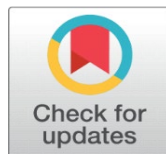


# THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH IN THE CONTEXT OF POST-COLONIAL SRI LANKAN CONFLICTS THROUGH MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S ANIL'S GHOST AND GUNADASA AMARASEKARA'S ASATHYA KATHAWAK

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## ABSTRACT

Sri Lankan history is fraught with numerous attempts of invasion and colonization from time immemorial. The European occupation being the major one, it lasted for 443 years until 1948. The post-independence period revealed the strong influence of colonization on the socio-economic, religious, and cultural mindset of the colonized. The policy of 'divide and rule' implemented by the Europeans paved the way for political conflicts among ethnic groups. The youth of both the Sinhala and Tamil ethnic factions of the population opposed the political decisions of the then Sri Lankan governments at different periods of time and this led to the Sinhala youth insurrection and the 30-year liberation war by Tamil separatist guerillas. Ondaatje in *Anil's Ghost* and Amarasekara in *Asathya Kathawak* have recognized these conflicts and their outcome through literature. The protagonists of these novels are eager to discover the truth and the perpetrators of violence during the uprisings in order to mete out justice to the memory of the victims. The different narrative techniques used, help in understanding the storyline through which the truth concerning the criminal occurrences of the era are uncovered.

**Keywords:** *Anil's Ghost*, *Asathya Kathawak* (Translation: *Out of the Darkness*) Political Conflicts, Truth, Colonization

## 1. INTRODUCTION

By the end of almost four and a half centuries of European colonization which ended in 1948, the year from which the post-colonial period commenced, Sri Lankans had imbibed much of the behaviour of the colonizers. Their policy of 'divide and rule' was deeply planted in society and as a result of it different ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions, which were not very obvious before emerged from society. Each ethnic group was in competition with the other to outdo them. In such a societal context, conflict was inevitable, and this invariably led to horrific trails of

disaster where each faction involved, tried to hide the proof of their brutalities. The notable conflicts of this period were the Sinhala youth uprisings against the then existent political authority and the 30-year civil war of the Tamil insurgent group against the governing power. The two novels *Anil's Ghost* by Micheal Ondaatje and *Asathya Kathawak* by Gunadasa Amarasekara are based on the pursuit of truth in order to bring the culprits of crime to justice. A task which could be termed as wishful thinking in an atmosphere where the fear of repression was looming for those who looked for the truth and attempted to do any justice for the victims of atrocious crimes. [Coughlan \(2000\)](#)

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Gunadasa Amarasekara's *Asathya Kathawak* were analyzed using the qualitative research method. [Amarasekara \(1977\)](#) The use of this method could be justified as the type of data in this research is descriptive and does not consist of figures and percentages but of words, phrases, and sentences to be analyzed. The main data source of this study is the text of the prose works by Ondaatje and Amarasekara. The other data sources of this study are the reference books which include journals and critical works published on recent research concerning these works and also the electronic articles and forums which contribute to the enhancement of information on the topic of the research paper. Regarding data collection, the most important step is the understanding of the works. For this purpose, the reading techniques of skimming and scanning were applied. The texts which have been skimmed through were then scanned focusing on the important words, phrases, and sentences with the research topic constantly in mind. A subsequent narrative analysis done, allowed the story line to unfold through the understanding of the conduct of the characters and their contribution to the plots of the works mentioned above. As the focus was laid on the quest for truth concerning the homicides and disappearances during the post-colonial conflicts, a need to primarily understand the nature of truth arises. Thereafter, these concepts were woven into the behaviour of the protagonists of the works and the results of their quest for truth were analysed.

Regarding the narrative structure of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* published in the year 2000, the novel is divided into eight sections and each one introduces a character. The narrative begins with 'She', which means a third person narrator, which invariably means that an external observer is in the process of giving information. This omniscient narrator brings out the different points of view of the characters. The narrative structure continues in this manner interspersed with dialogues. The perspective quite often switches between the living and the dead and this reproduces the experience of terror. The terse episodes are elliptical, and each section quite often starts with flashbacks to information which could be significant in understanding the character to whom the section is dedicated.

