“The Reason for War is War”:
Western and Eastern Interrogations of Violence in
Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*

SHOSHANNAH GANZ
Grenfell Campus, Memorial University, USA

Abstract

Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) is set in civil war-torn Sri Lanka. This contemporary violent moment becomes a rupture through which the writer interrogates the division between Western and Eastern ways of approaching a violent situation. This essay sets out to investigate historical instances of violence and justifications for violence in the Buddhist context. The essay then turns to Buddhist scholars’ contemporary critical examination of violence and war in light of the teachings of ancient Buddhist texts. Then, having established the Buddhist history and contemporary debate around violence and war, the essay explores how Ondaatje comments on this history through the contemporary moment of civil war in Sri Lanka. The essay argues that rather than illustrating the need for a purer Buddhism or the separation between the political and the religious, as some scholars have argued in relation to *Anil’s Ghost*, according to Ondaatje, the only way to approach the problem of violence with any hope of reaching understanding is through appreciating the different ways of knowing offered by the East and the West.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Michael Ondaatje, fiction, *Anil’s Ghost*, Buddhism, East, West, War, violence, political

Anil's Ghost (2000) is Michael Ondaatje's fourth novel and his second novel set in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka he returns to after almost twenty years is being torn apart by civil war. Like the author, the novel views the situation in Sri Lanka from the perspective of a Sri Lankan national who returns to Sri Lanka after being educated in England and the United States. Anil Tissera now works for an international human rights organization that has sent her to investigate the murders taking place in Sri Lanka. *Anil's Ghost* documents this investigation. Critics such as Lee Spinks note that "The impact of the civil war upon Ondaatje's writing is plain to see" (206). This contemporary violent moment becomes for Ondaatje a rupture through which he interrogates the division between Western and Eastern approaches to a violent situation and the different ways of seeking knowledge and truth. An understanding of the central teachings of Buddhism, the historical instances of violence in Buddhism, and the contemporary Buddhist perspectives on violence lend some understanding to the context of the Sri Lankan civil war. Likewise, the Eastern and Western characters in *Anil's Ghost* explore the cause and effect of the violence and the contemporary global situation that places the East and the West in proximity and often in dialogue. Rather than illustrating the need for a purer Buddhism or the separation between the political and the religious, as some scholars have argued in relation to *Anil's Ghost*, this essay argues that the only way to achieve knowledge or truth in the contemporary global context and according to my reading of Ondaatje is through appreciating and giving credence to the different ways of knowing and understanding truth offered by the East and the West.

Buddhist ideals include the harmony of all beings, non-violence, and peace. The early Pali canonical text, *The Dhammapada*, states that "[t]here is no bliss higher than peace" (qtd. in Deegalle 61). In fact, according to Mahinda Deegalle in a chapter entitled "Norms of War in Theravada Buddhism," which is a part of a larger work by Popovski et. al that explores the practices of war from the perspective of various world religions, "The ultimate goal of the committed Buddhist practitioner is the

attainment of perfect inner peace through leading a good life in this world” (61). Deegalle goes on to say that “Buddhism maintains that conflicts, intolerance and disharmony arise when human desire, hatred and ignorance are unlimited” (63). In “Buddhism and War,” Paul Demiéville argues that according to the “first five precepts of Buddhism,” precepts that both lay persons and monks must follow, “the precept of not killing” comes before all others (18). In fact, as Demiéville further maintains, “all the canonical traditions agree that ‘Murder is the most serious of all sins’” (18). Killing or murder is also number one in the ten major sins that are part of the “negative paths of karma” (18), and, according to Demiéville, it is “better to die than to kill” (18). On the one hand, Buddhism offers a different perspective on violence than every other world religion. On the other hand, unlike other world religions, Buddhism focuses on the individual and the responsibility of the individual in discussions on the use of force. According to Deegalle, “Buddhist life involves the use of force inwardly rather than externally” (70); the Buddha advises the practitioner to “restrain the five senses,” which means using “force for self-cultivation” (70).

