

Home as an Emotional Construct in Romesh Gunesequera's *The Reef and The Sandglass*

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Abstract

Globalist discourse confounds the once clearly demarcated territorial borders of geography, national identity and belonging. This is more so in a diasporic situation that forces us to rethink concepts of nationalism, transnationalism and transmigration. Territorial belonging becomes complex for the traversals involved question the rigidity of identity itself. The categories of religion, ethnicity, gender and nationality become unstable. Diasporic identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses, and the location of belonging gets governed by these varying identities. Since identity itself is grounded in the huge unknowns of our psychic lives, memory plays a vital role in unravelling of the ways in which the discontinuities of time past and time present collapse spatial and temporal boundaries. Such deterritorialisation of the idea of homeland describes the disjunctions and fractured conditions of lived reality. The idea of nationhood and belonging is, therefore, always in a state of flux and mediated by personal and collective memories.

The fiction of Romesh Gunesequera, a Sri Lankan writer now living in London, weaves together themes of memory, exile and postcolonial upheavals. The paper attempts to study two novels of Gunesequera, *The Reef* (1994) and *The Sandglass* (1998) and see how the territory of emotions determines the territory of longing and belonging in a diasporic situation. Being governed by location in time and place, the expatriate's feelings about "home" are indelibly marked by his relationship with the home country. Located in London, the novels echo the histories, fugitive memories, crashed dreams and moments of promise that lie interwoven with lives lived in Sri Lanka.

Abstract in Malay

Tulisan wacana global telah memburukkan sempadan geografi dan identiti nasional yang dahulunya jelas. Ini lebih terserlah dalam keadaan diaspora yang memaksa kita memikirkan semula konsep nasionalisma, transnasionalisma dan transpenghijrahan. Hak milik kedaerahan menjadi rumit kerana perjalanan yang dilalui mempersoalkan kekakuan identiti itu sendiri. Kategori agama, bangsa, jantina and kewarganegaraan menjadi tidak stabil. Identiti diaspora timbul sebagai suatu yang belum pasti atau yang

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masih dipersoalkan di antara beberapa tulisan yang bersilangan dengan lokasi pemilikan yang dikawal oleh pelbagai identiti tersebut. Oleh kerana identiti itu sendiri berakarkan pemikiran kita yang sebahagian besarnya tidak diketahui, kenangan memainkan peranan yang sangat penting dalam membongkar cara mana ketidaksenambungan masa lepas dan masa sekarang menyatukan batasan kawasan dan masa. Idea kawasan tanah air yang tidak berbatasan begitu menerangkan ketiadaan pembahagian dan keadaan perpecahan kehidupan sebenar. Idea tentang kenegaraan dan hak milik adalah sentiasa beraliran disebabkan kenangan peribadi yang terkumpul.

Karya cereka Romesh Guneseera, seorang penulis Sri langka yang sekarang menetap di London, adalah anyaman tema keceleruan ingatan, keterasingan dan isu pascakolonialisma. Artikel ini cuba mengkaji dua novel karya Guneseera, *The Reef* (1994) dan *The Sandglass* (1998) dan meneliti bagaimana emosi menentukan perasaan keinginan dan rasa dipunyai dalam keadaan diaspora. Kerana dipengaruhi oleh tempat dan masa, perasaan seseorang yang tinggal jauh dari tempat asalnya tentang tempat tinggalnya itu ditentukan oleh hubungannya dengan negara asal. Berlokasi di London, novel-novel tersebut mengimbuai semula sejarah, ingatan pengalaman berkelana, mimpi yang tidak tercapai dan saat pengharapan yang terikat dengan hidup sewaktu di Sri Lanka.

Keywords

Immigrant, transnationalism, terrorism, memories, emotions, marginalisation

Keywords in Malay

Penghijrah, transnasionalisma, keganasan, kenangan, perasaan, pengengetipan

Globalist discourse confounds the once clearly demarcated territorial borders of geography, national identity and belonging. This is more so in a diasporic situation that forces us to rethink concepts of nationalism, transnationalism and transmigration. Territorial belonging becomes increasingly complex for the traversals involved question the notion of identity as fixed. The categories of religion, ethnicity, gender and nationality become unstable. Yet the diasporic movement, as Braziel and Mannur claim, marks “not a postmodern turn from history but a nomadic turn in which the parameters of specific historical moments are embodied... and scattered and regrouped into new points of becoming” (3). Diasporic identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, located between a number of intersecting discourses with the location of belonging being determined by these varying identities. While the immigrant’s movement has a forward looking attitude, that of an exile indicates compulsory isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past. A refugee, on the other hand, seeks survival away from the homeland that for him comes to assume a baggage of fear and trauma that interferes with her or his feelings of belonging. Since identity itself is grounded in the huge unknowns

