

“The Hopes, the Aspirations, the Guilt Embedded in Our Shaken Lives”: Romesh Gunsekera’s *Noontide Toll*

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Abstract

The fiction of Sri Lankan diasporic writer Romesh Gunsekera has generated considerable debate among critics. While some accuse him of pursuing an Orientalist agenda to the extent of being a native informant; others, especially those residing in the West, have lauded him for faithfully depicting the socio-political climate that prevailed in Sri Lanka. The two decades that have elapsed since the publication of *Reef*, however, have witnessed a subtle transformation in his fiction and in critics’ response to the same. *Noontide Toll* (2014), which is Gunsekera’s first work on Sri Lanka since the cessation of the war, is more contemplative than exotic, and his critique of the island largely understated rather than explicit. Eschewing the controversial strategy of privileging the country of adoption over that of origin which some accused him of in *Reef*, Gunsekera here makes his narrator Vasantha exploit the post-war obsession for travel to transport in his van local and foreign customers who are scarred by their past and negotiate the present with uncertainty as they contemplate the need to construct a future. By having many of his characters in this work adopt a more philosophical approach to life, in making subtle adjustments to his authorial strategies, and in showing a willingness to treat the multifarious issues currently faced by the nation in a nuanced and in-depth manner, the author has succeeded in “neutralising” the debate on his work.

Keywords

Sri Lankan diasporic writing, homeland, travel, trauma, post-conflict readjustment, Orientalism

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With the publication of *Reef* in 2004, Romesh Gunesequera became arguably the Sri Lankan expatriate writer who divided opinion most among aficionados of Sri Lankan fiction in English. Thiru Kandiah, a senior Sri Lankan academic, lashed out at the novel in these terms:

And deposited on all this is a blanket of tropicalism, presumably intended to invest the situation with a certain exotic, 'oriental' charm.... This is the very stuff of the tourist postcard. None of which can, however, cover up the cultural violations that go on under the blanket, very much the kind of cultural violations perpetrated during colonial rule, but gratifyingly carried out this time round by the natives themselves. (50-51)

Rajiva Wijesinha is even more aggressive in an article on Gunesequera's next novel *The Sandglass* in which he says,

Given such audacity, one should perhaps cease from criticism, and simply admire someone who has managed to fool so many people in Britain. The problem, however, is that recognition in Britain leads to adulation here. Gunesequera's books will not only sell better than those by more genuine writers, they will be promoted more, by booksellers and even by academics. That is one problem. The second is that, as far as Sri Lanka goes, the opportunity creative writing offers for raising issues otherwise ignored is passed by. The colonised country remains forever colonised, a compendium of boys, booze and bombs, with no chance of exploring the subtleties that actually make up this complex society. (14-15)

It must be said that, while he has his many detractors, Gunesequera is also not without powerful supporters especially in the West who are quick to support him when castigated by resident critics. Minoli Salgado for one claims that "the expatriation of Gunesequera's work on the basis of his negative representation of the country [by Kandiah] is not only presaged on an essentialist reading of the authentic but also on a prescriptive notion of what 'positive,' culturally validated representations of the nation should be" (153). And in response to Wijesinha's comments, she asserts, "Cultural assimilation is thus drained of its multicultural basis, rejected as external to the basis of a legitimated, authenticated identity as the registers of a beleaguered, imperilled 'Sri Lankan' cultural inheritance are marked by its overdetermination" (156).²

While academic discussions on Gunesequera's early work continue to take place, though not as frequently as before, the focus of this paper is on *Noontide Toll* his most recent work of fiction based on contemporary Sri Lanka, which has

² For more approaches to the controversy, read Perera's "Images of Sri Lanka Through Expatriate Eyes" and "The Perils of Expatriation and a 'Heartless Paradise'"; Burnett; Lau's "Re-Orientalism" and Ranasinha's "The Shifting Reception."

not generated any such polarisations among critics although by locating the collection entirely in Sri Lanka he has taken even more risks than in *Monkfish Moon*, *Reef*, *The Sandglass*, *Heaven's Edge* and *The Match* which were partially situated in the UK where he actually lives. Such a strategy would have normally served as a lightning rod to the Sri Lankan critics who have previously accused him of writing on socio-political situations in contemporary Sri Lanka that he does not really understand since he left the island decades before. But such a situation has not arisen yet.