Historically, Buddhism is associated with peace and is “praised by insiders and outsiders for its doctrines of love and compassion” (Deegalle 61). Deegalle writes that people “have high expectations of Buddhism when it comes to issues of peace and violence in comparison with other world religions” (61). However, this is somewhat of a popular misconception as there were wars in the Buddha’s day as well. For instance, in the 6th century BCE although leaders sought the Buddha’s advice on governance, they still waged wars with one another. In fact, throughout Asia’s history there are examples of wars fought in Buddhist countries. Furthermore, Buddhist teachings in Asia do contain teachings on war and violence. Although the historical Siddhartha Guatama (566-486 BCE), or Buddha, preached against war, he himself was not able to avoid violence on all occasions. I will give three brief examples. The first is the story of a water dispute between the Buddha’s relatives, the Sakyans and the Koliyans, over the sharing of water rights to the Rohini river which divided their two

territories. A violent dispute arose during a period of drought, and they decided to wage war with one another over the limited water resources. After intervening, the Buddha asked the two sides which was more important to them “river water or their blood,” thus demonstrating the futility of waging war over water. There is also a second example of Siddhartha Guatama’s intervention in a dispute. In this case Siddhartha Guatama, or the Buddha, is not able to help the parties involved in the dispute to resolve their problems through logical discussion. In this instance, the Prince Vidudabha learns, while visiting relatives, that his mother came from a low caste because the Sakyans were too proud to give a high-born woman to King Pasenadi. Following his father’s death, the young prince wanted revenge upon the Sakyans for tricking his father. Knowing the danger to his relatives, the Buddha stood in the road three times, thereby preventing the prince from going to war. However, the fourth time the Buddha does not intervene, and the Sakyans are destroyed in battle. In this case, the Buddha does not intervene the fourth time because he learns of severe negative actions by the Sakyans, who in a previous lifetime had poisoned a river. The final example is recorded in the *Vinaya Pitaka*—the collection of Buddhist monastic rules. In this story, the Buddha withheld the bi-monthly confession because there was a monk who was not fit to participate due to his impurity. The Buddha called three times for the impure one to leave, and only then did the recitation of the rules begin. Taken together, these three examples show a variety of responses to violence or the use of force by the historical Buddha. In interpreting these three stories, a number of different conclusions can be drawn depending on the training of the reader and the impetus for the reading. However, at the most basic level, they show that the Buddha was not always able to stop violence or uphold peace through logic or dialogue, and that, at times, the severity of the actions warranted the violent response. Furthermore, the Buddha himself was willing to use gentle force in the persuasion of practitioners when called upon to uproot or unseat impurity.

Sri Lanka has its own particular traditions when it comes to the use of force and its own unique tradition and history—the *Mahavamsa*, a Pali chronicle beginning in the sixth century BCE—that is continually added to through the ages. One story in this chronicle is that King Sirisanghabodhi was willing to give his head to his aggressive brother Gothabhaya, who had dethroned him. This is a prime example of passive resistance. During his reign, King Sirisanghabodhi often used *satyakriya*, an act of truth, to resolve difficult problems (Deegalle 68). There are also stories according to which, instead of punishing criminals he would take them into custody, but then secretly release them. In one case, a demon comes to the king, and he offers himself up rather than one of his people. As a result of this action, the demon agrees to take an offering from each of the villages rather than a life. During the reign of King Sirisanghabodhi, “the imperative of self-defence was hardly raised as an issue since, for Sirisanghabodhi and others like him, being righteous and truthful took precedence over worldly concerns,” demonstrating a “willingness to forgo violent resistance in circumstances of adversity” (Deegalle 69).

