

The Portrayal of Mass Graves in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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Abstract

The winner of the 2018 Golden Man Booker Award, Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan-born Canadian poet, essayist, novelist, editor and filmmaker. He has been a recipient of a number of awards including the Governor General's Award (1970, 1979, 1992, 2000 & 2007), the Booker Prize for Fiction (1992), the Giller Prize (2000), the Prix Medicis étranger (2000), Man Booker International Prize (2007), and PEN Literary Service Award (2011).

“The fact of genocide is as long as humanity”- wrote Jean-Paul Sartre. It is the horrendous crime of destroying national, racial, and religious groups both culturally and biologically. At all the period of history, genocide has inflicted great losses on humanity.

Denial is the last stage of Stanton's predictive model of genocide. This is the final stage that always follows genocide and the surest indicators of genocidal massacres. In this stage, the perpetrators of genocide dig up mass graves, burn the bodies, try to cover up the evidence and intimidate the witnesses. It is important to note that the elements of disappearance, mass graves, disposal of bodies without evidence and

intimidating the witness are the characteristics of genocide. It can be regarded as invisible genocide. Ondaatje explicitly delineates the form of invisible genocide in his fiction, *Anil's Ghost*.

This paper aims to highlight how the fictional mass grave in the novel, *Anil's Ghost* portrays the real mass graves in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Genocide, Mass graves, Human rights violations, Victim.

Introduction

The winner of the 2018 Golden Man Booker Award, Philip Michael Ondaatje is a poet, novelist, essayist, editor, filmmaker of Burger, Dutch and Indian origin. He was born on 12 September 1943 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He immigrated to Canada by way of England in 1962 and became a Canadian citizen in 1965. He attended the University of Toronto (BA) and Queen's University (MA). He began his teaching career at the University of Western Ontario. From 1971 to 1990, he taught English Literature at York University and Glendon College.

He initially gained his literary reputation as a poet. His first books of poetry include *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), *The Man with Seven Toes* (1969), and *Rat Jelly* (1973). The collected works of Billy the Kid won the Governor General's Award for poetry in 1970. *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Poems 1963-78* won a second Governor General's Award. It is notable that he is a five-time winner of the Governor General's Award in the years 1970, 1979, 1992, 2000 & 2007 respectively. His other notable awards include the Booker Prize for Fiction (1992), the Giller Prize (2000), the Prix Medicis étranger (2000), Man Booker International Prize (2007), and PEN Literary Service Award (2011).

He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada, the highest level of the order in 1988. In 2005, he was honoured with Sri Lanka Ratna by the former Sri Lankan President, Chandrika Kumaratunga. In 2016 a new species of spider, *Brinnolia Ondaatjei*, discovered in Sri Lanka, named after him.

He is popular for his novels, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), *Running in the Family* (1982), *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), *The English Patient* (1992) *Anil's Ghost* (2000), *Divisadero*(2007), *The cat's Table* (2011) and *Warlight* (2018).

“The fact of genocide is as long as humanity”- wrote Jean Paul Sartre. William A. Schabas called genocide as the ‘crime of crimes’ and ‘odious scourge’. Without doubt, genocide is a heinous crime against humanity. It is the horrendous crime of destroying national, racial, and religious groups both culturally and biologically. At all the periods of history, genocide has inflicted great losses on humanity.

The destruction of Troy by Greeks, the ruin of Carthage by the Romans and atrocities of the Mongols under Gengis Khan are a few examples that the history had witnessed. The world is also well aware of the cruelties of China's Mao Zedong, Soviet Union's Stalin, Germany's Hitler, Cambodia's Pol Pot, and Pearl Harbor's Hideki Tojo.

According to the President of Genocide Watch, Dr. Gregory H. Stanton, genocide is a process that develops in ten stages “that are predictable, not exorable”. He suggested that the preventive measure can stop the earlier stages of genocide from further stages. Denial is the last stage of Stanton's predictive model of genocide. This is the final stage that always follows genocide and the surest indicators of genocidal massacres. In this stage, the perpetrators of genocide dig up mass graves, burn the bodies, try to cover up the evidence and intimidate the witnesses. Stanton also warns that the perpetrators deny that they committed any crimes and block investigations of the crimes. The Cambodian genocide was one of the examples of this stage.

It is important to note that the elements of disappearance, mass graves, disposal of bodies without evidence and intimidating the witness are the characteristics of genocide. It can be regarded as invisible genocide. Ondaatje explicitly delineates the form of invisible genocide in his fiction, *Anil's Ghost*.