In "The Sinhalese Diaspora," Lisa Lau dismisses the notion of "diasporic fatigue" among diasporic writers. She asserts, "the fact remains that for the migrant, (the) migration is often the key defining event of his or her life, the pivotal event, the starting point and source of so many life-altering experiences. The literature may be fatigued by diasporic focus, but the diasporic subject himself seldom is" (63). One is not sure if Gunesequera who has written more fiction on the "diasporic subject" than any other Sri Lankan expatriate writer felt the onset of such fatigue and thus confined the diaspora element mainly to a single story but the collection as already indicated has escaped controversy thus far. From being a novelist who had gained some notoriety for depicting the country as a fallen paradise, a dystopia, or one that is ravaged by war and terrorism with exile perhaps the only option for those who felt victimised or unable to fulfil their desires within, Gunesequera was now challenged to portray a different set of circumstances, an island that had seen the end of the ethnic conflict after a 26-year-old war. It could be said even at the outset that he has accomplished the task of reflecting on the past and what is possible in the future with the sensitivity and tact that were in abeyance in some of his previous work.

An important change is his choice of narrator. In reviewing the collection for *The Guardian*, Shehan Karunatilaka says, "Vasantha's thoughts are the soul of the book, rambling and poetic, wrapped in folksy wit and shrewd observation. Through him, Romesh Gunesequera examines the central argument that continues to rage across the island and its many roads. How should Sri Lanka address its past? Do we dig it up or do we bury it?" Vasantha who runs a van for hire having retired from his government job is indeed the "soul" of the book but his importance is premised on the fact that his pronouncements and judgements are often contradictory. There are indubitably some commonalities between Vasantha and Triton, the narrator in *Reef*. Both have emerged from the margins of society and are shrewd, ironic observers of life around them but the parallels cannot be taken much further. Vasantha remains at his social level while Triton ends as a successful restaurateur in the UK; in fact, the story proper is framed by this self-possessed, successful Sri Lankan expatriate who is given to making caustic comments on his country of origin from his vantage point in the UK, comments which hold sway because the author does not present any countervailing position.

While Vasantha, too, passes judgement on the island, his unreliability as a narrator is a *donné*. Unlike Triton, he vacillates, contradicts himself often, and is generally in a muddle which interestingly makes him more endearing as a character though the reader is alerted to the possibility that his declarations could be fraught despite being valuable. Two examples from the collection would confirm this claim. He says, at one point, "A driver's job is to stay in control behind the wheel and that is all. The past is what you leave as you go. There is nothing more to it" (25). Contrast this with "But for all the driving I do, I never seem to break out. I am always in the van. And whenever I go in the van, I reach the edge and have to turn back like an ant on a floating leaf. I go everywhere in this country but nowhere in my mind. Maybe you can never really leave the past behind. It's in your head and outside your control" (102). The contradictions, ambivalences and vacillations referred to are discernible especially in those stories that deal with the war. As Maryse Jayasuriya rightly observes, "the collection poses questions that are acutely relevant to Sri Lanka. What is the boundary between a war-torn and post-war society? At what point do the effects of war stop affecting a nation and its peoples? To what extent does the end of a military conflict lead to genuine efforts at reconciliation?" ("Amnesia" 89). In "Folly," a veteran soldier who has shot many LTTE cadres explains how he once waited until a powerful female Tiger he had tracked down to her home had completed breast feeding and burping her baby before he pulled the trigger. He was moved by her lullaby, the tune of which was identical to that sung by Sinhala mothers to their babies although the words were different. He also observes that even hunters do not kill animals in such situations. But that "compassionate" gesture does not decrease his post-war trauma. He says, "Only now, after it is all done, I feel I am the enemy of myself. I have wounded myself, no? I cannot ever look at my mother again. Not without always seeing that face behind her. ... I don't know what that baby will think of us, when he grows up. But I had to do it, no?" (20-21).