The concept of a “righteous war” defined as involving ethical conduct where there is no resort to unnecessary cruelty or harm of the innocent during a defensive war is basically a Western idea: “The South Asian Buddhist tradition still lacks a systematic, philosophical reflection on the nature of war and its justifications” (Deegalle 75). The seeds of a “just war theory” can however be seen in the military metaphors of the South-Asian Theravada tradition. However, these military metaphors are employed to explain individual achievements in conquering defilement. Buddhist monks were prohibited from watching military parades and soldiers were not ordained as monks (Deegalle 75). According to Deegalle, “The Pali canon of Theravada Buddhists completely lacks any textual resource that could be used as the basis for developing a just war theory” (75). However, just as the roots can be seen in the military metaphors of the earlier tradition, the beginnings of the just war theory seem to emerge in Sri Lanka during the post-canonical sixth-century chronicles of the

Mahavamsa. The story of the battle when King Dutthagamani defeats King Elara in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, recorded in the *Mahavamsa* (161-137 BCE) contributes to the just war ideology of Sri Lanka. The chronicler demonstrates that King Dutthagamani is closely tied to Buddhism and the national interests of the majority Sinhalese community. King Dutthagamani invites Buddhist monks to accompany him onto the battlefield to safeguard Buddhist teachings and institutions in Sri Lanka. The problem is that King Elara is represented as being a righteous king, and so, after King Dutthagamani defeated Elara in a duel, he cremated his body and put up a monument for him. Although Dutthagamani won, there were many deaths in the battle, and this upset the king. Monks were sent to comfort him and assure him that killing unbelievers carries no more weight than killing animals and that certain forms of killing, such as in battle and if they are unbelievers, is in fact allowed if Buddhism is under threat. This justification by the monks is called the “skill-in-means” in Buddhism. If the king had remained depressed about killing, he would not have been able to help the Buddhist community, and the community could do nothing to change the past karma of the king, but their help in relieving the king’s fear and guilt could direct the king to positive future action. This episode in the post-canonical *Mahavamsa* still affects the thinking and justifications for war and violence in modern Sri Lanka.

The contemporary Buddhist scholar and author of *In Defence of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* (2002), Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, dedicates a chapter of her work to “Dharma Yuddhaya and Dharma Warriors in Sri Lanka.” Bartholomeusz writes of *dharma yuddhaya* or righteous war “as actuality and as metaphor, both deeply embedded in Sri Lankan discourse” (68). *Dharma Yuddhaya* is an entire discourse of violence or war that is justified as righteous because it is used to defend Buddhism against unbelievers or safeguard the practice of Buddhism. *Dharma Yuddhaya* is a Sanskrit term that has gained currency in the West and in popular writings of the East. However, its first appearance in Sri Lanka was during the British colonial rule

in the late 19th century. In Sinhala publications, *dharma yuddhaya* has two meanings—one spiritual and one political. The spiritual definition refers to spiritual conquest over inner defilement such as that the Buddha achieved when he conquered Mara. The political writing produced by Buddhist monks after Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948 contains a different usage of the term *dharma yuddhaya*. After 1948, the definition comes to encompass any battle that protects the truth and can refer to violent battles as opposed to just referring to the spiritual dimension. The following heretical justification for killing and war is described at length to demonstrate the complex context of the Sri Lankan civil war. I quote at length in part because of the specialized terminology and the inherent illogical necessity it prescribes:

The saint of the Great Vehicle, the bodhisattva, must ‘contribute to the life of everything that exists.’ But, what is this thing called ‘me’? What is the ‘me’ of another living being? Why compassion, why altruism, why would I sacrifice myself out of respect for another living being if it does not exist in itself, if it is only an aggregate of continually changing aggregates, as Buddhism asserts? ‘Why combat suffering if the suffering being does not exist?’ And as for killing, what is it really, since the aggregates (*skandha*) are short-lived (*ksanika*)? ‘The destruction of things is spontaneous,’ states a well-known treatise from the Lesser Vehicle. ‘[T]hings perish on their own, because it is in their nature to perish. As they perish with no help from the other, they perish in being born; perishing in birth, they are short-lived.’ What then is the role of the murderer? We are told that he puts an end to vital breath (*prāṇa*) by inhibiting it to continue to recur. What is more, he annihilates the very organ that houses the life force (*jīvitendriya*), by obstructing the birth of a new ‘moment.’ However, if there is no person, no entity endowed with breath (*prāṇin*) who is killed: what dies, as what lives, [is] simply a material body complete with sense organs. Therefore, killing is allowed to be defined as ‘cutting short the series of a predetermined duration, of a sentient being. Mahāyāna doctors do not hesitate to jump to the conclusion: “[S]ince the living being [*sattva*] does not exist, neither does the sin of murder. And

since the sin of murder does not exist, there is no longer any reason to forbid it....In killing then, given that the five aggregates are characteristically empty, similar to the visions of dreams or reflections in a mirror, one commits no wrongdoing.” (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 20)

