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Dispositif Memory in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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**Abstract**

This paper analyses the functionality of memory in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Apart from the nexus between power and knowledge, as discussed by Michael Foucault, *Anil's Ghost* set against the backdrop of Sri Lankan civil war captures the role of memory and trauma in establishing and maintaining power. The locus of memory, its functionality in the plethora of narratives in the text and its dispositif aspect are the central arguments of this paper. By reading *Anil's Ghost* from a memory studies standpoint, this article refines the understanding of power and knowledge relationship alongside memory's functionality in war-torn societies like Sri Lanka and Guatemala, the places that are juxtaposed in *Anil's Ghost*. In establishing power-memory relationship, elaborated on Foucault's ideology of power-knowledge, this paper questions power's productive and disciplining aim. It examines memory as one of the important strategies, for instance just like the panopticon model of surveillance, of and to exercise power in the complex context of Sri Lankan politics and society. Foucault's ideas, however, on power has not touched the aspect of memory, it is plausible to draw the triangular relationship between fear,

memory and power. Furthermore, this paper demonstrates memory's performativity and various mnemonic signifiers that illustrate the internalised trauma of the Sri Lankan people in the text.

**Keywords:** Dispositif, fear, memory, mnemonic signifiers, power

**Introduction**

*Anil's Ghost* of Michael Ondaatje is set during the civil war period in Sri Lanka. It puts forth violence and terrorism imposed by the government, antigovernmental militants, insurgents and the plight of the common citizens' lives through turmoil. Anil lands in Sri Lanka, the place where she was born and brought up, as a UN representative to investigate the increasing number of deaths in Sri Lanka. She has been paired with Sarath Diyasena, an archaeologist. She finds a contemporary bone among some ancient bones excavated from a sixth century monastic site. She suggests that they could prove the

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government guilty as the bone was found in an archaeological site that has been under police supervision, in other words, under the control of the government. As Anil says,

To fetch a dead body: what a curious task! To cut down the corpse of an unknown hanged man and then bear the body of the animal on one's back . . . something dead, something buried, something already rotting away? Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest. (Ondaatje, 2000)

Quite paradoxically, the voices of the dead are lost, though, the memory of the dead looms around and dwells in the conscious and unconscious space of individuals. Both Sarath, unwillingly, and Anil embark on identifying the dead person, and the unidentified body was named Sailor. They seek the help of Ananda, a sculptor and painter, to recreate Sailor's head. They found it was the body of Ruwan Kumara, a graphite miner. Sarath returned to Colombo to check Ruwan's name in the government enemies' list but had neither returned nor contacted Anil. Anil through one of her father's acquaintances manages to reach Colombo with the skeleton of Ruwan Kumara, but the skeleton was separated from her. Without any evidence left at hand she did not budge from her point. In the end, she hustled out of the room angrily and

helplessly with all her documents and tape recorder confiscated. Sarath, however, has managed to smuggle Sailor's body, and Anil had just a night to reconstruct her notes. She had an early flight next day to escape with some of her findings with evidences. However, Sarath is killed for his betrayal in the end.

**Foucault's concept of power**

Michael Foucault's ideologies over the years have influenced a wide array of academic disciplines. In summarizing Foucault's theme, Philip Stokes (2006) comments, 'The theme that underlies all Foucault's work is the relationship between power and knowledge (p.187), and how the former is used to control and define the latter.' Rather than only controlling and defining knowledge, the notion that power uses knowledge is widely presumed in this paper. The dimension of power's control over knowledge is second only to its strategic use of knowledge.

Foucault's idea on power and knowledge greatly owes to Martin Heidegger's and Nietzsche's works, however, placing social and cultural contexts at the centre for production of knowledge or truth that Heidegger insists on, remains unelaborated by Foucault. Precisely, the functionality of power in a war-torn society, for instance in Sri Lanka and Guatemala in *Anil's Ghost*, opposes

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Foucault's productive nature of power. Power, to Foucault, is relational, impersonal and blind. While power remains as 'the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation' (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 92), Foucault's focus on disciplining the behaviour of people becomes only secondary to controlling or subjecting the people, in war-torn societies. Distinguishing between the medieval and the modern methods of power being exercised, Foucault argues, medieval methods used violence while the modern era uses the technique of surveillance as a mode of exercising power. Much importance has been given in explaining the panopticon model of surveillance by Jeremy Bentham, its need and disciplinary output, while its effect on the people, in a shattered society like Sri Lanka, attracts attention in establishing the triangular relationship between war, trauma and memory.