In another story, Vasantha drives Fr. Perera and a foreigner to an Army Mess in the North to meet a Major. The Major is suave, articulate, good humoured and hospitable but all three observe the menace that is masked by his gregariousness. The Major had beaten a woman and left her for dead in his hometown and Vasantha's guests, who have made the trip to gather evidence and have him prosecuted for this and perhaps other illegal actions during the war, speculate on the atrocities he would have committed when unfettered in the North.³ The divergent responses to the case are illuminating: While the Englishman insists on prosecution, Fr. Perera worries about insufficient evidence and Vasantha, who is

³ Gunsekera is rather hazy on why a foreigner would come all the way to Sri Lanka to have the Major charged for an act of violence that was restricted to the domestic sphere. One can only speculate that in having him prosecuted for such an offence, he would be also made to pay for his "war crimes."

charmed by the Major for treating him like an equal, wonders whether the Major's actions should be considered in an ameliorating spirit because they are normal in times of war. These divergent views succinctly capture the ongoing debate among various interested groups within and outside Sri Lanka on whether such deeds constitute war crimes or not.

In "Roadkill," Saraswathi who works as an Assistant manager in the Spice Garden Inn is outwardly professional but the scar on her neck, a calloused trigger finger, and deadly accuracy in killing a rat by throwing a beer bottle at it indicate her past as an LTTE combatant. Though determined to keep areas of her life "cordoned off," as it were, Vasantha's impolitic questions on her background bring out her suppressed feelings as she tartly responds, "after a war, it is best not to ask about the past" (102).

There is also the Sri Lankan General who is featured in fashion pages for his skill as a ballroom dancer but makes several guilt trips to the humble home of a family that had been decimated by the war. A pyrrhic victory under the General's military leadership had led to one boy dying in battle and his brother an amputee. The father, on being erroneously informed by the Army that both were dead, had committed suicide and the mother had lost her sanity. The General, though aware that his repeated visits to the home to assuage his guilt and effect reparation are futile, continues to do so because he cannot ignore the compulsions from within.

"Reconciliation" and "integration" became buzz words soon after the conflict ended. The most clichéd way of effecting reconciliation in literature would be through love relationships. Gunasekera does not hesitate to employ this strategy in *Noontide Toll* though there is a twist to his use of it. The soldier Vasantha meets in "Ramparts" after he has been transferred to Galle post-war is torn for several reasons. He and his colleagues are so used to the theatre of war that in peace time they "don't know what to do and just want to go back" (132). More importantly, the soldier's "heart is there, in Trinco, in a small red-and-yellow bakery on the bay road where she sells bread and biscuits" (133). This geographical divide between the Sinhala soldier and his Tamil lover who is based in Trincomalee is, however, not the only problem. A convoy of vehicles he and his comrades were travelling in had been ambushed by the Tigers during an operation. In an exchange of fire, he had killed the girl's brother whom he had later identified by a bloodstained family photo in the LTTE combatant's person. The soldier concludes, "I got rid of the picture. He shouldn't have been carrying it. I have never told her. It was before the victory but you know how it is. Some things you can't forget. Even if you burn the stuff, the smell sort of sticks. You can't wash it off" (135).

It would appear from all these stories that there is considerable guilt and remorse inherent in some individuals who feel that they had compromised their humanity in the heat of battle, while others who had been even more violent and bestial project themselves as "civilised" in peace time and feel that they have

nothing to answer for. Because these are interconnected short stories, Gunsekera has had to forgo depth for breadth but the “flashes” of insight he provides force readers to reflect deeply on the vicissitudes of war and their repercussions. To Jayasuriya, “The issue at hand seems to be whether to allow witting or unwitting participants in violence to forget the past, reinvent themselves and live their lives, or to remember past atrocities in order to prevent their recurrence” (“Terror” 205). While peace has been restored, reconciliation and normality are ideals that cannot be achieved immediately in a context where people are still battling demons within and without themselves.