I feel I must begin the discussion of Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* with the caveat that I am a Western scholar arguing for the balance of Eastern and Western thought in a text that I will show to examine the complement of both. From the outset it is clear, in setting up the discussion of the central doctrines of Buddhism and the Buddhist responses to violence and justifications for war, that my perspective is of the West looking at the East and that I must rely on the work of others in translating and explicating the simple and more complicated doctrines and philosophies of the East. While this essay supports an argument about the necessity of balance in the use of Eastern and Western thought in a text, it seems important to acknowledge the perspective of the author of this essay. I write from a Western (if Eastern informed) perspective. This makes for a clear bias that I attempt to acknowledge here and undermine with the help of the growing critical circumference to Ondaatje’s work on Sri Lanka. The scholars themselves contribute to the growing Eastern and Western perspectives offered and thus act as a kind of compendium to the Western and Eastern ways of reading the text.

As the earlier discussion of violence and Buddhism from a historical perspective has undoubtedly shown, the roots of violence and the reasons for violence are complicated not only by the remoteness of time but also by the problems of perspective. While there are numerous examples of violence in Sri Lankan history the first time that the word *dharma yuddhaya*, that is righteous or just war, is used is in relation to colonialism, the British and Sri Lankan independence. It seems then that at the very root of this discussion is a violent Eastern/Western rupture or wound. The origin, then, for the more modern, and at times read “heretical,” justifications for war in Sri Lanka is colonialism. In the history of colonialism, this in itself is rather unremarkable. The scars imposed on the East by

the West are nothing new and are arguably at this point embedded in the Eastern histories themselves. However, I bring this to the fore immediately because of the subtlety with which Ondaatje brushes against the violent intersections of Eastern and Western history and thought. Ondaatje writes in the introductory pages that “the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with *what* was happening here” (11). The point of historical comparison is most immediately with a Western tradition and a Western measure of tragedy. However, this measure is not adequate metaphorically or in terms of the historical distance it gives because here there are “Heads on stakes” (11) – immediate and unmediated by distance, time, or language.

Ondaatje immediately follows this discussion of violence by focusing attention back on a violent historical moment that again highlights the intersection between East and West and the irreparable damage imposed on the East by the West and preserved by the West. Told by Palipana, “*Cave 14 was one of the most beautiful sites in a series of Buddhist cave temples in Shanxi province. When you entered, it looked as if huge blocks of salt had been carted away. The panorama of Bodhisattvas—their twenty-four rebirths – were cut out of the walls with axes and saws, the edges red, suggesting the wound’s incision*” (12). Palipana continues “*This was the place of a complete crime. Heads separated from bodies. Hands broken off. None of the bodies remained – all the statuary had been removed in the few years following its discovery by Japanese archaeologists in 1918, the Bodhisattvas quickly bought up by museums in the West*” (12). Earlier in Palipana’s personal history, he had been intimately involved in “a nationalistic group that eventually wrestled archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans” (79). The right and claim to history itself seem to be at the center of this battle: “the West saw Asian history as a faint horizon where Europe joined the East, Palipana saw his country in fathoms and color, and Europe simply as a landmass on the end of the peninsula of Asia” (79). Palipana seems to play a similarly central role in this

narrative in focussing attention on the Eastern ways of knowing and finding the truth.

