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Of Religious and Ethical Assimilation in Sri Lankan-Canadian Writers: A Reading of Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts.*

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Abstract

Religion and Ethics are topics that are eluded in the context of South Asian migration. While on the surface they seem unimportant, these are discourses that dictate our sense of what is right and wrong. This paper will attempt to probe into the religious and ethical consciousness of two Sri Lankan-Canadian mainstream writers—Michael Ondaatje and Shyam Selvadurai—by deconstructing their fictional works in the post-civil war context. Both the novels under consideration—Anil's Ghost and the Hungry Ghosts, tell tales about Sri Lankan diaspora. This paper will investigate the assimilation of Sri Lankan migrants into a foreign country with special reference to their religious and ethical standpoints. This investigation tries to iterate the role of religion in constructing the identity of a person and might open up avenues for further research in this line

Key words: religion; ethics; assimilation; migration; Ondaatje; Selvadurai

Body of the paper

"I didn't respond, because what I had to say was obvious. We might be living in Canada, but we had brought Sri Lanka with us." (Selvadurai 52)

"…mingling with the remnants of the plane, equally fragmented, equally absurd, there floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, land, belonging, home."-- (Rushdie 5)

Introduction

Assimilation is a complex term. It is located within the context of cohabitation. Assimilation gains meaning only within this context and successful assimilation of 'the other' results in effective cohabitation. Most often, assimilation is understood in terms of either the 'melting pot' or 'salad bowl'. The 'melting pot' requires one to subvert one's unique ethnic identity while the 'salad bowl', which is a relatively modern model of social assimilation, privileges diversity. However, both these models of understanding assimilation has their limitations. On one hand, convergence or 'melting pot' model gives out the message that in order to cohabit harmoniously, the society needs to be homogenous and on the other hand, the 'salad bowl', though it is a model of cultural mosaic acknowledging ethno-religious diversity, does not speak of interactions between various heterogeneous elements within the lived community. The elements within the said 'salad-bowl' model are under pressure to pertain—for example, a Sri Lankan in this model has a fixed identity of being a Sri Lankan and nothing more. This paper is an attempt to revitalize the understanding of assimilation

going beyond the two widely accepted models of the 'melting pot' and the 'salad bowl' (Akiner 1997), through a study of the religious and ethical assimilation of characters in two fictional works of two internationally renowned Sri Lankan-Canadian writers—Michael Ondatjee and Shyam Selvadurai.

In the wake of Charlie Hebdo incident, the discourse on religion and its link with violence/peace, the question of how religion affects one's ethical position becomes significant. Ethics can be loosely defined as a moral philosophy. Ethics is preoccupied with the question of righteousness. Religion, as a discourse, influences ones ethical standpoints (Turner 1997). Religious assimilation is an upcoming discourse in the domain of migration studies, particularly that of South Asian migration. This is because religion is looked at as a factor that hinders the process of assimilation into the foster society (Greeley 1972). People who migrate become the carriers of their religion to the West. John R Hinnells in the preface to *South Asian religious Diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States* writes,

In the 1960's and early 1970's, the era when South Asian migration grew, most outside commentators assumed the second and third generations would inevitably and increasingly assimilate into the host society. This has not happened. As various chapters in this book show, the visible evidence of South Asian religions in the West is far greater in the 1990's than it was before, not only in the form of splendid new temples and mosques, but also in the more common wearing of turbans and *hijab*, and in the number and range of religious ceremonies performed in the communities. (2).

When Hinnells argues that religious assimilation has "not happened", he means that South Asian diaspora in the West has not given up on their respective religions. While this is true, I pose the question, "How is religious assimilation understood?" Assimilation does not signify an erasure of knowledge already acquired, instead it is the process of reassessment of existing knowledge with the newly acquired knowledge. Thus unlike Hinnells who argues that the south Asian diaspora has not assimilated religiously, this paper argues that it is the encounter with the 'other' that has refined and reassessed the characters' religiosity and ethics. This paper goes beyond the two accepted models of assimilation—the melting pot and salad bowl—by looking at the changes the encounter with the 'other' brings to the 'I'. And since religion is a discourse on moral conduct, which imparts teachings about ethical behaviors (Weaver and Agle 2002), this paper will study the ethical outlooks of characters under discussion.