In *Anil's Ghost*, the plot of the novel is set in the politically turbulent 80's. Anil Tissera of Sri Lankan origin, leaves for the United Kingdom to pursue her higher studies in medicine and subsequently proceeds to the U.S.A for specialization in forensic research. Here, she willingly accepts a mission by an organization working on human rights to probe into the atrocities taking place in her homeland. To say it differently, she is in quest of the truth. She accepts her mission and arrives in the country to work with Sarath Diyasena an archeologist who has been appointed by the governmental authority. She has her reserves about Diyasena's allegiance to the government but manages in the end, to frame a case against the authority

implicating them in a political murder. The truth is never revealed as Anil is obliged to quit the country hurriedly for her personal safety and the archeologist, her guide is brutally murdered. Palipana, Diyasena's mentor exiles himself into the forest as he chooses to avoid deforming the truth. Dr Gamini Diyasena, Sarath's brother, continues his lonely, monotonous life walking through hospital corridors and the sculptor Ananda Udagama is the only person able to supposedly transcend tragedy by reconstructing a Buddha statue on a terrain infested by the bones of slain youth. He does not expose the truth known to him but poignantly resolves to be silent and carries on his journey in life.

Concerning the narrative structure of *Asathya Kathawak*, a novel by the Sri Lankan author Gunadasa Amarasekara, the progression of the story takes place using analepses. These flashbacks are brought out through the thoughts of the protagonist and in addition dialogues, which are few and far between are interspersed into the storyline.

*Asathya Kathawak*, written in Sinhala has been translated as *Out of the Darkness* by Vijitha Herath but for the purpose of my study I prefer to use the original title given by the author. Somaweera Madurasinghe, a village youth of humble beginnings has procured a job as a policeman in Colombo. He is the sole bread winner of his family, and he aspires to climb the ladder in his profession. While awaiting the results of the interview he had faced a few days ago for a promotion, he is escorted by the police to see his younger brother, Nimal, a student at the Engineering faculty of the University of Peradeniya. Nimal, indoctrinated with Communist ideas, those on which the insurgent organization ravaging the country at that period were built upon, was an active student leader.

On arriving at the university, Somaweera is informed that his brother has died following a protest near the President's office. Different versions of the cause of his death are given. Some said that he had committed suicide by hurling himself out of the window while other witnesses said that he was pushed out of the window by police officials. Even though a court case was held and three witnesses; representatives of the student body, the police party at the spot during the scuffle and a final year female medical student give evidence each party seemed to speak for their benefit trying to defend themselves. Somaweera felt that only the medical student seemed neutral and spoke the truth when she said that she had not seen anything but was on the stairway when the incident occurred.

After the court hearings, Somaweera is summoned to the district police station, and he is warned by an official present, that his promotion is at stake if he aligns with the version of the student body concerning his brother's death. Somaweera acquiesces and even goes to the extent of acquitting the police of its indictments in the affair during his brother's funeral oration. A deed which he incessantly ruminates upon and subsequently regrets considerably. He is tormented for the rest of his days by his decision to clear the police without substantial proof and is looking to understand the truth.

### **3. DISTINGUISHING TRUTH AND PURSUIT OF TRUTH**

In all circumstances man wishes to know the truth. But what does truth signify? If one is in harmony with reality, it could be classified as truth. Each person could have a different notion of truth as it is subjective and varies according to each one's beliefs, experiences, and perspectives. Very basically, truth could be divided into two categories: factual truth and truth as a value. Factual truth is that which one thinks is true in one's perspective of judging objects, people, events, and concepts

with no certainty that it is THE appropriate answer. Baudart (1999), a French professor of philosophy, sees truth as a work of the mind, which tries to grasp the accuracy of reasoning, the coherence and the exactitude of matters resulting from a conflict between antagonistic forces. Hence, it is evident that truth varies from person to person. On the other hand, Nietzsche (1948), considers truth as a human value which is indisputable, not subordinate to any other values or principles thus giving it a universal status.

Some believe that truth and the quest for truth are quite similar in meaning. The latter is the path taken by one to look for what you are convinced is the truth. Therefore, Frambéry Jacobone's (2020) view that they are completely different when it comes to an end result could be accommodated. Truth is based on elements which one supposes are true, but the pursuit of truth does not really require the truth to proceed. It is a continual process which could be implemented with or without the truth for a result which could turn out to be rewarding or otherwise.