However, the Western role in the East is far from being reduced to a matter of historical telling or the violent removal of history through the Sri Lankan art and artifacts to the West. The novel at least suggests that when it comes to funding the civil war in Sri Lanka the West takes an active role. In going through the reports on the killings in Sri Lanka, Anil comes to this conclusion: "It was a Hundred Years' War with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners" (43). According to Katherine Stanton, Ondaatje here makes the "suggestion that the civil war is financed by those in the diaspora" (33). But who is at fault remains ultimately unanswered in the reports. The seeming guilt of the West, according to Stanton's reading of these lines, is mitigated by the introduction to this section which says, "In the shadows of war and politics there came to be surreal turns of cause and effect" (42) and then by the details of unidentified killings. The lines discussing who is backing the civil war are followed by the lines I chose for the title of this essay, "*The reason for war was war*" (Ondaatje 43). Thus, it seems that rather than clearly identifying the West as the cause of the present moment of violence, the situation is only complicated by the "modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries" (Ondaatje 43). Really, if there is a cause for war it is war, and the effect is war. While the explanation for war may be more Buddhist in its gesture to cause and effect, clearly this is another moment of intersection between East and West. And it is in Anil's investigation of the documents collected by "various human rights groups before leaving the United States" (42) that she gains her background perspective on what is going on in Sri Lanka. However, even further behind this cursory background compiled by Western organizations investigating the violence in Sri Lanka is Anil's own and deeply buried perspective as a Sri Lankan national.

For a short and bitter time after leaving Sri Lanka for her education in the West, Anil is married to a man from Sri Lanka and is caught up in remembering and missing Sri Lanka. However, the

iron grip of the past with which he attempts to hold her back from her life in the West ends up being the impetus for Anil to put Sri Lanka and her connections with the past behind her. When her lover Cullis asks about her background while dining out during a convention in Montreal, she says, "I live here," and more specifically "[i]n the West" (36). The "I live here" is said very generally about the West, as neither Anil nor Cullis live in Montreal, and most of Anil's other work takes place either in the United States or in locations where international human rights investigations are taking place. Even when Anil returns to Colombo, she does not identify with her earlier life there. About her celebrity status as a swimmer in Sri Lanka, Ondaatje writes, "[Anil had] spent the fifteen years since ignoring that early celebrity" (11), and the gaze that Anil turns on Sri Lanka when she returns is, she believes, fully Westernized such that, "Anil had read documents and news reports, full of tragedy, and she had now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze" (11). Sarath notes early in their discussions that Anil "talk[s] like a visiting journalist" (Ondaatje 27), which is in many ways how she views herself. Anil does not see herself as a returning national invested in what is happening in Sri Lanka in a personal way, but as someone hired by a human rights commission outside the country to investigate the abuses. She does not view this situation in her former homeland as being any different from the assignments in Guatemala or other sites of ethnic cleansings or genocide. Anil speaks English and has lost her ability to understand or speak Sinhalese; therefore, she relies on translations made by Sarath and others seemingly unconcerned by the loss of her mother tongue and her reliance on translation in her former homeland. Clearly, this disconnection is part of what Anil has gained and lost in her years away from Sri Lanka; she is now seen and sees herself as an outsider from the West. She believes that she is able to apply the values and truths taught and learned as part of her Western education and experience as part of an international body of specialist investigators into global human rights abuses.

The first acknowledgement on the last page of *Anil's Ghost* states: "I would like to thank the doctors and nurses, archaeologists, forensic anthropologists, and members of the human rights and civil rights organizations.... This book is for these people and these organizations" (309). While Ondaatje dedicates this work to the people working for human rights, the Sri Lankan characters in the text are not as open to or thankful for the involvement of Western human rights groups. Thus, towards the very end of her time in Sri Lanka, Anil remembers a night when she sat between Sarath and Gamini and listened to them discussing the war. She recalls that "they spoke of how much they loved their country. In spite of everything. No Westerner would understand the love they had for the place. 'But I could never leave here,' Gamini [had] whispered" (285). Gamini also contributes this observation of Western detachment:

"American movies, English books—remember how they all end? ...The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit." (285-6)