Ethical assimilation in *Anil's Ghost*

One of two novels under discussion in this paper is Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000). *Anil's Ghost* tells the story of a forensic anthropologist, Anil Tissera, visiting her home country to investigate the human rights violation by the government during the civil war. The story of *Anil's Ghost* unfolds in the chaos of Sri Lankan civil war. She, along with Sarath Diyasena, goes on with the investigation to find out a recently buried skeleton in a Government protected zone. She names the skeleton Sailor and an inquiry into the identity of Sailor leads them to three other cardinal characters in the novel—Gamini, Sarath's brother and also a dedicated doctor, Palipana, Sarath's former guide and an infamous researcher and Ananda, a worker in the mines and an artist. The lives of all characters are interlinked by the war. In the chaos of war, each of the characters peeps into their memories and attempts to cope with their traumatic experiences by dedicating their skills to a war-torn nation. In the end, Anil is not allowed to turn in her findings as the investigation gives proof of government aided killings during war.

This novel is religiously elusive, in that, it does not speak of faith or what is right or wrong against the backdrop of war. The only explicit reference to a religious act is Gamini reaching out and touching the Buddha in a niche of a wall. But, a subtle ethical commentary runs through the entire length of this novel. The reception of Anil's Ghost has been mixed (Kanaganayakam 2006). Goldman in "Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" reads the novel as that which "calls into question the long standing ties between Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism." (28). Derrickson writes how different critics have received the novel differently,

"LeClair writes that Ondaatje's "apolitical gaze seems irresponsible" (31) and that his overwhelming "silence on class and religion and ethnic prejudice" is apt to "retaliate somewhere" (31). Others are less acerbic but equally insistent on the author's turn from politics. Paul Gray notes the "neutrality of Ondaatje's language" and observes that the novel, as a result, features "no clear demarcations between opposing forces, allies and enemies" (75). In a more dramatic account, *The Economist* initiates its review with the title "Brrrr!" and concludes that "there is a certain coldness about the book altogether," something too "easy, tidy, and literary" in the way the story unfolds."(131)

While Ondaatje is criticized by some as being neutral, this paper argues that Ondaatje does take a political stand, which brings out his ethical consciousness through this tale. To begin with, the first character who is introduced in the novel is Anil, a Sri Lankan expatriate and a British citizen very similar to the author himself. She symbolizes the western outlook towards the ethnic issue in Sri Lanka. She is sent to Sri Lanka on a seven week project "as the Geneva Organization's forensic specialist" to work along with Sarath Diyasena, "an archeologist in Colombo" (Ondaatje 9). She travels with a British passport and has studied in the United States. At one point in the text, the narrator writes, "She was now alongside the language of science. The femur was the bone of choice." (61), meaning that she was ardently pursuing the study of western science. Thus the ethics that Anil stands for is a scientific one. Her truths are those that can be proven systematically and scientifically. Victoria Cook, in her article titled, "Exploring Transnational Identities in *Anil's Ghost*" quite rightly argues that the portrayal of Anil transcends national boundaries and acquires a transnational acculturated self (2).

When she comes into the textual space of the novel, she is presented as the westernized foreign 'other' who has come to objectively look for proof of human rights violations but as the investigation progresses, her belief in an objective truth diminishes to accommodate other ways of perceiving truth. She thinks, "But here, on this island, she realized that she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere. There was less to hold on to with that one arm. Truth bounced between gossip and vengeance." (Ondaatje 24). This is a strange realization for one who believes in the western maxim that "The truth shall set you free" (Ondaatje 44).