Gunsekera's depiction of foreigners in this collection is also somewhat different from his previous fiction. Apart from the odious American, Robert, in *Reef*, Western characters encountered in his other work rarely invite major censure or satire. In *Noontide Toll*, however, Vasantha declares early, in referring to the tourists who hire his van, that “Having paid for a piece of paradise, they are then bombarded with warnings and get worried about travel sickness, dengue, landmines and nerve gas and so are amazed to get to their pleasure pools unharmed.... In their relief, their generosity gets the better of them” (13). Such ironic comments on the IQ of some tourists and the travel advisories they receive which are at some variance with the actuality were unthinkable in Gunsekera's first novel *Reef*. That Vasantha desires to keep a distance between himself and his foreign customers is also patent. In “Turtle,” a couple from the old Czechoslovakia arrives to escape from the problems that had beset their country and are enraptured by the exoticism of the island. But their naiveté is exposed soon enough when the night watchman to whom they effusively exclaim that they feel so safe by the balmy sea in Sri Lanka and that he is privileged to have such a job, reduces them to shocked silence by laconically informing them that he had lost twenty-two members of his family to the Tsunami. In commenting on such sequences that take place in Vasantha's travels in the South of the country, Paul Binding remarks, “The same phenomena accosts him as up North—the impossibility of ever mentally banishing experienced violence. The insensitivity of so many travellers to the pains of other people's pasts” (35).

Gunsekera's critique, however, becomes even more severe when characterising the Leonard Woolf fanatic Miss Susili⁴ in the excellently titled story “Humbug.” Initially, he makes us sympathise completely with this young woman from Britain who is distraught that the iconic buildings associated with Woolf during his time in Hambantota are to be torn down in the name of development – such occurrences, one should say, were frequent in Sri Lanka after the war with

⁴ Although Pico Iyer calls her a “rich returning Sri Lankan,” Susili, a Sri Lankan name, and Vasantha, in comparing Susili with her English husband Colin, refers to the two as “black and white” (211) in terms of skin colour, there is no indication whatsoever that she is a first-generation member of the Sri Lankan Diaspora. Since she is so young with little grasp of current Sri Lankan realities, one could assume that she is temperamentally more British than a Sri Lankan expatriate.

the State creating concrete jungles to impress the masses and perhaps for self-aggrandisement as well. The hotel employee who has neither tact nor a sense of history and a purblind view of modernity also fantasises about the new harbour and airport which will attract countless tourists who will surely savour the “state-of-the-bedrooms: climate control, rain-showers, triple X adult TV, you know. Full Works” (216) once the old rest house is renovated. His comment, “We need to modernise for tomorrow’s visitors, not yesterday’s tiffin-tuckers” (217) would suggest that preserving a building for its historic value leaves him baffled; in fact, as he informs Vasantha sotto voce, “Nona tikak pissu, neda?” (219), which translates into English as “the lady is slightly mad, is she not?” Gunsekera is perhaps being somewhat mischievous here through this otherwise fatuous person in the hotel trade who had read Leonard Woolf’s *The Village in the Jungle* in school. Silindu, the main character in Woolf’s novel, is also infamously described as “tikak pissu.” That he would use this expression to describe an aficionado of Woolf’s work is no accident but a calculated insult. Susili who is distraught by this demonstration of philistinism is somewhat mollified when in having lunch in a hotel after they are refused service at the Rest House she meets Abeysinghe whose father had worked with Woolf and provides her with anecdotes which she relishes. However, her “humbug” nature (or more bluntly, hypocrisy) is made apparent and her lack of grace and “civility” exposed, when she refuses to donate her dog-eared books to Abeysinghe who runs a library as a community service to create literary awareness among people in the area. What makes the sequence ironic is that he is trying to create the awareness that Susili found lacking in her encounter with the boorish executive at the Rest House.

“Humbug” is a multi-faceted story which poses several questions but there is one that is not asked by Vasantha, Susila, Abeysinghe, Colin or the employee at the hotel. The reasons given for dismantling the Rest House are obviously crass but the question arises why a building should be preserved to memorialise an Englishman whose *The Village in the Jungle* is regarded by a post-Saidian generation of literary critics as one which “reflects colonialist attitudes, judgements, and ideological and cultural conditioning” (Ranasinha, “The Shifting Reception” 36). Reading this story against the grain allows one to conclude that both the Sri Lankan version of Raj nostalgia and the compulsion to modernise for material gain alone should be queried as the island faces the future.

