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A Case of Cognitive Closure? : Transcendental Naturalism and the Diaspora in

Anil's Ghost

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Abstract

In this article, it will be my aim to show that apart from a Diasporic view that may be taken of Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost*, we can also approach it from the direction of the philosophical methodology known as transcendental naturalism, of which Colin McGinn is a pioneer. It is often also known as New Mysterianism, and occupies a unique place in the philosophy of mind. To this end, several crucial portions of the novel have been meticulously

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analysed and focused upon, with the chief aim of classifying them according to the categories of *problems* as laid down by McGinn. It is noteworthy that the Diaspora serves to *problematize* such an analysis, and therefore the protagonist's position as its subject is also examined in such a light.

“Four sorts of question may confront a particular type of cognitive being B: *problems*, *mysteries*, *illusions*, *issues*. A *problem* is a question to which B can in principle find the answer, and is perhaps designed so to do, for biological or other reasons; or at least is of such a *type* as B can answer. Everyday life and much of science consists of solving *problems* - questions that fall within our cognitive bounds. A *mystery* is a question that does not differ from a *problem* in point of the naturalness of its subject-matter, but only in respect of the contingent cognitive capacities that B possesses: the *mystery* is a *mystery for that being*. An *illusion* is (or arises from) some kind of pseudo-question, or a question that is so formulated as to suggest an answer of a kind that does not objectively exist. An illusory question is not to be confused with a mysterious one, which latter reflects ill on B, not on the question. An *issue* is a question, typically of a normative character, about which B creatures may dispute, and with respect to which no scientific theory is suited as an answer - questions of ethics and politics, say” (McGinn 3).

Indeed, when we think of Michael Ondaatje's much acclaimed novel *Anil's Ghost*, it becomes abundantly clear that the *problems* faced by the protagonist in the story may be classified into four categories, though such a nomenclature would certainly leave us with an entire array of grey areas which may remain unresolved even at the end of this investigation, by virtue of the manner

in which they are placed. Firstly, upon trying to classify them we immediately perceive that the focal *problem* of the novel easily overlaps with the *mystery* which is intrinsic to the milieu of Sri Lanka constituting Anil's *problem*. Therefore if we are to go by the words of Colin McGinn, she can in principle find herself able to solve the *problem* of establishing the identity of the skeleton which she names Sailor during the course of the investigation in the interests of human rights. The concept of the *mystery* as laid down by McGinn holds true here as well, considering that she may be perceived as being B to whom it is mysterious and awaits a solution.

The walls of *illusion* and *issue* build themselves around these two factors and may in this respect be seen from multifarious angles and instances. To complement our investigation of the matter we may further juxtapose it with Colin McGinn's concept of *transcendental naturalism*-

“Philosophical perplexities arise in us because of definite inherent limitations on our epistemic faculties, not because philosophical questions concern entities or facts that are intrinsically *problematic* or peculiar or dubious. Philosophy is an attempt to get outside the constitutive structure of our minds. Reality itself is everywhere flatly natural, but because of our cognitive limits we are unable to make good on this general ontological principle. Our epistemic architecture obstructs knowledge of the real nature of the objective world. I shall call this thesis *transcendental naturalism*” (McGinn 14).

He further goes on to clarify this concept as-

“In principle, two sorts of creature might invert each other's characteristic division of questions into *problems* and *mysteries*, depending on their epistemic talents and endowments. Indeed, the *mystery* class for one sort of creature might be *innately* soluble

by the other [. . .] Let us say that such creatures differ in the 'cognitive space' through which their minds can move" (McGinn 14).

It is with these ideas in mind that we will now proceed to investigate the diasporic aspects in the novel, beginning, of course, with the protagonist herself. Her idea and measure of herself as a person and her identity has obviously been infinitely convoluted by her oscillation between two necessarily divergent cultures amongst which she has contrived to distribute immense chunks of time in the quintessential currency of lived experience. Therefore on her return to Sri Lanka she must render herself a subject of *dediasporization* in order to proceed with the *mystery* at hand. We may think of her state in agreement with the idea that-