When Sarath tells her of the method of reconstructing the face of the skeleton they found from a government protected zone, Anil considers it as a foolish idea. According to her, the method of reconstructing the face by an artisan is un-scientific and hence might not elicit the truth that she is looking for. Anil is unimpressed by Ananda when she meets him first and is critical of him to Sarath. Anil and Sarath take him to the walawwa to work on the skeleton. Ananda begins to work on Sailor and in the following days, Anil's resistance to Ananda decreases. She notices the "sadness in Ananda's face" (Ondaatje 70), and is moved on seeing the recreated face of sailor, the skeleton. The calmness and the particularity of the face

affects her. Later she learns from Sarath that Ananda's wife was one of the people who went missing in war. It is this grief of loss that gets translated in his art works. It is Ananda, again, who reconstructs the face of the bombed Buddha statue. Ananda reconstructs the statue and paints the eyes thereby giving life to God. This act is ironic because it is an artisan who creates God and gives him vision thereby determining what s/he should see. In this character who changes grief into art, it is care and love for the living that gets manifested. Ananda does not feed into a system of hate, but chooses instead to put aside the wrongs done for a better tomorrow. Ananda is portrayed as the peace-maker in the novel. He does not retaliate against the atrocities of war, instead he reconstructs what is broken. This act of reconstruction in the face of war can be read as a healing act. He thinks, "But if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, specters of retaliation." (Ondaatje 121). Thus the encounter with Ananda teaches Anil to shift her focus from finding out the truth to looking into the process of the construction of 'truth'.

Anil is presented in stark contrast with Sarath, the archeologist working in Sri Lanka. His views on truth are radically different from those of Anil. "As an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use." (Ondaatje 65). According to Sarath, Anil who pursues truth to its end would not understand the relevance of "this old and accepted balance" (65). Sarath is introduced in the novel by Anil who notices "a precise and time-stalling mannerism in him". She compares it with an Asian nod, "which included in its almost circular movement the possibility of a no."(9). The nod, a gesture, is perceived by Anil with the implication of an inherent paradox. Sarath is thus introduced as someone who cannot be delineated linearly. He is ethically ambivalent and is not concerned with voicing the truth unlike Anil. His ambivalence springs from his way of life and his circumstances which are different from those of Anil who has had most of her professional training in the West.

> Sarath's daily path as a professional archaeologist in this world, she (Anil) guessed, involved commissions and the favours of ministers, involved waiting politely for hours in their office lobbies. Information was made public with diversions and subtexts—as if the truth would not be of interest when given directly, without waltzing backwards. (Ondaatje 24)

Ironically it is the ethically ambivalent and practical Sarath that saves Anil towards the end of the novel. He is a believer in the sexuality of care for he says, "he would, he knew, also give his life for the rock carving from another century of the woman bending over her child….the line of the mother's back bowed in affection or grief. An unseen child. All the gestures of motherhood harnessed. A muffled scream in her posture." (Ondaatje 65). Care outweighs ethics in the case of Sarath.

Bolland argues, "In *Anil's Ghost*, the horrors of the Sri Lankan Civil war are confronted by Western and Eastern philosophical and ethical systems." (21). The debates between Anil and Sarath are typical of the Western and the Eastern ethical systems. Ondaatje by carefully juxtaposing characters with different and contrasting world views drives home the importance of ethical assimilation for a peaceful co-existence. Anil and Sarath are depicted as people with different ethics—Anil is obsessed with correctness and truth while Sarath is concerned about appropriateness and concern for the living. Anil and Sarath unearth four skeletons from a government protected zone; one of which they suspect to be a person who has been recently killed. Their study on the skeleton (named Sailor) leads them to believe

that Sailor was a victim of government killing and they seek out Palipana to help them find the identity of the skeleton.