Gunsekera regards the new dispensation with some ambivalence as well. While recognising that with “The decades-old debris of blown-up banks cleared, the burnt-out carcasses of buses carted away” and “the oil barrels of makeshift checkpoints gone” (230) the country can at least imagine a peaceful future, he cautions that the ideal is far from being achieved because “someone gets shot for speaking out of turn, or saying the wrong thing, and you realise that there are consequences after all” (230). The government’s strategy of maintaining post-war triumphalism could brook no opposition or revelations that would jeopardise its

cause, so Vasantha is being factually correct. The country remained militarised in many ways with journalists, social activists and opposition politicians threatened, assaulted, kidnapped or killed for stepping out-of-line.⁵

The nationalistic euphoria also resulted in the younger generation especially forgetting the carnage before the so-called peace. One of the most evocative stories in the collection is entitled “Scrap” in which a group of Chinese businessmen are taken to the notorious “No-Fire-Zone, or was it the combat zone” (90) in Mullaitivu, a stretch of beach in which civilians were ordered to stay until the war had ended but many perished when fired on by both sides to the conflict. The Chinese are interested in purchasing the abandoned vehicles for scrap. The account of the piles of lorries, buses and vans which the Chinese have come to inspect is rendered very effectively but the site of the human devastation is more chilling in its description:

If architecture is said to be frozen music, then what was before us was frozen pandemonium. Cars, vans, lorries, buses, cycles, scooters, every kind of vehicle jumbled up and abandoned in creeks and ditches. Whereas the junk fields we had seen before were like a catalogue collection of a mad museum, bizarre but sorted out by type and size, this was the headlong rush of a mass of vehicles petrified in the past and whose occupants had vanished.

The set had been switched to that of a disaster film and all the actors had been vaporized. (88-89)

Unfortunately, the scene which so shocks Vasantha, his client Sepala and even the Chinese visitors, leaves some young Sri Lankans from the South unmoved. They have chosen this site to make a music video and “out on the sand, about a dozen youngsters were singing and dancing to music thumping out of a silver Pajero. There were a couple of other vehicles nearby that seemed to rock to the beat while a film crew with large cameras and sunshades wheeled about” (90). None of these players see anything wrong in drinking and dancing to *baila* at a site still raw from the recent slaughter of civilians fleeing from the last stages of the conflict. When Sepala remonstrates with them by saying, “You can’t do that here?” (90) and “Don’t you know what happened here?” (91), one of them responds, “Happened? Are you talking history? We are the future, machang. The fuckin’ A future no?” (90)

With the cessation of the war, many Sri Lankans became obsessed with the idea of marketing, entrepreneurship and using modern technology to promote both. Gunsekera satirises this tendency in “Fluke” with considerable humour. Vasantha’s passenger Mr Weerakoon, the resource person at the seminar “Marketing: The Secret of Success,” is, as the author describes him, “a man of

⁵ Read Vimukthi Yapa, “CID Links Army Spies to Several Hi-Profile Rajapaksa-Era Murders.”

the modern world. The brand-new face of our remodelled country open at last for full-on business” (145). But the blue suit, his blue “pretend leather” bag, and smarmy manner indicate phoniness and conceal a deep insecurity. Not only is he totally lost when technology fails him but he is petrified that the secrets stored in his phone and computer (both of which Vasantha can access with his native intelligence) will be stolen by others. Even his presentation complete with “bell curves and market segmentation and www shots seemed so much hot air” (148) to Vasantha who ruminates on how much more effectively he had “marketed” his services as a van driver. The other participants too do not impress. They are a motley crew of a Buddhist monk who seems totally out-of-place in a seminar on entrepreneurship and two giddy young women who relish the attention paid them by men both young and old. The one who intrigues Vasantha most, however, is the ex-Navy commander who has employed some of the craft purchased to fight the LTTE into whale watching ships for tourists. Despite his initial bonhomie, he becomes dejected towards the end when he recounts to Vasantha the attempts by foreign powers to find out the truth about casualties in the war: “Not good for tourism, not good for me, not good for you. We all make mistakes, it is not always a war crime” (153).

Pico Iyer is absolutely correct when he says that “*Noontide Toll* says more in its 235 short pages, about Sri Lanka’s ‘war within’ and the ‘Gulfers, gangsters, pilgrims of pain’ eager to turn it to advantage, than many an epic could. And in the process, it poses questions about Cambodia and Rwanda and, perhaps, one day, Syria, as all work hard to move past the sins and sorrows of the past without simply pressing a button that says ‘Delete.’” Unfortunately, “Scrap,” “Fluke,” and other stories reveal that people from all strata of society are more than willing to press the “delete” button and get into “carpe diem” mode in “our brave new world of infinite opportunities” (154), a tendency which Gunesequera does his best to thwart in writing this collection.

