



## Refracting Reality: Modalities of Representation and the Perceptual Gaps in Anil's Ghost

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### Abstract:

This study examines the intricate interdependence of representation and perception in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000). By navigating the novel's omniscient narration, the research explores Sri Lanka's geographical and cultural landscapes amidst the violent struggle for justice in the civil war between the insurgent groups from the north and the majoritarian political establishments and identification of the dead. It argues that the novel's fragmented narrative structure deliberately destabilizes the boundaries between past and present, as well as Eastern and Western epistemologies of "truth." The paper also tries to analyze the conflict of preserving the national identity and the global perspectives on the mysterious deaths in Sri Lanka. Overall, the analysis demonstrates how these conflicting modalities highlight the inherent fluidity and interchangeability of reality as it is perceived and represented within resistance literature.

**Key Words:** Representation, perception, resistance, reality, identity.

### I. Introduction: The Cartography of a Fractured State

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* is a novel preoccupied with the act of seeing—or, more accurately, the difficulty of seeing clearly through the smoke of civil war. Set against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan Civil War in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period defined by state-sponsored terror and insurgent uprisings of the Northern Tamil minorities and the majoritarian Sinhalese political efforts to curb the insurgency, the novel serves as a profound

meditation on how reality is constructed, represented, and ultimately perceived.

The title itself suggests a dual focus: the forensic (Anil Tissera, the Western-trained pathologist) and the ephemeral (the "ghost" of the unidentified victim, "Sailor"). This tension between the tangible evidence of the body and the intangible weight of memory forms the core of Ondaatje's project. As resistance literature, the novel does not merely document atrocities; it questions the very tools we use to document them.

### I. The Forensic Lens: Western Empiricism and its Limits

Anil Tissera, the protagonist, returns to her homeland as a forensic pathologist for the UN. Her arrival marks the entry of a specific modality of representation: the scientific method. For Anil, the truth is an objective entity residing in the marrow of bones and the density of soil. She views the human body as an archive of facts, believing that "the dead could receive justice" if only their biological markers could be correctly identified and presented in a court of law. She enters Sri Lanka as an outsider, despite her birthright. Her perspective is shaped by "the science of the dead," a Western modality of representation that treats the human body as a text to be decoded.

"The island no longer held her by the past. She'd spent the fifteen years since ignoring that early celebrity. 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. But here it was a more complicated world morally. 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.” Anil's Ghost (p. 11).

Anil represents the western modality of empirical science in approaching the mysterious deaths and hence looks at things from the Eurocentric point of view. For Anil, truth is something that can be measured, photographed, and reconstructed through forensic data.

However, Ondaatje quickly establishes a gap between Anil's scientific certainty and the lived reality of Sri Lanka. In a country where "the government was the ghost," evidence is not a neutral tool for justice; it is a liability. Anil's search for the identity of "Sailor"—a skeleton found in a restricted government zone—becomes a metaphor for the struggle to maintain a Western "singular truth" in a landscape of "multiple silences."

As critic Victoria Cook notes, Anil's reliance on "objective" truth ignores the subjective terror that permeates the landscape. The reality of Sri Lanka is not a puzzle to be solved but a trauma to be lived. Anil's struggle to "identify and do justice" to the dead is hampered by the fact that in a state of civil war, facts are often secondary to survival. Her forensic tools can name a bone, but they cannot name the fear that keeps the living silent. While Anil tries to find the scientific truth from the western perspective, Sarath the archeologist tries to approach it from the indigenous perspective. Therefore, Sarath tries to prevent the Sri Lankan national truths within the country. When Anil finds the skeleton she names Sailor in a government-protected archaeological site, she believes she has found a "representative" truth—a singular victim that can hold the state accountable. But Sarath tries to divert Anil's documentations that could well reach the international organizations in order to preserve the home cultural identities well within the country.

“I promised to take you to that temple. In an hour it's the best time to see it. We'll catch the dusk drummer.” Anil didn't like the abrupt switch to something aesthetic. “You think it's safe?” “What do you want to do? Take it wherever you go? Don't worry about anything. These will be fine here.” Anil's Ghost (p. 52).

Sarath here apparently shows his interest in preserving his nationality and ethnicity over truth and documentation. Yet, forensic representation is shown to be insufficient. Anil's struggle to "identify and do justice" to the dead is hampered by the fact that in a state of civil war, facts are often secondary to survival.