Palipana is yet another character through which much of the commentary on Buddhist history is given. He is introduced into the novel as Sarath's stringent teacher who is unforgiving of any errors committed by his students. This epigraphist who rose to fame in Sri Lanka was a central figure in the pragmatic Sinhala movement. He had become famous by "translating Pali scripts and recording and translating the rock graffiti of Sigiriya." (Ondaatje 34). He was known to his students as a strict historian and "the best archeological theorist in the country" (34) to the point that all his protégées had picked fights with him over issues of correctness by the time he was sixty. But with the publication of the translation of "a linguistic subtext that explained the political tides and royal eddies of the island in the sixth century" (35), he lost his name in his field for the texts he quoted could be found by no one. The narrator says, "Now it seemed to others he had choreographed the arc of his career in order to attempt this one trick on the world." (35). Ironically, nobody could prove his work false but he was defamed on the basis that his work could not be proven right. To him, truth was "just opinion" (44). Thus Palipana becomes a paradox—on one hand he was stringent in verifying historical facts objectively yet he had committed a "strange act" of jeopardizing everything he had stood for by publishing an unverifiable truth. Palipana never accepts that he had fabricated his last work. His ethics of being true does not come into question but it is the verifiability of his truth that is called to question. He symbolizes a many-faceted approach towards meaning and truth. It is because of this that Sarath goes in search of him to seek his advice in discovering the identity of Sailor, the skeleton. Farrier writes, "The lesson of the embrace, like Palipana's gesture, is that truth is something entered into rather than examined and described, a revelation that finally allows Anil to gesture towards the local herself and employ the problematic "us"." (90). In Anil's final conversation with Dr. Perera, Sarath hears her say, 'I think you murdered hundreds of *us*.' Hundreds of us. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally us." (Emphasis added, Ondaatje 108). The 'us' in the above mentioned conversation is what Farrier terms "problematic" and thus, needs consideration. Firstly, she acknowledges herself as one among them but the problem arises when we think about who 'us' includes. It probably includes all those who reside in Sri Lanka irrespective of their ethnicity or nationality. Thus the expatriate who returns to her homeland as a deputee falls under the trope of place and locates herself as a Sri Lankan in the above discussed conversation. But, the position that she takes does not segregate people as Sinhalese and non- Sinhalese. Instead she stands by the victims of war and speaks for people who cannot or are not given an opportunity to speak for themselves—the subaltern.

The view of highlighting a multifaceted truth as opposed to righteousness/ the simplistic ethics of right versus wrong is seen in Gamini, Sarath's brother. It is through Gamini that the reader becomes aware of the atrocities of war. He is described in the novel thus,

He turned away from every person who stood up for a war. Or the principle of one's land or pride of ownership, or even personal rights. All of those motives ended up somehow in the arms of careless power. One was no worse or no better than the enemy. He believed only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care, so the children would be confident and safe during the night. (Ondaatje 50).

Gamini is a dedicated surgeon but he was not always like this. During his childhood he was called "Meeya" or "the mouse" for he "burrowed away unknown" and he "loved never

being at the centre, while perceptive of what went on there." (Ondaatje 89). His parents were embarrassed of "unsavory anecdotes about him" (89), and gave up on him. His desire to become like his brother makes him break away from his family and Sarath. He dedicates his skill to heal people affected by war only to find that one of the dead bodies ushered into the hospital was that of Sarath. Gamini's rivalry towards Sarath which "had begun with the desire to be the other, even with the impossibility of emulating him" (89), ends with Sarath's death. Anil is forced to return to her foster nation without submitting her findings. Sailor is seized from her as her findings provide proof of government crimes. Sarath helps her get out of the country safely and smuggles Sailor out for her. But when Anil leaves, she goes back as a changed person. Ondaatje writes,

> If she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be part of her life? Would she talk to intimates about them, the two Colombo brothers? And she in some way like a sister between them, keeping them from mauling each other's worlds? Wherever she might be, would she think of them? (114).

Anil's 'western-ness' dissolves to accommodate alternate knowledge/value systems. The novel ends with Ananda performing the ritual of Netra Mangala to reinstate the bombed statue of Buddha. The last lines speaks of what the newly painted eyes of Buddha can see as the dawn breaks suggesting that there is hope for reconciliation and healing.

Thus the reader with a critical eye comes to see that Ondaatje has attributed various and contrasting ethical positions to his characters. Anil's concept of right is that which can be proven, Palipana's ethics is a paradox, Sarath's and Gamini's ethics are love and care and Ananda's ethics is creativity. It is in Anil, the other's confrontation with multiple ethical stances, that assimilation takes place. She has gone back to "the West" with the knowledge of other truths. Farrier writes, "The novel's folksong epigraph states "*Only when I return to the surface / is my life safe* (3). Once Anil has "re-surfaced" in the West after seven weeks in Sri Lanka, a question remains as to what she in fact returns with." (90). Farrier would argue that she has an "intimacy with the local" (90), when she leaves Sri Lanka. But, it is not just an intimacy. She has undergone a change within herself. She is carrying a part of the ethics of her own country when she leaves. Thus her idea of truths are multifaceted and richer.