of our psychic lives, memory plays a vital role in unravelling of the ways in which the discontinuities of time past and time present collapse spatial and temporal boundaries, creating what T.S. Eliot describes in the *Four Quartets* as “the still point of a turning world” (64). Rather than being a territorial construct, “home” comes to assume emotional dimensions. Such deterritorialisation of the idea of homeland describes the disjunctions and fractured conditions of lived reality. The idea of nationhood and belonging, in a diasporic situation is, therefore, always in a state of flux and mediated by personal and collective memories and desires projected into what Uma Parameswaran calls, “the corridor of time, standing between the past and the future” (319).

The fiction of Romesh Gunesequera, a Sri Lankan writer now living in London, weaves together themes of memory, exile and postcolonial upheavals adroitly. The paper attempts to study two novels of Gunesequera, *The Reef* (1994) and *The Sandglass* (1998) and explores how the territory of emotions determines the territory of longing and belonging for the diasporic subject. Being governed by location in time and place, the expatriate’s feelings about “home” are indelibly marked by his relationship with the home country. Though set in London, both these novels echo the histories, fugitive memories, crashed dreams and moments of promise that lie interwoven with lives that have been lived in Sri Lanka.

The narrator of *The Reef* is a Sri Lankan boy named Triton who is sent to work for the marine biologist Ranjan Salgado. Mounting Tamil terrorism forces Mr. Salgado, a bourgeois, landowning Sinhala intellectual, into exile. He along with his houseboy move to England, setting up a “home” separated from the history of their homeland. But as Hall points out, “History has to be understood as a continuous dialectic or dialogic relationship between that which is already made and that which is making the future” (229). Therefore, Mr. Salgado, after several years in England, seeks his future back in his island home, summoned by a desire to hold on to a lost dream and the memory of a lost love, while his servant, Triton stays behind. Alone in London without a past, Triton remains determined to survive and transforms his makeshift existence by an alternate dream – to turn his small snack shop into a Sri Lankan restaurant. Though both master and servant had left their homeland as refugees, the servant is happy making a “home” in England, for his life in Sri Lanka offers an unengaging past and a meaningless future. In contrast, in spite of the worsening political scenario in the island nation, Mr. Salgado’s moorings in life lived in his country draw him back to it. For him, it is all a question of memory. He tells Triton, “we are only what we remember, nothing more... all we have is the memory of what we have done or not done” (*The Reef* 190). “In the end, belonging has to do with the people you’re with – not with places” claims

Gunesequera and “alienation... has nothing to do with being in a different country” (Interview).

The diasporic identity, as Jasbir Jain argues, carries with it an ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refugee. “While one requires,” according to her, “the projection of one’s culture and the ability to enhance its understanding, the other seeks refuge and protection and relates positively to the host culture” (Jain 11-12). By cashing on his culinary skills, Triton becomes an ambassador of Sri Lankan culture in England and simultaneously also seeks refuge there by entering into a symbiotic relationship with the host country. He is, what Abdul Jan Mohammed describes, as a “syncretic border intellectual” who is more at home in both cultures and reaches out to both simultaneously combining and synthesising them; while Mr. Salgado is Mohammed’s “specular border intellectual” who is unable or unwilling to be at home in an adopted society (96-120). Although educated in England, Mr. Salgado’s position as an exile now is indicative of an enforced isolation that results in an emotional withdrawal from the host country. Since geographic displacement is not the only kind of dislocation, the territorial acceptance or rejection as “home” is governed by mental and emotional markers.

Though the novel focuses on domestic space, while the violence of civil war looms large in the background, the upheavals become a major ingredient colouring the memory. Instances of terrorist violence rock the placidity of Mr. Salgado’s household when his close friend and companion, Dias, disappears mysteriously and is reported to be drowned, off the reef in the rough sea. The sea, by implication, is the militant youth of Sri Lanka and violence not only in its occurrence but in its very nature becomes a harbinger of change. The reef and the fragile coral becomes a metaphor for a land poised to crumble into fratricidal self destruction. “You see,” says Salgado at one point, “this polyp is very delicate. It has survived aeons, but even a small change in the immediate environment... could kill it. Then the whole will go. And if the structure is destroyed, the sea will rush in, the sand will go. The beach will disappear” (*The Reef* 58). The vulnerability of the island mirrors the vulnerability of “homes.” Where is home, asks Gunesequera, for people who hover between a Sri Lanka that no longer embraces them and an England that they are reluctant to embrace? The colonial tension having been transferred to the post-colony, there is a preoccupation with the process of self-preservation through the act of transformation that determines the immigrant’s relationship with his homeland.