#### **4. THE NATURE OF TRUTH IN ANIL'S GHOST AND ASATHYA KATHAWAK**

In *Anil's Ghost*, the protagonist Anil, travels from America to Sri Lanka on her own accord to initiate the project of discovering the reasons for the senseless murders and violence which had taken place in the country. Sarath, a local archeologist is assigned to her, to facilitate her mission. Hence, both engage in the same mission, the former voluntarily and the latter under governmental orders. Regarding *Anil's Ghost*, truth is of the utmost importance within the confines of the novel. In *Anil's Ghost*, and Ondaatje's other novels; *In the Skin of the Lion* and *The English Patient* the main characters are on an eternal quest to discover the heart of the problem of the novel. One could imagine thus that quest is a characteristic of Ondaatje's works.

Sarath a Sri Lankan, through his experience of living in the country is aware that the citizens will never denounce the perpetrators of the crimes for fear of repercussions. Therefore, he sees the futility of Anil's mission from the very beginning. He is certain that she will be in quest of the truth without even ever grasping the truth for the simple reason that she is an expatriate, a 'novice' to the Sri Lankan environment and the conventions of Sri Lankan society, as she has been out of the country too long to have a feel of Sri Lanka and its ins and outs. Harting (2003) describes Anil as believing in "the grand narratives of Western civilization" based on "empirical truth and reason" (Heike 10). Anil's Western understanding of truth is based on the fact that "Information could always be clarified and acted upon" (Ondaatje 54) Sarath knows about "The night interrogations, the vans in daylight picking up citizens at random, (...) mass graves at Akmeemana. Half the world, it felt was buried, the truth hidden by fear" (Ondaatje, 156) and he believes that dread of punishment will never allow any form of truth, be it even the truth as Anne Baudart says which varies from individual to individual, to surface. He also understands that it is of no use looking for the truth in a country where the media is biased. He is fully conscious of the fact that in such a political environment, no one could access the untainted truth carrying the universal status given to it by Nietzsche. Sarath thinks, "Anil would not understand this old and accepted balance. (He) knew that for her the journey was in getting to the truth" (Ondaatje 156) Sarath then questions the purpose of this mission, "But what would truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. (Ondaatje 156)" Sarath recollects that the foreign press had distorted news quite often for their own ends and the findings of Anil he

thinks, could be “a flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter. There were dangers in handling truth to an unsafe city around you.” (Ondaatje 157) Finally, Sarath expresses his opinion on truth and confirms that it is a ‘principal’ thereby aligning himself with Nietzsche’s theory that truth is a value. Sarath goes on to vent his ideas on truth and indicates that he “would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use” (Ondaatje 157).

Subsequent to the discovery of skeletal remains through which Anil decides to pursue her search for the truth, Anil tells Sarath that she is of the opinion that one should know the background of a specimen to retrieve the truth and that she is confident that Sarath will be able to do it as he is an archeologist. “I need to break things apart to know where someone came from (...) You’re an archeologist. Truth comes finally into the light. It is in the bones and the sediments” (Ondaatje 259) Disagreeing with Anil on the idea of factual truth, Sarath argues that truth is a human value which is found in the “character and nuance and mood” (Ondaatje 259) of a human being. Anil replies “that is what governs our lives, and that is not the truth” (Ondaatje 259). This conversation clearly points out their divergent opinions on truth which possibly impacts the incomplete ending of the novel where the reader is left in suspense.