“Dediasporization has been defined “as the regrouping or in-gathering of dispersed people [. . .] This definition emphasizes only one aspect of the process and equates it with physical relocation to the homeland. In this chapter, by contrast, dediasporization is defined as the process by which a diasporic subject either reacquires homeland citizenship by returning to the sending country, effects generational assimilation in the host state, or reinscribes himself or herself in the transnational circuit of the transnation-state. This definition identifies three distinct locales where dediasporization can be effected: the homeland, the hostland, and the translocal arena of the transnation-state. [. . .] It is not return per se to one’s former place of residence, but rather to an ancestral territory. As we will see, dediasporization for individuals who never gave up their citizenship or acquired a new citizenship usually is a smooth process that requires only one’s return to one’s homeland as if one has never left it [. . .] Dediasporization

activates a process that entails the participation of three sets of actors to ensure a successful outcome and cannot

be assumed to be the work of the diasporan alone. This is so because the individual, the state, and society have distinct roles to play in the deployment of the process, and none of them can assume or ignore the contributions of the others, in the various phases of dediasporization” (Laguerre 128).

Therefore the *illusion* in this case is fundamentally and intrinsically woven right from the very outset of the novel, in the question that is raised about the identity of the protagonist Anil. The selfsame question is repeatedly posed to her in a formidable variety of ways, which keeps on putting her in an inexorable and relentless thrust and parry of ideological crossfire-

“‘How long has it been? You were born here, no?’

‘Fifteen years.’

[. . .]

‘The return of the prodigal.’

‘I’m not a prodigal.’

An hour later he shook hands energetically with her at the door of the small house they had rented for her.

‘There’s a meeting tomorrow with Mr. Diyasena.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You have friends here, no?’

‘Not really’” (Ondaatje 1).

The question of her diasporic identity is further renewed later on in the course of the novel-

“‘You are Anil Tissera, no?’

'Thats right.'

'You won the scholarship to America.'

'She didnt say anything. The foreign celebrity was being pursued.'

'Can you give a small talk, thirty minutes, on poisoning and snakebite?'

They probably knew just as much about snakebite as she did, and she was sure that this choice of subject was intentional, to level the playing field between the foreign-trained and the locally trained.

[. . .] She nodded. 'You contact me at lunch and tell me where.' She was saying this as she swerved past Dr. Perera.

'*You!*'

She turned to face the infamous senior medical officer.

'You're the new one, no? Tissera?'

'Yes, sir. I heard your speech two nights ago. Im sorry I.'

'Your father was . . . *this thing* . . . right?'

'What . . . ?'

'Your father was Nelson K. Tissera?'

'Yes.'

'I worked with him at Spittels Hospital'' (Ondaatje 79).

To "even the playing field," implies that by their choice of *episteme* they wish to equate their own discourse and signifying authority on a hegemonic scale equivalent to Anil in the strife for epistemic power and dominance. It is, indeed, in this fashion that nowhere can she go unscathed or unchallenged. If she is to retain her identity, she is compelled on all scores to fight for it, and this psychological ordeal has to continue until she's able to enunciate accordingly, and bring

about a splitting of herself her identity as a subject. This is what she's able to do when she relieves herself of her past as a swimmer –

“*So you are the swimmer!*” A broad-chested man in his late forties was approaching her casually, with his hand out. She hoped this wasn't Mr. Sarath Diyasena, but it was.

‘The swimming was a long time ago.’

‘Still . . . I may have seen you at Mount Lavinia.’

‘How?’

‘I went to school at St. Thomas. Right there. Of course I'm a bit older than you are.’

‘Mr. Diyasena . . . let's not mention swimming again, okay? A lot of blood under the bridge since then.’

[....]

‘Are you married? Got a family?’

‘Not married. Not a swimmer.’

‘Right’” (Ondaatje 43).

Thus, it is only after this inward resolution that she is able to commence the investigation with her colleague, the archaeologist Diyasena. It appears at their first meeting, and Anil's concluding remark becomes a kind of shibboleth by which he is able to establish her identity, just as in similar fashion she inscribed herself into a tradition far removed from her native ideology when she chose to name herself Anil, and name that belonged only to boys, and that too, purchasing it at the cost of her chastity from her own brother, an act which would be considered nothing short of heinous in Sri Lanka. This may be elucidated as follows –

“How do we conceive of the 'splitting' of the national subject? How do we articulate cultural differences within this vacillation of ideology in which the national discourse also participates, sliding ambivalently from one enunciatory position to another? What comes to be represented in

that unruly 'time' of national culture, which Bakhtin surmounts in his reading of Goethe, Gellner associates with the rags and patches of everyday life, Said describes as 'the nonsequential energy of lived historical memory and subjectivity' and Lefort re-presents again as the inexorable

movement of signification that both constitutes the exorbitant image of power and deprives it of the certainty and stability of centre or closure? What might be the cultural and political effects of the liminality of the nation, the margins of modernity, which cannot be signified without the

narrative temporalities of splitting, ambivalence, and vacillation?” (Bhabha 318)