Here Gamini notes that the human rights worker is much like the hero of American films or English books. This is not a position of accountability or intimacy. Gamini and Sarath will stay to face the consequences of the investigation, but Anil will leave. Stanton argues that the "novel points to the necessity of an international framework for criminal justice" (28). However, the text seems to indicate that the international perspective linked to what the Western experts would consider the 'universality of truth' is very much seated in Western ideas of justice. While Anil argues that "[o]ne village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims" (176), according to Spinks, "although ethical

fidelity to the victims of political terror may require the recovery of an idea of universal humanity from the ruins of damaged life, it must also preserve the integrity of individual memory from the global language of ‘human rights’” (218). Spinks goes on to argue that “Sarath’s suspicion that Anil’s universal commitment to human rights risks effacing the very subject it claims to represent is evident” (218). Again, it seems that Sarath’s problem with Anil is with the Western perspective she is applying to the situation in Sri Lanka. Sarath says, “You know, I’d believe your arguments more if you lived here. You can’t just slip in, make a discovery and leave” (44). Spinks notes that

Anil’s commitment to the language of ‘human rights’ demands this universalising perspective: it is impossible, after all, to speak in the name of human rights without recourse to an idea of ‘rights’ or the ‘human’ in general. Elsewhere, though, the presumptive universalism of Anil’s language is repeatedly challenged by Sarath’s... commitment to the singularity of the event of experience before its meaning is determined by an already given system of truths. (219)

What is at odds here is not only the universal and the particular, but also the Western belief that they can establish the universal from their perspective. As a proponent of Eastern thought and student of Palipana, Sarath insists on the particularity of the event and the responsibility of the Western investigation by looking at the problem at close range – something the Western perspective fails to do almost entirely. Sarath speaks repeatedly in the text about the intimacy of the violence and the necessity of seeing things at close range. The story he uses to illustrate this principle is the effect a particular incident of violence had on his way of understanding the civil war. Sarath watched as the insurgents took away a blindfolded man to his death. Sarath recalls “When they took off, the blindfolded man had to somehow hang on. One hand on the handlebars, but the other he had to put around the neck of his captor. It was this necessary intimacy that was disturbing” (154). Similarly, it is Anil’s lack of intimacy with the events taking place

in Sri Lanka that keeps her, the expert, from understanding what even young students know. Anil asks early in the narrative about a corpse, “How did they break the arms without damaging the fingers? It’s strange. Your hands go up to protect yourself. Usually the fingers get damaged” (14). One of the students answers immediately “Maybe he was praying” (14), thus establishing the authority and lived experience of the Sri Lankan people. As illustrated in this example, the Western perspective is not able to immediately understand the situation that is obvious to the Sri Lankan. Anil continues the examination and “tutorial” without comment. Clearly, the way of understanding and coming to the truth of the events is different in the East.

The West is characterized by Ondaatje as a place where truth is fixed and as a place with “clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries” (54). In telling a historical story to Anil, Palipana concludes with the following: “‘Even then there was nothing to believe in with certainty. They still didn’t know what truth was. We have never had the truth. Not even with your work on bones’” (102). Anil responds: “‘We use the bone to search for it. ‘The truth shall set you free.’ I believe that’” (102) and Palipana says, “‘Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion’” (102). It should be noted that Anil’s response about truth is not a quote from a Buddhist text, but a quote from the Christian Bible – a Western source that demands a universal and singular truth and perspective. Spinks writes that “Anil’s evangelical faith in the emancipatory power of the truth will be sorely tested by the end of the novel” (213). It seems interesting that Spinks demarcates Anil’s faith in “the emancipatory power of the truth” as “evangelical faith” – again connecting her search for the truth and belief in the power of truth to the Christian Biblical and Western perspective. Clearly, Anil’s belief in both universal truth and the “emancipatory power” of the truth is the result of Western training and a Western belief in the ability to attain a universal perspective in situations involving non-Western countries and people. The belief Anil holds, and indeed the Western position, is that Western values apply in the same way everywhere and to every situation. However, from the

Eastern monastic and mystical perspective, Palipana notes that “Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion” (102), thereby challenging the Western monopoly on truth and perspective.