Religious assimilation in *The Hungry Ghosts*

"In Sri Lankan myth, a person is reborn a perethaya because, during his human life, he desired too much—hence the large stomach that can never be filled through the tiny mouth. The perethayas that appear to us are always our ancestors, and it is our duty to free them from their suffering by feeding Buddhist monks and transferring the merit of that deed to our dead relatives." (Selvadurai 17).

The title of *The Hungry Ghosts* (2014) is based on this myth. The hungry ghosts are the perethayas who desired too much in life as a result of which are reborn with a "large stomach" and a "tiny mouth". They are eternally doomed for their bad karma and can only be redeemed by an act of mercy in their name. Thus, it can be seen that the novel begins on a moral note. Unlike Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* which does not have any straight forward religious allusions, *The Hungry Ghosts* is steeped in myths from Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism. The story is narrated from the perspective of Shivan, the protagonist. When the story begins Shivan is thirteen years old, a pet of his grandmother who is portrayed as an adamant and miserly Sinhalese old lady. Shivan's mother Hema has a strained relationship with his grandmother, Daya, who is referred to as "Aacho" by Shivan. Hema, who married a

Tamil man in the context of the brewing ethnic trouble in Sri Lanka lost her place in the family. The reaction of the grandmother when Hema says that she wants to get married to a man of her choice mirrors the ethnic issues playing out in the background,

> When my mother told my grandmother she was getting married, she replied, "A Tamil and a Christian," as if such foolishness was exactly what she expected from her daughter. "Are you blind to what is going on in our country? Have you forgotten the 1958 riots, how Tamil people lost their homes and businesses? How Tamil women were raped, the gold earrings ripped from their ears? By marrying this man, you will become one of those women, mistaken for Tamil because of your surname. (Selvadurai 27).

It is through this grandmother that most of the Buddhist tales that are narrated comes forth. Shivan says, "Sometimes she told a story she'd narrated before, but brought a different angle to it, filling out a scene until it became a subplot, giving a minor character greater presence on stage, or sometimes simply retelling a scene as the full tale—these variations so numerous, I am not sure today what the original story is, and where my own interpretation veers off from hers." (Selvadurai 15).

The grandmother's act of employing Buddhist tales to drive home a point is significant in the story as these are instrumental in teaching Shivan an ethical code of conduct. But, every time Daya brings "a different angle to it" she is performing an act of subversion. All other characters in the novel, despite Daya's portrayal of being stubborn and mean, are influenced by her tales that echoes moral teachings of Theravada Buddhism. It is also worth noting that the grandmother uses the Buddhist myths to justify people's suffering. When Daya goes to collect rent from a tenant who has been recently widowed, she says, "That Siriyawathy must have done something very bad in her past life, Puthey" (Selvadurai 9). Thus the practice of Buddhism, as Shivan has seen it, is not without subversion.

When Shivan narrates his mother's past, he says that he is reminded of a Buddhist tale that his grandmother once told him. In that tale, a hawk steals a piece of meat and is chased by other hawks. After a point, when the other hawks start attacking the "thieving hawk", it lets go of the meat and flies away (Selvadurai 15). Thus the hawk is free from the pain by giving up on the object that caused pain. Despite the grandmother's disapproval, Hema goes ahead and marries the Tamil man. The marriage which was more an act of rebellion than of love does not go well. He keeps losing jobs and ends up working in a lodge as manager. Hema's relationship is strained to the point of breaking up by the time they have two children—Renu and Shivan. Shivan's father's unexpected and premature death leaves Hema both free and troubled in her society—she is free from the tension of living with a man whom she does not love anymore but she is also troubled because she does not have the means to sustain two kids and herself.