Foucault's idea of power not only is productive but impersonal, rational and purposeless. In *Anil's Ghost*, power is impersonal and blind: despite Sarath's connections with the government he was killed for his betrayal; it is rational rather than relational; and has a purpose. The pervasive nature of power according to Foucault, however, echoes in the writings of Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Foucauldian

concept takes side with power, its production, establishment and development rather than viewing it from the perspective of the subjects on whom the power is exercised upon. Despite agreeing on the productive aspect of power, it is quintessential to comprehend the functionality of power on a synchronic scale of time and place. People's behaviour is changed, either through violence as in medieval times or through surveillance as in modern era, in favour of power itself rather than for the betterment of its people. Power is intelligible and can be exercised through various techniques like surveillance. The quite fascinating twin relationship, I presume, between power and memory is its pervasiveness as it circulates via communications of fear. In contrast to Foucault's (1980) words, '(...) individuals are the vehicles of power not its point of application' (p. 98), the functionality of power and memory is directed upon the individuals, becoming the vehicle and carriers of memory that power has inflicted. In the Sri Lankan civil war context, the distribution of power remains shattered, for instance, among the militants and insurgents, who started to revolt against the government and exercise power, too. Beyond resistance being an internal property of power, its establishment as a body of power is illustrated throughout *Anil's Ghost*. As the proverb, 'Knowledge is power', which Foucault believed, rather

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than power produces knowledge, power uses knowledge.

The intelligible power has penetrated deep into the memory of individuals. Sarath's constant checking that Anil's tape recorder is off before he could speak something controversial contrasts with Anil's behaviour, who seldom remembers the tape recorder. Sarath's behaviour is the cause of surveillance and it is conditioned. Memory has become a regulatory mode of power, just as panopticon. Analysing panopticon surveillance as a metaphor and imagining each cell of the prisoner as an individual memory, surveillance has delved into people's unconscious. Along with the traumatic memory that the war had inflicted on people's consciousness, fearful memory of what the power is capable of remains pervasive in *Anil's Ghost*. Another pivotal quality of power, according to Foucault, is achieved not just through surveillance but through people's cooperation in internalizing that surveillance. This internalization of surveillance marks the line of demarcation between the demeanours of Sarath and Anil.

**Dispositif Memory**

Foucault's dispositif/apparatus deals with an elaborated understanding of the exercise of power through various physical, institutional, administrative ideologies and

knowledge structures. While further deciphering this term, Giorgio Agamben (2009) in his essay, "What is an Apparatus" states,

I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses—one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face.(p. 14)

According to Agamben, language itself becomes a dispositif, which I would like to elaborate further that memory in a way functions as an important dispositif in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Fear has always been one of the hegemonic devices to subjugate and exercise power. The memory's functionality as a dispositif is

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also due to people's emotional connectivity with their lost loved ones. In *Anil's Ghost*, two instances validate the value of subjectivity along with the looming fear of the past. A group of families searches for their lost son in the sites where Anil searches for dead bodies. There are no hopes but only possibilities. The possibility of their lost son was everywhere and so was the memory attached to the past. Similarly, a woman with a hunchback appears in search of her lost husband and son. These minor narratives of the novel hover around throughout which instils terror of the past.