## II. The Body as Archive: Reconstructing the Unnamed

One of the novel's most potent modalities is the representation of the human body. In Anil's Ghost, the body is both a biological specimen and a political site. Anil tries to scrutinize the skeleton of the unnamed man whom she calls as the Sailor serves as the central point of her investigation. Anil's work with the "Sailor" skeleton is an attempt to reverse the process of "disappearance" practiced by the state. By naming the bones, she attempts to give the "ghost" a reality that the government has tried to erase. Because, the act of political genocide of a particular social group would lead to the violations of the international regulations. However, Anil who represents the international amnesty tries to examine the Sailor deeply in order to retrieve the truths behind each of the hidden corpses in the far-flung areas of Sri Lanka by keeping the Sailor as an example.

This process of reconstruction is not merely scientific; it is an act of resistance. When the state burns records and hides bodies, the act of identifying a single victim becomes a revolutionary deed. However, Ondaatje shows that this reconstruction is always partial. Even when Ananda, the artist, uses his skills to recreate Sailor's face in clay, the result is not a perfect likeness of the man, but a representation of the suffering of the man. Ananda creates an imaginary face for the skeleton of Sailor by considering his traumatic distraught of death and distortion. The "perceptual gap" here is between the man who was and the icon of suffering he has become. Sailor represents the entire political victims of the civil war whose actual identity is being reconceived by the artist Ananda based on the expected traumatic experience of the Sailor and the distortion of his identity. Therefore, the overt reality of the entire narrative conceals an implicit harsh reality that eventually gets unveiled through the artistic representation of Ananda.

## III. Narrative Fragmentation as a Mirror of Reality

The structure of Anil's Ghost is notoriously non-linear. The narrative leaps across time and space—from Anil's past in England and America to her present in the caves of Sri Lanka, and into the childhoods of the Diyasena brothers. This fragmentation mirrors the "interchangeability of representations.”

This stylistic choice serves two purposes:

1. Mimetic Chaos: It reflects the chaotic nature of life during the civil war, where routine is interrupted by sudden violence. As Sri Lankan population is largely split between the minority



Tamil settlers in the north and the majoritarian Sinhalese of the south. Essentially the Tamils were asking for equality in civil and political rights that gradually turned into a siege and retaliation. This violence led to the survival crisis for many innocent communities who lived under a constant threat of death. For instance, when Anil tries to reach her roots of Tamil family, she identifies the horrific escapist life coerced upon them in a distant places.

“Anil could hardly recognize the tiny aged woman. They stood facing each other. Anil stepped forward to embrace her. Just then a young woman walked out and watched them without a smile. Anil was aware of the stern eyes that were taking in this sentimental moment. When Anil leaned back the old woman was weeping; she put her hands out and ran them over Anil’s hair. Anil held her arms. There was a lost language between them. She kissed Lalitha on both cheeks, having to bend down to her because she was small and frail.” Anil's Ghost (p. 22).

This clearly indicates that the political chaos and uncertainty makes them speechless and live in distraught and despair. Similarly, the other social groups particularly the blameless people continued to suffer death and anguish without knowing the actual cause of their distress

2. Epistemological Doubt: It forces the reader to question which "version" of the story is the most real. Is it the forensic report? The historical myth? The personal memory?

The government represented by the archeologist Sarath tries to defend the political actions and protects the truths from the international representative in the form of Anil who works to document the original truths for the amnesty.

“In this rest house near Bandarawela with four skeletons. You’re six hours away from Colombo and you’re whispering – think about that.” Anil's Ghost (p. 54).

This shows how Sarath’s efforts to conceal reality from Anil and the double versions of the narrative. Therefore, Sailor not only represent the war victims, but a standing testimony of underlying perceptual gap in the multimodalities of representation.

By breaking the narrative into "shards," Ondaatje suggests that a cohesive, linear narrative would be a lie. To represent a broken world, the representation itself must be broken. The reader, like the characters, must navigate these fragments to piece together a semblance of the truth.

#### IV. The Diyasena Brothers: Divergent Paths of Perception

The relationship between Sarath and Gamini Diyasena provides a study in conflicting modalities of perception. Sarath, the archaeologist, looks at the world through the lens of deep time. He sees the current war as a "thin layer" on top of centuries of historical conflict. His modality is one of preservation; he believes in protecting what can be saved, even if it requires silence or complicity with the state.