What of the Sri Lankan expatriates? As previously suggested, in *Reef*, expatriation was shown as some kind of panacea for all ills which is one reason Sri Lankan critics regarded his fiction with some scepticism, but here Gunesequera’s accounts are nuanced and multi-layered. In “Deadhouse,” Dr Ponnampalam who had left Sri Lanka before the conflict returns to show his roots and the palatial home that his family had once owned to his son Mahen who has never been to Jaffna before. Ponnampalam’s Jaffna has vanished beyond recall, however, and even that past seems flawed and fraught now. As he tells Mahen, who though initially unenthusiastic, subsequently relishes the challenge of living in Jaffna, “I don’t know son. I don’t know if I can. I learnt something growing up here. It was a refuge once, but even in those days the place seemed haunted. Can you imagine what it would be like to live in there now?” (77). Such pronouncements are reminiscent of *Reef* but here Ponnampalam’s position is neutralised by Sujitha who now occupies his old house. Inspired by a public

lecture, she had left her Canadian comforts to make a contribution to Jaffna defying the dangers posed by both the Tigers and the Government forces. In turn, she motivates the initially indifferent Mahen to consider a future in the North. Rather than valorise flight from Sri Lanka, which was the message in *Reef*, the author here encourages expatriates to return and rebuild in a context where the peninsula is being exploited by others and its residents who survived too dispirited, traumatised, embittered and devoid of leadership to fully engage in the hard work involved in reconstruction.

If Mahen ponders on the possibility of returning to the North after his first visit, the unnamed, studious young man Vasantha meets in “Renewals” plans to go to Italy where one of his cousins is a cook and another sells paintings (one of them had been a Tiger hero) because “for me, the future is another country” (118). Once again, however, Gunsekera does not use the opportunity to glorify expatriation. Despite his desire to further his studies abroad, he is proud that the Jaffna library has been rebuilt and that it “will one day have a hundred thousand books, like it used to. Even if it does not bring back the poetry, the ola leaves, the record of our civilization and all that, it would still be worth waiting for” (117).⁶ Another reason for his maintaining links with Jaffna is his girlfriend who will presumably continue living in the North for the time being as he suggests to Vasantha. What Gunsekera stresses in this story is the determination and resilience of such people in Jaffna who can study English and Italian (with a focus on Dante) on their own despite deprivations suffered during the war. This encounter takes place when Vasantha was hired by Mr Desmond to take him to Jaffna for a needs assessment of the Jaffna Library. While Mr Desmond concludes after the visit that “management and technology books” donated by the Americans and “agricultural development books from the UK” will “do the trick” (122), he is contemptuous of the “bloody strange woman,” the librarian, for requesting books on literature and language which he considers passé. One of the major debates on reconstructing the North centres on what is needed therein with people in authority who do not live in these areas often deciding on what is required without properly consulting those affected, a national debate which Gunsekera subtly introduces through this particular episode.

I began this paper with a quotation from Rajiva Wijesinha in which he blames Gunsekera for failing to use his skills as a creative writer to raise awareness about the complexities of Sri Lankan society. *Noontide Toll* is possibly a rejoinder to such accusations. Pico Iyer says,

⁶ The Jaffna library which boasted one of the best collections of books, manuscripts and other material in Asia was burnt down in 1981. To date, there are differences of opinion whether it was done by the Sri Lankan police on directives given by the ruling party politicians in the South or the LTTE.

I sometimes wished Mr. Gunsekera was giving us a full-fledged novel instead of a collection of sharp-edged pieces. But the gathering of fragments here mirrors the jigsaw puzzle of a broken nation, and the very claim of an overarching vision or narrative development might, in such a world, be the greatest offense of all.

