civil riots, and the suffering of ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka. The research questions formulated based on the research gap are as follows:

- 1) What are the tortures inflicted by the ethnic prejudice of the majority ethnic group on ethnic minorities?
- 2) How does Anil rediscover the mass graves of the genocide of ethnic minority people of Sri Lanka?
- 3) Why does the Human Rights Commission fail in a conflict-affected country? Why is this problem important?

### 2.2 Methodology

The methodology adopted for the current study employs qualitative analyses where the primary text, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, has been critically interpreted and presented in descriptive form. Additionally, the chosen text has been scrutinised through the perspective of George Stanton's denial stage of genocide. By critically analysing the novel "Anil's Ghost," it explores that the author undertakes a remarkable endeavour to chronicle the firsthand narratives shared by family members of the victims. It also analyses the importance of portraying these accounts from victims' families and sheds light on the detrimental consequences of war. The victims endured scenarios of disappearance, extrajudicial killing, and unidentified murder. The narrative illustrates the shortcomings of the Human Rights Commission (HRC) within a nation embroiled in conflict. The analysis describes the involvement of the Human Rights Commission in an ongoing conflict.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Mapping the Cause of the Civil War

*Anil's Ghost* graphically depicts the internal crisis of Sri Lanka's violent ethnic war. The events of *Anil's Ghost* occur in the 1980s amidst the fierce conflict between the government and the separatists. The underlying causes of this Civil War are deeply ingrained. Historically, Sri Lanka has upheld the Buddhist tradition that was introduced to the land long before the arrival of its native inhabitants. Later, the Portuguese and Dutch arrived, bringing colonised people to the ground. Then, the British colonisers brought the Tamil people from India during their colonisation. They began to settle in Sri Lanka in the south and east of the country. On the other hand, Sinhalese exhibited animosity towards the indigenous Tamil minority population residing in the northern region of Sri Lanka. During the colonial era of British rule, Tamils were afforded comparatively more favours than their Sinhalese counterparts.

The Sinhalese community began exhibiting indications of racial superiority, ultimately resulting in the marginalisation and prejudice against minority groups of diverse racial origins. After gaining independence from the British colonisers in 1948, the government implemented discriminatory laws towards the minority population (Manav, 2004, p.125). The enforced discriminatory laws led to the sources of the conflict between the two ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, which can be traced back to the declaration of guerrilla warfare by the Tamil group in the Northern and Eastern regions to establish an independent state for them. This prolonged tension led to panic and terror across the country.

#### 3.2 Anil's Investigation

Anil's role as a forensic anthropologist is crucial in uncovering human rights violations during political turmoil. Before starting her case study, Anil was aware of the obstacles that appear while performing a forensic investigation in Sri Lanka, especially during political unrest. Based on Anil's extensive experience in conducting investigations across various countries, it is evident that significant limitations exist in carrying out inquiries related to human rights. At the novel's outset, Ondaatje begins the narrative with striking juxtapositions of human rights violations in nations such as the Congo and Guatemala. It's important to remark that the locations and events mentioned in the novel are factual. The Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation has made a significant discovery and gained widespread recognition as an exemplary example. They found a mass burial site where the military was extensively active during the 36-year-long civil war in Guatemala. In 1996, they unearthed ten sets of human remains. Ondaatje incorporated an actual location in *Anil's Ghost* to highlight Anil's role, where Anil was a forensic team member in Guatemala and Congo.

Anil began her investigation in Sri Lanka with Sarath. Anil and Sarath, during their investigation, successfully identified the skeletal remains, which they referred to as "Skeleton as Sailor." To uncover the truth, they decided to reconstruct the face of the Sailor (Nami, 2022, p.78). During the reconstruction process, they encountered Gamini Sarath's brother. He recounts information to them regarding the frequent violence that Sri Lankans endured during the conflict. Gamini describes the victim, whose extremities had been nailed to a road, and reveals the heinous acts executed during the ethnic conflict. He also highlights the daily struggles and sufferings Sri Lankans endure amidst the ongoing war. Anil and Sarath embarked on a mission to identify a sailor, seeking the guidance of Sarath's former teacher with optimistic anticipation. Palipana advises them to reconstruct the skeleton remains for accurate identification. Based on the security measures at the site where the corpse was found, the available evidence indicates that governmental entities had engaged in the act of murder (Kim, 2021, p.78).

"It's a government-protected zone. The skeletons were interred in natural hollows near the Bandarawela caves. (Ondaatje, 2001, p.17).

Anil and Sarath have decided to embark on their journey towards Galapitigama. Based on the advice of Palipan, they embarked on a journey to Galapitigama to meet Ananda, a sculptor. Finally, Ananda successfully reconstructed the Sailor's face. Numerous historical, ethical, and political issues were raised by exhumation (Judith Misrahi-Barak, 2023, p.). Many forensic anthropologists believe that the history of mass killings can be read on the victims' bodies.