Gamini, the doctor, represents the visceral present. He exists in a state of perpetual emergency, treating the victims of bombings and torture. Unlike Sarath’s historical distance or Anil’s scientific distance, Gamini’s perception is unfiltered and raw. He does not care for "Justice" with a capital J; he cares for the body on the table.

The "perceptual gap" between the two brothers highlights the impossibility of a unified response to trauma. Sarath’s silence and Gamini’s exhaustion are both valid, yet conflicting, representations of survival in a war zone. Their eventual reconciliation over the body of a victim underscores the theme that in the face of death, these differing modalities must eventually converge into a singular act of care.

#### V. The Aesthetic Turn: Netra Mangala and the Eye of the Artist

Perhaps the most significant challenge to Western perception in the novel is the ritual of Netra Mangala, or the Eye-Painting Ceremony. Towards the end of the novel, Ananda Udugama, an artist consumed by the loss of his wife, is tasked with reconstructing the face of the victim, Sailor, and then performing the ritual that "brings the Buddha to life" by painting the eyes. This ceremony represents a shift from forensic representation to aesthetic and spiritual perception. In this ceremony, the artist cannot look directly at the statue’s eyes while painting them; instead, he must look into a mirror to see the reflection of where he is painting. This is the central metaphor for the novel’s title and thesis:

While Anil seeks the "truth" of the skeleton's identity, Ananda provides a "truth" of human connection. He paints the eyes while looking into a mirror, because a human cannot look directly into the eyes of a god—Ondaatje introduces a literal "refraction" of reality.

"The eyes of the statue were the last things to be painted... The artist looked into a mirror to see the reflection of the eyes he was painting" (Anil's Ghost 307).



This act of looking into a mirror to paint reality symbolizes the "perceptual gap." Truth is too blinding to be looked at directly; it must be approached through the mediation of art, ritual, and memory. The painting of the eyes "awakens" the statue, turning stone into a perceived living presence.

This ritual signifies a shift from Western forensic representation to Eastern aesthetic and spiritual perception. While Anil seeks the "truth" of the skeleton's identity, Ananda provides a "truth" of human connection. The "refraction" of the mirror is not a distortion, but a necessary filter that allows the human mind to process the divine—or the horrific.

#### **VI. Resistance and the Concept of Truth**

Anil's *Ghost* functions as resistance literature by challenging the monopoly on truth held by those in power. In a post-colonial context, "Truth" is often a Western import—a rigid set of rules that do not account for the complexities of a nation struggling with its own internal divisions.

Ondaatje suggests that resistance lies in the plurality of perception. By presenting the perspectives of the scientist, the archaeologist, the doctor, and the artist, the novel prevents any one group from "owning" the narrative of the war. The "perceptual gaps" between these characters are where the real Sri Lanka exists—not in the official government reports or the simplistic headlines of Western media, but in the spaces between what is seen and what is felt.

#### **VII. The Conflict of Values: West vs. East**

The relationship between Anil and Sarath represents the central ideological conflict of the novel. Anil represents the Western pursuit of "Justice" through the public naming of crimes. Sarath, conversely, represents a more traditional, perhaps pragmatic, Eastern approach to truth—one that recognizes that naming a killer can often lead to more killing.

Sarath's "silence" is not a lack of perception but a different modality of representation. He understands that in Sri Lanka, the "concept of truth" is fluid. He tells Anil,

"You're an outsider... You don't understand that here, truth is a dangerous thing" (*Anil's Ghost* 259). This highlights the interchangeability of truth and safety. Sarath's ultimate sacrifice—giving his life to ensure Anil can escape with the evidence—bridges the gap between her clinical justice and his lived loyalty.

Conclusion: Finding Love in the Ruin

Ultimately, *Anil's Ghost* suggests that while representation is always flawed, it is the effort to perceive that constitutes our humanity. The search for lost identity and the struggle for justice are

inextricably linked to the capacity for love and empathy.

As the novel closes with Ananda looking out over the landscape after the ceremony, the "ghosts" remain, but they are no longer unidentified. They have been represented through science, through art, and through memory. Ondaatje does not offer a resolution to the civil war, but he offers a way to see it. The "refracted reality" of the novel serves as a testament to the fact that even in the darkest periods of history, the act of bearing witness—no matter how fragmented—is an act of profound hope.

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