Spinks likewise discusses the role Palipana plays in demarcating the difference between Eastern and Western thought, “in general terms Palipana’s intellectual example implies a distinction between Western and non-Western modes of knowledge” (212). One of the first problems with the clear lines of difference imposed by Western logic in Sri Lanka involves Anil’s first encounter with Gamini. He is sleeping covered in blood in the waiting room at the hospital, and she fails to recognize that he is a doctor. It is at the point when he is summoned back to work by a nurse that Anil leaves the hospital noting that, “If she couldn’t tell who was in a hospital, what chance did she have” (38). Later, in a symbolic challenge to Anil’s perspective on the universality of truth from the Western point of view is her encounter with crucifixion. This is also one of the first places where Anil allows for another kind of knowing – the intuition that makes her to have Sarath turn around the car in the middle of the night because of a feeling that something is wrong. When they return to the parked truck they passed on the highway, they find the driver “almost unconscious. Someone had hammered a bridge nail into his left palm and another into his right, crucifying him to the tarmac” (111). Gamini tells them at the hospital that ““There are no beds left here tonight. Not for this level of injury. See, even crucifixion isn’t a major assault nowadays”” (130). Given the descriptions of violence in the text, crucifixion does seem to pale by comparison. But crucifixion is the central Western metaphor for ultimate suffering and ultimate sacrifice. Nevertheless, while, from a Western perspective, crucifixion is the central and universal symbol of faith and forgiveness and the promise of redemption, in this text, crucifixion hardly qualifies as a serious injury and is reduced to minor care in an overcrowded hospital. The symbol for redemption and healing that comes later in the text is an Eastern one – the mending and repairing of the broken Buddha.

John McClure reads the novel as a return to “religious ways of being” (28) and sees the monks and ascetics’ “practices [as] chart[ing] the redemptive possibilities and political significance of retreat crucial to that practice” (28). McClure announces early in *Partial Faiths* that “collective retreat itself becomes an essential ingredient of resistance, a way of achieving insight, emotional balance, support, and strength necessary to do the work of healing in a violent world” (3). Thus, the redemption McClure sees in the novel is retreat, and while retreat from the world certainly appeals to Gamini, Sarath, and Anil, *Anil’s Ghost* is in fact dedicated to “members of the human rights and civil rights organizations whom I met in Sri Lanka” (309) and not to monks or ascetics in retreat. Although the leaf monastery seems to offer healing to a young woman traumatized by losses in the war and an old man preparing to leave the world entirely, the solitude and relief offered by the leaf monastery is only temporary for the other characters. What Palipana offers is not a model of retreat from the world, but rather, as Spinks argues, an “intellectual example [that] implies a distinction between Western and non-Western modes of knowledge, his initial function is to bring Anil and Sarath one step closer to recovering Sailor’s historical image” (212). This is in fact the beginning of Anil and Sarath’s collaboration in a quest to find the individual identity of the skeleton they call Sailor.

Following this retreat and on the advice of Palipana, Anil and Sarath attempt to unveil the identity of the remains they call Sailor through the reinvention of a religious practice of the Nētra Mangala ceremony with the help of the artist Ananda. This ceremony and its practice are passed down from father to son and are held to be sacred. The artist takes an important role in the elaborate ritual. The final step in the ritual is to paint the eyes of the Buddha statue. In the case of Sailor, they wish the artist Ananda to apply his techniques to the reconstruction of Sailor’s head and face. The religious significance of Ananda’s name cannot be overlooked in this particular application of religious practice or in the later reconstructions of the Buddhas destroyed by robbers or during the war. Ananda was the historical Buddha Guatama’s disciple. Thus,

Ananda learned the teachings of the Buddha and was able to instruct others in these teachings following the Buddha's final deliverance. Ananda is said to have continued his corporeal existence as a Bodhisattva, and there continue to be occasional stories of encounters with the still living Bodhisattva. That the artist Ananda has the role of remembering and recreating history during and after the civil war seems significant. Steven Kemper writes that "great emphasis has been placed throughout the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka on the idea that the connection between the past and present must be unbroken, whether between a sacred place and the historical events that created its importance or between a group of monks and the historical origins that guarantee the authenticity of their teachings" (33). What Ananda promises then is not only the work of artistry he is renowned for, but his namesake's ability to create historical ties with the past and keep the continuity between the past and the present alive. Thus, perhaps Anil's single-minded pursuit of the "truth" of history is not so far removed from the Sri Lankan's obsession with establishing and keeping the continuity of history and particularly the Buddhist history that is central to Sri Lankan identity. Marlene Goldman points to a number of recurring Buddhist symbols in the text including the thread tied around Anil's wrist during a pirit ceremony (19). While Goldman's article is dedicated to explaining the different Buddhist symbols, it will suffice to say here that this is another symbol of the historical connection between Anil and the Eastern ceremonies and Buddhist practices of Sri Lanka.