This paper aims to highlight how the fictional mass grave in the novel, *Anil's Ghost* reflects the real mass graves in Sri Lanka.

Plot-overview

The novel, *Anil's Ghost* (2000) takes place during a gruesome 1980's civil war in Sri Lanka. The protagonist Anil Tissera, a forensic pathologist, revisited her country after fifteen years as part of a U.N commission investigating the human rights abuses. She was chosen as the Geneva organization's forensic specialist, to be teamed with an archaeologist, Sarath Diyasena in Colombo for a seven-week project. She felt that she was alienated from her motherland because Sri Lanka had become a morally complicated world in her absence. During her course of work, she found out human remains within the premises of government-protected zone that is 'not pre-historic'. Anil's meticulous case study of identifying the human remains and the cause of death turned out to be truth against the government. At one point of time, she had to leave the country in order to save her life and the ensuing events lead to the tragic death of Sarath.

Portrayal of mass graves

Anil's human rights investigation started with the backdrop of the phenomenon of disappearances. Anil had been sent reports collected by the various human rights groups before leaving the United States. She was conscious of all the human rights reports. She had read documents and news reports and says, "I couldn't tell who was worst. The reports are terrible" (AG14). She felt that Sri Lanka had become a morally complicated world and thus compared Sri Lanka's situation to Greek tragedies:

The streets were still streets, the citizens remained citizens. They shopped, changed jobs, laughed. Yet the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale (AG 7).

Recalling the history of Matale, the place which Anil had mentioned has another grave secret from the past in reality. Matale was an epicenter of the late 1980s insurgency by a Sinhalese leftist group, the JVP. The Matale District was notorious as a hideout of the JVP insurgents during the failed Marxist revolution of 1987. The site had a classic appearance of a mass grave. Archaeologist Raj Somadeva stated that the skeletal remains dated from the period between 1986 and 1990. An easy connection was made between extra-judicial killings by the army that ended the revolution. On November 25, 2012, workers at a construction site near

the Matale District hospital encountered some human bones while trying to install a biogas unit. The magistrate's court ordered the remains to be exhumed. By February 2013, there were 155 human skeletons unearthed in total. However, the police claimed in court that the skeletons belonged to victims of a smallpox epidemic in the 1950s. The commission collected evidence from 156 witnesses and obtained a forensic report from a laboratory in China as well as from Beta Analytic (a company based in Miami), U.S.A., which specializes in radiocarbon dating. However, due to January 2015 election, the government shelved the Commission's report and phased out all mentions of it from the public domain. When the government changed in 2015, the Commission reopened its report. However, upholding the 1950s hypothesis, the Commission rejected the allegation that the mass grave was a scene of crime. More importantly, Archaeologist Somadeva disputed its findings, implying that the wrong skeletal samples were sent for testing.

Without doubt, these kinds of human rights violations set a model for the later genocide in Sri Lanka in 2009. It is evident that the human rights violations should be curbed initially or it becomes a way of testing limits for the perpetrators, how far they can go. The recent spotlight on the mass graves in Sri Lanka is a proof that these events were chronicled and foretold by earlier events written in the blood of the Sinhalese youths killed two decades before.

In this novel, Anil received another notable report about the discovery of mass grave in Naipattimunai in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province in 1985. In this grave, blood-stained clothing with an ID card was identified by a parent as that worn by his son at the time of his arrest and disappearance. The identification of others in this mass grave was never discovered. On the contrary, the warden of an orphanage who reported cases of annihilation was jailed. A human rights lawyer was shot and removed by army personnel to silence the buried truth. In this case, the author has not only focused on the discovery of mass grave but also implicated the readers about the failure of the human rights commission.

At the same time, the mass grave was discovered in Mannar town in Sri Lanka's Northern Province in the month of January, 2019. The recent discovery of mass grave has raised fresh questions about the island nation's history of violence. It has also re-opened old wounds and triggered traumatic memories among the

survivors of the deadly conflict that ended barely 10 years ago. The news about this mass grave was reported in *The Hindu* newspaper, titled “Grave secrets from a troubled past” on Saturday, January 19, 2019. According to the news report, “there would be 300 skeletons, including those of 23 children below the age of 12, have been identified”. In March 2018, construction workers stumbled upon human remains while preparing to build a new outlet for the state-run cooperative Sathosa. Little did they know that they would be uncovering one of Sri Lanka’s largest mass graves almost a decade after the civil war ended in 2009. The team that comprised fellow judicial medical officers, forensic archaeologists and analysts had resumed excavating the skeletons. In this case, bodies had been found “dumped” instead of being “laid to rest” beside each other as would be the case in the cemetery. Samples had been sent to a laboratory in the U.S., in Miami, Florida for carbon dating analysis.