Hence, she returns to live with her mother. Daya at first refuses to let them in but on seeing Shivan, her heart is overwhelmed with love and she lets them stay. To her he was like "rain soaking a parched land" (Selvadurai 100). From then on, Shivan is urged by the grandmother to be snobbish. Hema is forced to be blind to how Shivan is raised by his grandmother for want of economic security. Shivan is taught how to maintain properties and is introduced to Daya's thug, Chandralal. However, Shivan is too soft-natured to take after his grandmother. By the time he is seventeen, he discovers his gay sexuality and this discovery prompts him to take initiatives to leave Sri Lanka after the 1983 riots. Anna Branach-Kallas argues in her article about the *Funny Boy* that "the norm" in South Asia is

"defined for them by Western gendered stereotypes, whereas the luxuriousness and transgression of vestimentary codes, traditionally associated with South Asia, falls outside the respectable and the prescribed." (39). Thus, Shivan is aware of him falling short of "the norm" in his own country. This realization makes him consider America thus, "If America offered such opportunity for sex with women, did it not offer similar opportunity for people like me?" (Selvadurai 28). Shivan's willingness to migrate is an attempt to break free from the "norm" that does not accept his sexual identity. Hema presents the decision to migrate to Daya. Daya insists that she buy a house in Canada for Shivan. Thus, Hema with Renu and Shivan moves to Canada.

Initially, they are enamored by the 'western-ness' of the country. They move in with an old schoolmate of Hema, Shireen Subramaniam who lives in Canada. Bhavan and Shireen who at first seems to be good people turn out to be snobbish. The Subramaniams charge them high rent. They also seem desperate to fit into the Canadian society for which they "had no Sri Lankan friends" (Selvadurai 39). Shivan describes them thus, "They had become out of touch with Sri Lanka and did not fit into the new community. And the community's indifference to perceived white expectations—cooking Sri Lankan food, forming their own social groups—made a mockery of the sacrifices the Subramaniams had endured to integrate, sacrifices that were increasingly unnecessary." (39). Shivan's family move out of the Subramaniam's house when Bhavan misbehaves with Renu. Thus the family begin life in their "own terms" (39), in Canada. In Sri Lanka, Shivan is not part of the majority for he is half-Tamil and in Canada, he is both a foreigner and gay. His position in the margins, makes his assimilation difficult.

At first, the family is thrilled by the freedom the foster country affords them. Shivan explores his sexual possibilities while Renu fares "better socially" than Shivan and forms a circle of Canadian friends "in her women's studies program" (Selvadurai 46). Hema, though, feels that she "had tried to escape her mother and ended up in a worse place." (50). Slowly, Shivan realizes that he does not fit into the foster country because of what he is—a Sri Lankan and gay. One of his gay friends says, "We did not belong in the gay world because of our skin color, yet spurned by our own people, we had no choice but to linger on its fringes." (45). Throughout the depiction of Canada in the novel, we see Shivan attempting to negotiate his identity of being a Sri Lankan and gay. Johnson argues, "Unable to reconcile his identity with the dominant social and cultural practices of either culture, Shivan is alienated from both." (3). The only solace that Shivan finds is in the stories that his grandmother once told him.

Renu gets over her phase of socializing with Canadians and starts a romantic relationship with a Sri Lankan man, Jaya who is already engaged to Otara. This relationship fails as Jaya gives in "under pressure from his parents, their friends, relatives here and in Sri Lanka" (Selvadurai 51). Renu is heart-broken and Hema, stressed out by the problems at home attempts suicide. The news that Daya had a stroke gives the family more cause for depression. Shivan volunteers to visit his ailing grandmother in Sri Lanka. Johnson writes, "As the narrative shifts back and forth between Sri Lanka and Canada, the dominant systems of meanings and values confronted by Shivan shift and oscillate." (3).