Anil's frustration early in the text and throughout her remaining time in Sri Lanka is in part with the corruption and slowness of the bureaucracy and the lack of scientific instruments and lab facilities with which to apply her linear and Western-learned scientific knowledge to discovering the truth about Sailor. However, in spite of the seeming narrowness of her Western approach to discovering the truth, Anil nonetheless does allow for the approaches suggested by Sarath and Palipana. Moreover, it is through her relationships with other people in Sri Lanka that she seems to recover other ways of knowing and seeing and even the

ability to see the connection between her Western approaches and the Eastern ways of knowing. It is in a sort of silent retreat with Ananda when they are both seeking knowledge of Sailor—Ananda through intuition and art and Anil through science and reason—that they share in a number of moments that profane the sanctity of Anil's hard-learned scientific facts or perhaps wed the ways of knowing. Anil is able to come to know the profession of Sailor through her scientific observations of the skeleton and through an unexplained intuition that operates unacknowledged in her line of work—those sparks of insight and inspiration that follow no formula and cannot be understood rationally. Similarly, she comes to understand that the work that Ananda is doing in reconstructing Sailor is not a work of scientific discovery but rather the artist's hope for the peaceful rest of his slaughtered wife. Furthermore, it is in a strange and unexplained flash of insight that Anil rushes to Ananda's room as he is in the act of taking his own life, and it is through this moment of unexplained knowing that she is able to save his life.

Thus, her perspective and distance are silently and steadily broken down by a return to an Eastern way of knowing through silence, movement, and at times even retreat. She engages in dancing in the rain and acknowledges the flashes of insight that come not from science or reason but from some other and certainly non-Western way of knowing. She acknowledges, in fact, at the end of her time in Sri Lanka that she “decided to come back” (200). Further, Anil eventually identifies as Sri Lankan when she accuses those gathered for the hearing of her investigatory findings and says “I think you murdered hundreds of us” (272). In fact, the truth that has been discovered is not Eastern or Western in either the approach to knowing or in what they find. In the end it is simply that “the problem here ... it's the human problem” (245). Likewise, the faith that is referred to is not Eastern or Western but “any faith” (193). Similarly, the eyes that Ananda paints in the end are on “a statue that was no longer a god” (307), and it is Ananda himself who “appear[s] to stare past it all” (301). Therefore, the point of intersection for the East and the West seems to be in the moment of

violence and the truth that this reveals about all of humanity. As Palipana says of his brother, the monk, “passion or slaughter will meet you someday” (103), and, according to Palipana, the only thing that survives is the idea—the idea of suffering, the idea of violence, and the idea of truth—all human ideas in the end and none of them really universal except for death and the loss of self in suffering. As Gamini notes of the field hospitals, “you were without self in those times, lost among the screaming” (118). The loss of self through suffering is one way of overcoming the divide between Eastern and Western perspectives. Suffering offers something of a universal way of knowing through the loss of self.

Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* offers in its very title a metaphor for the impossibility of singular truth. Sailor’s identity, the central mystery for much of the text, was in the end discovered through a combination of Eastern and Western ways of seeking and knowing. The truth that is revealed, however, does not lead to liberation or justice, but simply to more individual suffering and death. Thus, the belief in the emancipatory power of a singular truth posited by the West is seen to be irrelevant at best and even dangerous in the context of the Sri Lankan civil war. While *Anil’s Ghost* offers historical Eastern and Buddhist perspectives on violence and shows the ways in which the West attempts to intervene in conflicts, there are no clear answers to the violence and war in Sri Lanka. Rather, this violent rupture provides a context and moment for the author to contemplate suffering, but the wound cannot be completely healed by the answers offered by the East or the West.

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