A war that spanned 30 years, a savage state’s unleashing mass violence, an armed militant group offering resistance-at times with their own brutality, has meant a massive human cost. The casualties were more than a lakh as in some estimates. With the unresolved mysteries of the deaths and disappearances of Tamil rebels, activists, journalists, and scores of civilians haunting them for years, the survivors in the north struggle to recover from the everyday imprint of trauma. Even if they choose to look ahead rather than behind, healing is not easy as they strive to make ends meet in a battered economy with no promising jobs and few sympathetic political leaders who chose action over rhetoric.

The families of disappeared were appalled by the recent spotlight on the Mannar grave. In an interview to the newspaper, *The Hindu*, Amarasingam Rajini shares her bitter memory. Her son, who was in the LTTE, went missing in the summer of 1999. She still hopes to see her son one day. She says, breaking torn between denial and resignation:

I do believe he is alive somewhere and I will continue looking for him. But when I saw this mass gravesite and heard about the hundreds of bodies being unearthed, I wondered if one of them could be my son. The thought did cross my mind.

The thousands of mothers looking for their loved ones who were made to disappear forcibly are far from accepting that their child could be dead. Jena Jeyakandhi, a Mannar based activist working with the

families of disappeared, asks, “If you haven’t seen your child’s body, how do you begin to believe that he is dead”.

It was this “double-edged” fear that Ondaatje described in his novel, *Anil’s Ghost*. He wrote of a fictional gravesite with submerged bones in Guatemala:

There was always a fear, double-edged, that it was their son in the pit, or that it was not their son- which meant there would be further searching. If it became clear that the body was a stranger, then, after weeks of waiting, the family would rise and leave. They would travel to other excavations in the western highlands. The possibility of their lost son was everywhere (AG).

Ondaatje’s description of the impact of the dead people in mass graves or disappeared having on those who are alive can be understood through the personal accounts of the families of disappeared. Here, it is important to recall lines from Archilochus which Anil had translated at the University: “*In the hospitality of war, we left them their dead to remember us by*” (AG 7). In the case of Sri Lanka, no such gesture to the families of the dead. They do not even know about the information of who the enemy was. While discussing the personal accounts of the victim’s family which the author portrayed throughout the novel, it is important to know the personal accounts of the victim’s family in reality. Piotr H. Kosicki, the writer also concedes that the victim’s memory can tell all sides of the story.

The last time mass graves were alleged in Mannar was in late 2013, near the famed Thiruketheeswaram Shiva temple, and later in 2016, in a well not far from the temple. The Office on Missing Persons (OMP), set up in 2018, investigate the scores of cases of missing persons, reported from the former war zones in the north-east, and during the state’s ferocious crackdown on radical Sinhala youth in the south in the late 1980s. Amnesty International estimates a total of at least 60,000 disappearances in the country since 1983.

The recent turmoil of the discovery of mass graves over recent years brings fresh relevance to the theme of *Anil’s Ghost*. It is notable that both the mass graves in Matale and Mannar were discovered

between the years 2013 and 2019. Ondaatje has mentioned about it even before unearthing these mass graves. With the knowledge of human rights reports, he could foresee where the decades of civil war would lead to. Ondaatje's prediction of mass graves was turned out to be a bitter reality in the history of Sri Lanka. He himself would have been appalled by these mass graves in reality. The recent discovery also brought the fact of structural genocide into focus. In this novel, *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje provides all the details of mass graves through the human rights report. Thus his intention is not just unearthing the mass graves but unearthing the truth buried with bodies.

Considering the fact that each genocide is unique in its own way, the Sri Lankan model of genocide used this strategy to quell the JVP insurrection in the 1980s and the LTTE later in 2009. It is important to note that digging up mass graves, burn the bodies, try to cover evidences are the last stage that follows genocide. But in the Sri Lankan model of genocide, this strategy was used throughout the process.

Conclusion

To conclude, Genocide is a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups which shocks the conscience of mankind. In the cases of mass graves, it is evident that the victims were not only denied their lives but also denied culturally appropriate burial. Stanton expressed his concern over the need for the rights of its victims. He also suggested that justice should be accompanied by education in schools and the media about the facts of genocide, the suffering it caused its victims and the motivations of its perpetrators. Thus for the sake of humanity, it is one's duty to raise voice against the heinous crime, genocide.

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