In *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje, deems that one cannot have confidence solely in one entity to reveal the absolute truth. Making use of the idea of cubism he uses many voices to obtain the truth. In an interview with Peter Coughlan in the year 2000, Ondaatje explains, “you know in the big and intricate world of politics today, and in Sri Lanka for example, you cannot rely on just Anil to tell the truth, or just Gamini, or just Sarath, or just Palipana, or just Ananda or whoever it is to have the only voice. Because everything is shaded: (...) So, it seems to me that a novelist has somehow, either through various narrators or through suggestion or something else (...), to suggest the complexity of any moment. It’s the morality of Cubism in a way, to allow us to see the face four different ways simultaneously.” In the novel, Anil and Sarath’s meeting with Palipana and his niece illustrate the different opinions each person holds on obtaining the truth. As Kokkola explains in “Truthful (Hi)stories in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*”, following his mentor Palipana’s opinion, “Sarath considers the truth to be of little value” and that “the conclusions one draws from the truth are of more importance” (Ondaatje 16) In reality, Palipana considered truth as “just an opinion” (Ondaatje 102), he turns down Anil’s plan built upon a factual approach which she thinks would enable her to discover the truth. Anil in her direct, occidental manner firmly replies, “We use bones to search for it, the truth shall set you free, I believe that”. (Ondaatje 102). Seeing truth as a liberator indicates the extent to which Anil will feel oppressed if she will not be able to reveal her findings. Unfortunately, this turns out to be the predicament of Anil, in the process of her search for truth. The skull of her skeleton baptized ‘Sailor’ which undergoes a reconstruction process and is given an identity by sculpting a face, disappears on the day of presenting her findings to the authority. It is replaced by another, preventing Anil from going any further and revealing the truth she supposedly discovered, and which would implicate the government in the murder. In addition, she is warned to leave the country with immediate effect. In retrospect one understands that this action was initiated in order to save Anil’s life, but paradoxically Sarath unfortunately loses his.

Concerning the novel *Asathya Kathawak*, understanding the title is important in the light of the research paper. Deciphering the title, ‘Kathawak’ meaning story, what does the adjective ‘Asathya’ signify? Is it untrue or false? ‘Untruth’ derives from



the adjective untrue, and a dictionary synonym would be 'false'. Geoffrey Thomas, in his reply to a question asked concerning this difference on the website [philosophy.stackexchange.com](http://philosophy.stackexchange.com), explains that false and untrue are not synonyms when taking into consideration the "conceptual distinctions expressed in ordinary language. A dictionary does not always do justice to such distinctions". He continues that although the bivalence in Logic claims "that there are only two truth values - true and false - so that 'untrue' can only mean 'false'" this is incorrect. In daily usage neither the dictionary definition nor the logical principles could strictly be applied to the connotation of the term as the meaning depends on how people use the language. [Thomas \(2018\)](#). takes the British philosopher J. L. Austin's famous sentence, "France is hexagonal" used by him to prove the difference between untrue and false to elaborate on his argument. In the light of this sentence, Thomas refuses to say that this statement is false, we use 'false' when we want to assert the contradictory nature of a true statement or at least of a statement we take to be true (...) because there is a vague sense in which France is hexagonal. So instead of saying, 'It's false that France is hexagonal', (he says) 'It's untrue that France is hexagonal' - meaning that it is not strictly (geometrically) true that France is hexagonal but not simply (in common sense, everyday terms) false either".

Taking into account the difference between false and untrue when reverting to the adjective 'Asathya' in the title of the novel the author could mean that it stands for untruthful and not false because Somaweera, the protagonist in quest of the factual truth concerning the death of his brother at one moment believes all that the Police says, mostly because he works and is loyal to the establishment and furthermore, is blinded by the possible refusal of a future promotion. He goes even to the extent of freeing the Police of guilt in public during the funeral oration. On reflecting on events, he subsequently realizes that the version of the police is untruthful, and he returns to his dilemma of finding the truth in the versions of the other witnesses. [Wisdomlib.org](http://Wisdomlib.org) indicates that the word 'Asathya' has been defined in Mahayana Buddhism and Jainism as untruth and in Shaivism as unreal. In light of these definitions, considering Somaweera's mindset at the final stages of the novel, where he is in a quandary concerning the reason and the mode of his brother's death it could be that the entire occurrence seems unreal to him and consequently, perhaps the title of the novel.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In *Anil's Ghost*, Anil applies the knowledge and approaches acquired in the West in order to discover the truth of the appalling events which took place in Sri Lanka. Her factual method of research seems unproductive because of the lack of transparency practiced in Sri Lanka and the threatening fear of reprisal in the country. Unable to complete her project she is hurriedly repatriated in order to protect her life. Somaweera, too is unable to pursue his search for the truth as a result of governmental influence and power. Both protagonists looking for factual truth are unable to achieve satisfactory results owing to external interference which could be detrimental to their professions and even their lives. This illustrates the illusive nature of truth and the way in which it can be falsely presented or even repressed. Unfortunately, this is a current phenomenon prevalent in conflict riddled countries worldwide. [Ondaatje \(2000\)](#)

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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