Back in his home country, Shivan has his first serious relationship with Mili, an old schoolmate. Amidst the war, Mili, the Tamil sympathizer and Shivan, the half- Tamil fall in love with each other. Shivan, in an impulsive act, makes his sexual orientation known to his grandmother and goes off with Mili to a beach house. Chandralal's *goyalas* follow them there

and beat up Mili. Shivan now realizes the enormity of his actions. Mili is accidentally killed in the encounter with Chandralal's *goyalas* and Shivan feels responsible for Mili's death and breaks away from his grandmother. Sriyani, a friend comforts him saying, "You could not have known it would come to this. If you don't mind me saying, you misjudged this country, because you are now foreign to it. You wanted poor old Sri Lanka to love and accept the person you became in Canada. But it cannot. That does not make you responsible for Mili's death." (Selvadurai 93). Shivan, who had felt left out in Canada because of his race, believed that he would be accepted in Sri Lanka. But Mili's death brings to him the realization that a norm prevails in every society and it is that norm that dictates the way one lives in a said society.

Shivan comes back to Canada and after some time he moves out to Vancouver. Meanwhile Renu goes to study in Montreal. Shivan takes up a job in a University and befriends Michael with whom he begins a romantic relationship. Shivan opens up to him and narrates the story of his mother and his sister carefully leaving out Mili and his grandmother from his tale. His conscious act of leaving out Mili and Daya is an attempt to erase them from his past. He is rewriting his past thereby asserting "the power of representation" (Nash, 3). But as in the grandmother's tale that says, "Like a leopard stalking its prey through tall grass, a man's life pursues him, waiting for the right moment to pounce." (122). Just a few weeks after Shivan and Michael celebrate their second anniversary, his mom calls to say that Renu and she will be visiting them in Vancouver. When they come, Shivan finds that his mom has come to discuss his grandmother who had by now had many strokes. Shivan who has kept the story of his love for Mili and the trouble with grandmother from Michael, is disturbed. He tells Michael the truth and their relationship enters a turbulent phase with Michael accusing Shivan of being untruthful. Shivan decides that he has to go back and make peace with his grandmother, for like in the Buddhist myths, a wrong doing can only be rectified by an act of mercy. "Turn back, turn back," a voice within me cries. But as in my grandmother's story of King Nandaka, the road behind me has disappeared." (Selvadurai 140). The story ends with Shivan preparing to leave behind, Michael, Canada and everything he loves to "a world of security checks, disappearing Tamils and suicide bombers." (140).

Throughout the life of Shivan, as it is narrated within the reality of the text, he understands his world in terms of the Buddhist tales. His assimilation into the Canadian society is also influenced by the religion that he is brought up in. His last move of going back to Sri Lanka, after all the problems he has faced, gives the reader an understanding of the moral stance of Shivan. He has moved away from rewriting his life to making peace with his troubled past. He wants to make peace in the face of hostilities. Shivan can be compared to Ananda in *Anil's Ghost*. They are the peacemakers—Ananda performs the Buddhist religious act of Netra Mangala which signifies Buddha coming to life and Shivan, like the King Nandaka, is going to a place where destiny is taking him.

Conclusion

A study on South Asian migration to the West gives scope for critics to understand the intricacies of assimilation. In both the novels under discussion, it can be seen that assimilation gives a transnational flavor to the characters. They have transformed and assimilated multiple value systems, liberating themselves from the tyranny of a single truth. Their assimilation has transcended structural models such as 'melting-pot' and 'salad-bowl'. The titles of both the novels suggest haunting—*Anil's Ghost* and *The Hungry Ghosts.* The ghosts are the baggage that the characters under discussion carry with them. It is the knowledge of the 'other' and the realization that the 'other' is posited within the context of

'I'. This realization is a major influence on the identity of Anil and Shivan. They are prompted to reassess their values systems and become reflective.

Canada and Sri Lanka are posited as different knowledge/value systems in the novels under consideration. Their encounter happens within the locus of the 'I'. Stuart Hall argues that, "Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space, or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses." (10). Thus the unsettled 'I's transformation into a self-reflective 'I' is facilitated by ethical and religious discourses that the characters encounter within the reality of the texts. Reflexivity and reconciliation as an ethical position emerges out of their experiences of migration. Thus Sri Lankan Canadian diaspora's experiences as fictionalized in the texts under discussion offer an insight into the metamorphosed ethical positions that could be constructive in further research.

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