'And they would be present all day while Anil and the others worked, never leaving (...)', and the trauma inflicted on the masses also never left their memory. The concurrent relationship that strikes between the war in Sri Lanka and Guatemala, for instance, would help comprehensive unfurling of memory and trauma. Just as Foucault rejected the enlightenment ideology of universal rationality, his ideology of power and its functionality is dynamic pertaining to social and cultural contexts. A gaze is enough in the modern era to exercise power. The characters' thoughts and actions, affected with traumatic memory, are hampered in the novel. The novel's shifting narratives from being a victim and a witness all the major characters are possessed with the ghost of fear and memory. On emphasising the indelible nature of memory, power strategically uses it to its further

development and subjugation. This method is widely exploited by the government, militants and insurgents in the context of Sri Lankan civil war. Power ingrains fear that creates fearful memory which in turn contributes to the establishment of power.

'In the hospitality of war, we left them their dead to remember us by' (Ondaatje, 2000), emphasizes that memory becomes one of the important apparatuses of power. 'Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. *Every side.*' Despite the relational nature of power, in *Anil's Ghost* power seems to accumulate in the hands of the militants and insurgents other than the government. This shared exchange attribute of power envisages rebels or revolts not as an integral part of power, as Foucault defined, but mirrors power itself. As Sarath explains to Anil some of the methods power uses, of which fear, the memory ensued after it are quite repetitive throughout the text. Power uses violence targeting the human body, as in medieval times, creates fear that looms around in the memory of the people. Sarath warns Anil that fear is a national disease and this memory of fear is pervasive and communicable. 'A couple of years ago people just start disappearing. Or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition...And no one can tell who the victims are' (Ondaatje, 2000). Mnemonic signifiers

The novel is scattered with signifiers that reinstate the relationship between power and memory. Like

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submerged bones that Anil excavates, the memory of the lost individuals keeps surfacing to the consciousness, making the traumatic memory vigil and omnipresent. Recalling Reinhart Koselleck's term 'a present past', the individuals in *Anil's Ghost* locate themselves in time and associate, not distinguish, themselves from the past. While Anil and her teams' excavation serve as the manifestation of tangible memory, the silent manifestation of the individuals who had lost their loved ones, suggest that memory is quite coercive. Ann Rigney says, 'individuals recollect the past selectively through various media and become involved in narrating and reading to attending commemorative ceremonies (...)', while memory itself serves as a medium intrinsically as opposed to the extrinsic signifiers that Ann Rigney points out.

And as Georges Duby marks that the traces an event left are more important than the event itself as the event would be insignificant without the traces. The war and its memory as mnemonic signifiers in the context of Sri Lanka indexes different signified in the individual memory. Apart from articulating traumatic memory, the novel represents individuals as the carriers and signifiers of memory. Fearful memory is something all the characters in the novel share among themselves, highlights the rootedness of that memory and its indelibility. It is this aspect of memory that helps maintain power. Sarath describes a

scene that he has witnessed when two militants kidnapped a man in a cycle blindfolding him in a market place on a daylight, and he insists the reason behind this incident is that none of those who were watching this would forget it. This forceful penetration of fear into memory results in the internalisation of such power and results in its multiplication.

Lakma's passivity, whose parents have been killed; Sirissa, Ananda's wife, who has been abducted; and Gamini's sleepless, stressful life as a doctor who handles patients incessantly reveal them as living signifiers of war and its painful memory. They have been trapped in the web of traumatic memory. Ondaatje points out, Amygdala as the location of fearful memories in the brain. He also acknowledges memory's plurality; perhaps, the diversity in articulating and receiving trauma as well. Though diverse, amygdala controls the actions and behaviours of the characters, who have been victimised in the novel, as per power's code of conduct.

**Conclusion**

The word 'ghost' in the title of the novel metaphorically signifies the memory that Anil smuggles out of Sri Lanka along with her. The memory of what she witnessed and had been a part of would, presuming, haunt her. The memory of Sailor, Ananda, Sirissa and Sarath were to haunt her all her life. Contrarily, in the



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beginning of the novel, Anil says that Sri Lanka no longer exists in her memory. However, in the end she leaves out of Sri Lanka carrying with her an intangible ghost (memory) that will remind her of Sri Lanka never like before.

To conclude, this paper highlighted memory as one of the apparatuses to exercise power in the contextual setting of *Anil's Ghost* and elaborated on the metaphorical mnemonic signifiers that illustrate individuals as carriers of fearful memory that maintains power and hegemony.

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