When all these things are collectively considered, they throw some essential light on the cognitive space that she has to inhabit. Considering how deeply the ruts of political strife run throughout the novel, she tries to apprehend even the questions which should fall under the categories of *illusions* and *issues* with her Western epistemology within the ontological space that comprises both its and presently, her own Other, if we are to continue our analysis of her diasporic condition along the lines of the *transcendental naturalism* laid down by Colin McGinn. The insinuations of her past cognitive space in America under completely different conditions form, as it were, the foil and shadow to the main narrative, recurring in various forms such as lyrics-

“Oh, the trees grow high in New York State,

They shine like gold in autumn

Never had the blues whence I came,

But in New York State I caught 'em.” (Ondaatje 173)

We can also observe the same in the cultural exchanges that necessarily take place between

herself and her friend named Leaf-

“It was in the Arizona labs that Anil met and worked with a woman named Leaf. A few years older, Leaf became Anil’s closest friend and constant companion. They worked side by side and they talked continually on the phone to each other when one was on assignment elsewhere. Leaf Niedecker, what kind of name is *that*, Anil had demanded to know. She introduced Anil to the finer arts of ten-pin bowling, raucous hooting in bars, and high-speed driving in the desert, swerving back and forth in the night” (Ondaatje 210).

Once again we notice the same when it comes to a discussion of movie theatre traditions-

“In Sri Lankan movie theatres, Anil told Leaf, if there was a great scene”usually a musical number or an extravagant fight”the crowd would yell out Replay! Replay! or Rewind! Rewind! till the theatre manager and projectionist were forced to comply. Now, on a smaller scale, the films staggered backwards and forwards, in Leaf’s yard, until the actions became clear to them.” (Ondaatje 210).

Therefore it is through these interactions that her intrinsic and indelible hybridity come to light and constitute her as a kind of diasporic subject that she becomes, arriving in Sri Lanka to play what may be called the complex game of diaspora politics-

“The aim of diasporic politics is to influence both homeland and hostland policies or political practices on behalf of the homeland and the residential diasporic community. The services of these cosmopolitan activists are sought by politicians in the homeland and the hostland either to strengthen or to undermine the governmental regime, and this consolidates their recognized status as transnational brokers. Their actions are aided by cheap air transportation, periodic visits to the homeland, and the use of e-mail, telephone, or facsimile to keep alive the communication within the transnational circuit. ... This type of politics is undertaken both by activists who operate on their own or through nonprofit organizations”(Laguerre 241).

This, then, is the very fabric of Anil's personality. This is the lens through which she approaches the human rights conundrum in Sri Lanka, going on to solve the *problem* of identifying Sailor and eventually making a fair sense of the implacable political ruckus that she happens to be caught up in, when the skeleton which she so painstakingly found and analysed is stolen in order to jeopardise her presentation, including Sarath coming into the fray, heaping on top of that allegations of negligence and mediocrity in her investigation, seeking once again to deflate her epistemic and methodological predominance in the equation, therefore administering a direct and staunch challenge to the Western logoi-

“Can you be more precise?”

‘We cannot. I really dont see its relevance.’

‘Because sections of the hill outside the cave, where this one was found, had been worn down by cattle, trade, rains . . . isnt that correct? Can someone turn on the damn air-conditioning in here, its difficult for us all to think clearly in this heat. Isnt it true that in the old nineteenth-century burial grounds, murder sites as well as graves were often”in fact in nearly every case”found with less than two feet of earth over them?’

She was becoming agitated and decided to be silent. Sarath could sense them focusing on him, turning in their seats.

[....]

‘The skeleton I *could* have proved something with has been confiscated.’

‘We seem to have too many bodies around. Is this one less important than the confiscated one?’

‘Of course not. But the confiscated one died less than five years ago.’

‘Confiscated. Confiscated . . . Who confiscated it? Sarath said.’

‘It was taken while I met with Dr. Perera in Kynsey Road Hospital. It was lost there.’

‘So you lost it, then. It was not confiscated.’

‘I did not lose it. It was taken from the lab when I was speaking with him in the cafeteria.’

‘So you misplaced it. Do you think its possible Dr. Perera had something to do with that?’