The novel encompasses an in-depth account of the island's ethnic conflict, and a central narrative revolves around a character's quest to discover ancestral heritage. Anil, the novel's protagonist, is increasingly captivated by her native's concealed truth. By investigating the skeleton of an unknown Civil War victim, she gains insight into the distressing condition of the nation. Although the author does not explicitly mention history in the novel's plot, historical events act as a backdrop. The growing tension between the government and extremists is evident through unidentified killings, the kidnapping of doctors by terrorist squads to treat war victims, and suspicion.

The unexpected disappearance of the Sailor's skeleton, which sculptor Ananda rediscovered, has sparked suspicions that it holds something mysterious. As the novel progressed, Anil predicted that the skeleton would expose the truth behind several killings. The novel's narrative highlights the depiction of racial violence, public executions, and the subsequent imposition of a state of emergency after the tragic events of the 1983 genocide.

The word "ghost" serves as a key symbol throughout the novel. It was interpreted as the novel's central metaphor. The ghost reflects the civil war's evil aspects, resulting in numerous genocides. The sailor's evidence holds significant importance as it has the potential to uncover the violent elements of the crime that was committed against the victims during the conflict. The word "ghost" refers to the sailor in *Anil's Ghost*. At the novel's end, Sarath is portrayed as a ghost after his death amidst the numerous genocides during the Civil War, symbolising the extensive violence that affected the country (Deogharia, 2021). Ananda, the sculptor, felt the ghostly presence of Sarath while preparing to paint Lord Buddha's eyes for the Netra Mangala ceremony.

He could feel its partial warmth on his arms and saw it light the brocade costume he wore over Sarath's cotton shirt – the one he had promised himself he would wear for this morning's ceremony. He and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena. (Ondaatje, 2001, p.301)

### 3.3 Victims of the Genocidal Act.

During the civil war, Palipana endured a tragic event in which his sibling, Narada, was murdered due to a perplexing act of genocide. Palipana guided Anil and Sarath during the investigation of the Corpse victims when they sought him for clarity and suggestions. He cautioned them about the potential hazards involved in their pursuit of integrity.

In the case of Ananda Uduguma, his wife was among the enforced disappearance in the island's disappearance culture. There was no evidence found indicating her presence or confirming her death. The vast majority of Lankans were aware of 'the white van culture,' which entailed the forcible disappearance of people. The people who were forced to disappear in this manner would never return. It was undoubtedly an act done by a shrinking opposing group to create panic. In Anil's Ghost, Ondaatje recounts the disappearance of Ananda's wife, Sirissa, during the conflict (Ondaatje, 2001, p. 181). When Anil and Sartha approach Ananda, as a member of the victim's family, Ananda readily assists in rebuilding Sailor's face. Ondaatje expresses the suffering of the victim's family through the characters of Ananda and Gamini, another notable member of the victim's family. As a "war doctor," he has experienced the horrors of war and has treated countless victims during the conflict. He tragically lost his brother Sarath, who assisted Anil during her investigation to uncover the truth. Sarath has become a ghost among thousands of victims. Ananda and Anil would carry the Ghost Sarath (Gresil & Kahambing, 2019, p.78).

Anil was deliberating about the method of how the Sailor's murder occurred. The author's meticulous portrayal of bodily damage proves how the victim's condition matches with acts of brutality. This is evident in the Sailor's case; the sailor's forearm was fractured, and his body was partially burned and damaged in his spine was analysed during Anil's examination. Additionally, she noticed the potential presence of a gunshot injury on the skull (Kanimozhi,2022, p.3.). Exhumation contributes to a multitude of historical, ethical, and political concerns. Numerous forensic anthropologists claim that the historical record of heinous crimes can be discerned by analysing the victims' corpses.

### 3.4 Proving the Genocidal Act: Mass Graves in Anil's Ghost

The human rights investigation initiated by Anil began against the backdrop of a series of disappearances. Anil encountered a remarkable report in *Anil's Ghost* regarding the 1985 discovery of a mass burial in Naipattimunai, Sri Lanka's Eastern Province. The identity of the people buried in this mass grave remained undisclosed. At the same time, the orphanage warden who recorded extermination cases was incarcerated. To conceal the hidden truth, soldiers murdered and eliminated a human rights attorney; this acts as evidence to prove Stanton's denial stage of genocide. In this particular instance, the author not only drew attention to the unearthing of huge graves but also informed the readers about the failure of the HRC. The strategic placement of large burial sites in Tamil regions, such as Naipattimunai and Mannar, provides evidence of a similar approach used to suppress the Tamil militants' attempt to establish an independent state (Kanimozhi,2022, p.224). In this particular incident, Ondaatje depicts the enduring human rights violations, such as egregious acts of genocide, detonations, targeted assassinations, extrajudicial executions, abductions, and enforced disappearances, that occurred between 1988 and 1989.

*Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje's novel, is a riveting account of the terror acts during 1988 and 1989. It is set against the backdrop of the JVP insurgency of 1987-1990 (Hewa,2021, p.22). During this bloody epoch, teenagers were tortured and killed 'en masse' in public. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) led two uprisings by Sinhalese youth against the government, and this was the second one. The first, in 1971, resulted in the death or disappearance of approximately 10,000 people, while the second, in 1987-1990, resulted in the death of over 40,000 people. Anil had to re-educate herself about what a terrifying country it had become in a war-torn country.

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje provides a detailed description of mass graves through the human rights report in the first chapter—Ondaatje's novels centre on factual accounts. Ondaatje endeavours to discover the truth buried along with the murdered corpse by exposing the mass graves (Edward Mallot,2012, p.154). To uncover the concealed truth in the fiction, Ondaatje introduced a resolute character named Sarath, an archaeologist with whom Anil had to collaborate during her human rights investigation project. Ondaatje expertly integrates several forensic approaches in a systematic way to expose concealed truths, and it exhibits his exceptional level of expertise.

Sarath initially thought that the pairing of Anil as a forensic pathologist and an archaeologist was an "unconventional pairing." He informed Anil about the country's ongoing unofficial war, human rights violations, and the extensive and prevailing issue of enforced disappearances. Sarath encouraged Anil to unearth the truth regarding the enigmatic genocide that was committed during the civil war. During the expedition, Anil discovered that a particular skeleton seemed to deviate from the 6th-century timeframe like the other skeletons (Cook, 2004, p.2). As stated by Ondaatje, "Now she picked a fragment of bone from the detritus pile and rubbed it. This is from the same place? It doesn't seem sixth-century." (Ondaatje, 2001, p.18).

During the initial days of their investigation, three human skeletons were unearthed. Subsequently, a fourth skeleton was unearthed by Anil during her excavation a few days later. Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, and Sailor were the names given to the skeletons. Notably, Sailor was a murder victim.'

Sarath was entirely cognizant that they required extra evidence or else their whole initiative would be denied. Throughout Sri Lanka's

history, the government consistently refuted the accusations that these sites indicate criminal activities whenever mass graves are unearthed. Furthermore, the authorities declared that the skeletons seemed to belong to the timeframe of an epidemic. In this regard, an unearthing massive burial in Matale is noteworthy. The authorities argued in the court that the skeletal remains relate to the victims' who died of smallpox during the 1950s. Anil strongly demonstrated in this novel that Sailor's murder was evidence of a specific type of crime by distinguishing between the skeletons of the epidemic and the contemporary. However, the inexplicable disappearance of Sailor's skeletons and Sarath's extended absence complicated the situation. Anil was supposed to provide her report in the absence of supporting evidence. However, Anil's belongings and research findings were ultimately confiscated, rendering her hard work futile. Anil was frequently stopped and inspected by government officers in the Armoury Auditorium.

Anil had encountered the difficulties of being subjected to insults, humiliation, and embarrassment alone. Sarath predicted the process of dehumanisation that Anil would undergo. "Sarath knew they would frequently check her paper to irritate and humiliate her". (Ondaatje, 2001, p.274).

The above citation states how the Human Rights Commission failed in a conflict-affected country. Not just in fiction but also in reality, the efforts of the Human Rights Commission failed miserably in the span of 30 years of civil war in Sri Lanka. The existence of the mass graves in the novel serves as compelling evidence indicating a deliberate endeavour that carried out systematic acts of killing and dehumanisation against the victims relevant to acts of genocide. As expected by Sarath, Anil left the building with nothing. Sarath instructed Anil to prepare false reports to depart from the nation, and helplessly, Anil obeyed Sarath's orders as it was the only option to escape. However, she tried hard and made various daring endeavours to uncover the truth, and in the end, Anil was compelled to leave the nation without proving any claims. In this Act, Anil's role implicated the failure of the Human Rights Commission

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, Ondaatje has systematically integrated several forensic approaches to expose concealed truths, exhibiting his exceptional expertise. The existence of mass graves serves as compelling evidence of a deliberate endeavour that the government was involved in carrying out systematic acts of killing and dehumanisation against the victims. The mass grave atrocities highlight an ongoing grim truth in the history of Sri Lanka, particularly during the JVP insurgency from 1989 to 1999. The relevance across actual and fictional accounts of mass graves is often associated with Stanton's concept of genocide denial. In the novel *Anil's Ghost*, the author has made an exceptional effort to document the firsthand narratives provided by the family members of the victims. The importance of portraying the experiences of victims' families elucidates the adverse effects of war. The victims were subjected to disappearance, extrajudicial killing, and unidentified murder. The author is concerned about the loss of human life in the name of the Civil War and the dead who were not given justice at the time of the Civil War. The narrative illustrates how the Human Rights Commission (HRC) failed in a conflict-affected country. In fiction and reality, the Human Rights Commission's endeavours failed to address the 30-year civil war in Sri Lanka.

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#### Abbreviations

AG - Anil's Ghost.

HRC- Human Rights Commission.

HRI - Human Rights Investigation

JVP - Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

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