Vasantha's ruminations show that Sri Lanka is in a state of limbo. The war is over but still impinges on the present and plans for the future. Significantly, the last story which focuses solely on Vasantha is titled "Running on Empty" (as opposed to the one which opens the collection named "Full Tank") and located in Colombo. The cessation of the war has prompted people in the city to let their hair down, relish life in the fast lane and (to use a cliché) live as if there is no tomorrow. In this *phantasmagoria*, Vasantha sees "party people tumbling out of blacked-out German cars into coffee bars and nightclubs –the few who have more money than sense.... Perhaps they know something the rest of us don't and are enjoying whatever they can get hold of before the coffers run dry" (232-33). Vasantha cannot relate to this neon-lit world and yearns instead for real companionship which his social position, innate diffidence and the mobile existence he relished at one time had prevented him from experiencing before. And at the end of *Noontide Toll*, he seeks out this woman who works in a pizzeria. She knows this "Van man," as she calls Vasantha, from previous visits and while serving him, "sprinkles stardust in a circle like a healer and smiles as if tonight, as darkness falls, she might just bring me everything" (235). Some commentators ignore the auxiliary verb "might" and read this final sequence in a totally positive light. But that is counter to the spirit of this collection. As Steven Heighton rightly points out, Vasantha's conception of himself "imbues the book with a muted, sombre tone and – interestingly, given its peripatetic nature and structure – a static quality." Vasantha craves rootedness on occasion but is fated to travel constantly. He and many of his passengers wish to move forward after the war but find themselves immobilised by hallucination, amnesia and atrocities committed in the past.

Under the circumstances, Vasantha's projections are at best ambiguous, at worst wishful thinking. One has seen promise undercut so often in this collection that this could be one of the chimeras that "come and are briefly illuminated, then all too quickly completely forgotten in the noontide's toll" (235). After all, Gunsekera suggests elsewhere that Vasantha is sexually diffident or deficient. Vasantha claims in "Renewals" that "glandular fever....put an end to a lot of youthful dreams of random fornication" (113) and in "Ramparts" that he "used to always carry a condom in my coin purse, ever-hopeful, until it and all hope dried out" (130). Also, in the same story, he details how he had fallen in love with a woman from an entirely different social stratum whom he had helped when her car stalled but was not brave enough to formalise his interest. This lack of commitment, uncertainty about the future, ambivalence towards the past and

tendency to underachieve is what Vasantha to some extent shares with the country at large.

It would be useful at this juncture to once again compare Vasantha with Triton. The full quotation in *Noontide Toll* which provides the title to this essay goes thus:

I carry a big load now, whenever I go, from the yearning of teenagers to the heartache of soldiers. I carry more than dreams. There is so much in my head I wonder how I will ever get it out. How do I do it before it is too late? Before I forget what has happened, what I saw, what I thought, what I believed on all those journeys north and south. *The hopes, the aspirations, the guilt embedded in our shaken lives*. Before I give up on the stories that make us who we are and drift with the tide into oblivion like every other sleepy grey head in the world. (235; emphasis added)

At one level the highlighted lines above are reminiscent of Triton's ruminations towards the end of *Reef* when he hears the "seabirds cry, plaintive calls of cormorants and black-tipped herring-gulls as sad as our uprooted, overshadowed lives" (182). Both are depressed but the reasons for the same and the scale are quite different. Triton is temporarily saddened because he realises that he is not in his country of origin but this mood passes swiftly enough as a few pages later he begins to anticipate the end of his "rags to riches" story:

My life would become a dream of musky hair, smoky bars and garish neon eyes. I would learn to talk and joke and entertain, to perfect the swagger of one who has found his vocation and, at last, a place to call his own. The snack shop would one day turn into a restaurant and I into a restaurateur. It was the only way I could succeed: without a past, without a name. (190)

Put differently, he makes a strong case for expatriation and the sadness converted into exultation, even cockiness without too much difficulty. If Triton's sense of feeling uprooted is temporary, Vasantha's notion that he is adrift is well nigh total. Though he considers that being in perpetual motion (virtually) as a van driver brings fulfilment, initially, he is exhausted and craves fixity at the end. He has neither the temperament nor the wherewithal to enjoy the "smoky bars and garish neon eyes" like Triton; what he does possess, however, is a compulsion to speak which is the reason for the narrative. It would appear that Gunsekera has progressed beyond Thomas Hardy's dictum in his poem "In Tenebris II" that "if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst" (117). While he does not hesitate to highlight the worst in Sri Lanka after the war along with the illusion that normality has been restored, he also provides incidence of humanity and examples of a few people who are prepared to do their little part to begin the process that would eventually bring about "real normality" to the island. Such a

balanced approach not only creates a sense of awareness among readers but has also conceivably won over Gunesekera's harshest critics.

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