‘I dont know. Perhaps. I have not seen him since.’

‘And you wished to prove that skeleton was a recent death. Even if we now do not have the evidence.’

'Mr. Diyasena, I'd like to remind you that I came here as part of a human rights group. As a forensic specialist. I do not work for you, I'm not hired by you. I work for an international authority.'

He turned and directed his words to the audience.

'This 'international authority' • has been invited here by the government, has it not? Is that not right?'

'We are an independent organization. We make independent reports.'

'To *us*. To the government *here*. That means you do work for the government here''

(Ondaatje, 208)

Therefore the *problem* and the *mystery* according to the concepts of them expounded by McGinn reach as far as the very brink of a solution. But what is in itself problematic, and also problematizes Anil's own perspective and identity is the layer of *illusion* which profoundly commingles with that of the prime *issue* of the story, and of the cognitive space that the protagonist occupies, that of political injustice and government killings. We can see in the above example from the novel how Sarath himself appears to turn against her during the enquiry which forms a kind of climax in the story. Whereas earlier in the novel she is of the opinion that the archaeologist's inner personality remains shrouded in mystery to her and to the world-

“You like to remain cloudy, don't you, Sarath, even to yourself.'

'I don't think clarity is necessarily truth. Its simplicity, isn't it?'

'I need to know what you think. I need to break things apart to know where someone came from. That's also an acceptance of complexity. Secrets turn powerless in the open air.'

'Political secrets are not powerless, in any form,' he said.

‘But the tension and danger around them, one can make them evaporate. You’re an archaeologist. Truth comes finally into the light. It’s in the bones and sediment.’

‘It’s in character and nuance and mood.’

‘That is what governs us in our lives, that’s not the truth.’

‘For the living it is the truth,’ he quietly said” (Ondaatje 162).

It is here that Sarath melds into the layer of the *issue* in Anil’s ontological space of enquiry. She does not read the signal that he wants to send. Their respective *epistemes* must differ even though they are to remain friends, which is clearly an influence that can be traced back to Sarath’s teacher, Palipana. He, like Sri Lanka, and even her own self in the middle of it all, fades away into the layer of the unknowable, and the novel extends the same quality to another important character, Ananda. Even though the time spent with them and the experiences had shape her very concretely as a person, she can never entirely grasp the changes that have been wrought within her, and also the real, inner life of Sri Lanka. This is amply represented by the image of the tranquil Buddha, which is very much like a still pool that she fails to stir despite her most earnest enquiries, and at several points, entreaties to the various persons and elements of the situation that she finds herself in. This unmitigated angst is duly mirrored at various points in the story, exemplary among them being-

“She needed communication with the outside world. There was too much solitude in her head. Too much Sarath. Too much Ananda.

Dr. Perera at Kynsey Road Hospital answered the phone. It took a while for him to remember who she was, and he was startled to be told that she was speaking to him from a paddy field. What did she want?

She had wanted to talk to him about her father, knew she had been skirting the memory of him since her arrival on the island. She apologized for not calling and meeting him before she left Colombo. But on the phone Perera seemed muted and wary.

‘You sound sick, sir. You should take a lot of liquids. A viral flu comes like that.’

She would not tell him where she was. Sarath had warned her of that, and when he asked for the second time she pretended she could not hear, said, ‘Hello . . . hello? Are you there, sir?’ and hung up” (Ondaatje 186).

This not only represents her losing a seminal last strand, which was her hold on her past in Sri Lanka, that of her father’s memory. But she also in a manner fails to represent or recommend herself to others as well as her own old self, or who she was in a past long lost, the central *illusion* of the novel, which is shattered. Her own identity is not only dissolved but proven utterly irrelevant. For this we may borrow the existential idea of temporalities where her past has now been inscribed as the “being-in-itself,” and she herself lingers only as the “being-for-itself” (Sartre). Furthermore, Colin McGinn alludes to the same when he discusses self-identity, conceding that-

“Yet philosophical reflection on this putative ontology rapidly turns vertiginous: we suffer from that peculiar philosophical anxiety which insinuates that, upon examination, *we don't know what we are talking about.*” (McGinn 283).

This, in the vein of transcendental naturalism, leaves the protagonist, Anil, to eventually run up against the wall of cognitive closure, against which she fights a losing battle. The novel itself,

thus, may be seen as crowning her effort to resolve this and find herself in inexplicable mesh of diaspora politics.

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