The novel *The Sandglass* also depicts the complexities related to the idea of home that is formed through negotiation of identity in relation to experiences encountered in Sri Lanka and England. When Prins Ducal arrives in London for his mother Pearl’s funeral, he is full not only of grief but of unanswered questions about the past. Among the secrets that his mother has taken to the grave is the mystery of his father’s much publicised “accidental death” nearly

forty years ago. Memories bubble slowly to the surface as he attempts to uncover the truth with his friend Chip, who is also the narrator of the novel. As Pearl's ex-lodger and confidant, Chip has assumed the role of a keeper of Ducal's secrets. The bits and pieces form a chronicle of four generations of the family that is intricately linked with another clan, the Vatunases. The hatred between these neighbouring families is a metaphor for the Sinhala-Tamil conflict on the island. Once more, Gunasekera abstains from depicting the inferno back home in terms of bloodshed but focuses on family antagonism, shady business dealings and political power struggle as representations of the turbulent times.

As is evident from the title, the events in the novel *The Sandglass* are filtered with a strong emphasis on the passing of time. Though spatial movement marks a change, Pearl feels that "the world... did not change much from place to place; not as much as it changed with passing time. It's time that wreaks havoc with us, you know. Plays hell with everything" (*The Sandglass* 51). Temporal and emotional associations govern her rejection of her "homeland" as "home" after her husband's death. Feeling trapped in her house surrounded by hostile territory she escapes to London because that is a place where she feels she "belongs." It is in London that she spent the happiest time of her life when she went for a belated honeymoon with her husband. Her "unloved house" in Sri Lanka was presided over by Jason who she felt "seemed to become a true colonial: a man obsessed with the place and status – geographical and social" (*The Sandglass* 23). Marginalised in her own home she hopes, to quote Said, "subvert the manipulative meta-centre" by rejecting it (qtd. in Jain 25). Her shifting to London was a way of disowning a troubled past and reclaiming a cherished one. "That is how," narrates Chris, "Pearl came to England. In love with a shadow in her head that she couldn't quite focus on until she got here" (*The Sandglass* 64). In the "accidental" killing of Jason, she becomes a victim of the violence rampant in her country. The political catastrophe translates as an emotional calamity and further dislodges her from her "homeland."

On the contrary, her son Prins's rejection of "mother" for "motherland" is governed by a baggage of strained relations and a quest to cash on the troubled situation in his homeland "by making money out of paintings, tourism out of terrorism" (*The Sandglass* 41). "You have to escape and go where you can find yourself," he feels, "or you stay and transform what is around you until it becomes your own" (*The Sandglass* 37). Fractured memories and a desire to fulfil dreams of success become mutually interchangeable and result in a restless "self" in search of fixity. "Memory and desire" Uma Parmeswaran points out, "cannot be differentiated, they both occupy the same space and evolve to the centre; but the centre is located in a sense of exile, in a place that never was, and hence the perpetual interplay, and endless torment" (321).

The predicament of physical and emotional ostracism in a situation of exile, sometimes assumes mythic proportions as is the case with Pearl's second son, Ravi. His year long visit to America had dislocated him not only from the country but from life itself. With his English accent, his brown skin was a bit of a shock for the Americans he encountered. "In this country," he says, "it's my skin that people notice, that goes in front of me, everywhere. People look at me and they see darkness first. Even my shadow seems darker to them than theirs" (*The Sandglass* 65). A Sri Lankan, living in England, visiting America affords him an experience of multiple consciousnesses, each being incompletely realised. And "unfinished identities," as Paul Gilroy claims, "necessarily exhaust the subjective resources of any particular individual" (qtd. in Braziel 50). This results in a consumptive uncertainty regarding the construction of selfhood. The ambiguous identity leads to a hazy relationship with location so that the feelings of belonging become problematic. Ravi's passion for collecting travel tickets is indicative of this unstable relationship with land while his reluctance to leave "home" reveals a fear of dislocation. Ultimately, finding no place where he could feel at "home," he gets his own ticket out of life. "It's a question of memory.... Should we remember things as a way of learning, or forget them as a way of healing?" wonders Gunesequera (Interview).

The fiction of Gunesequera is peopled with such wanderers seeking anchorage. Victims of emotional and political violence, memory and desire become foundations on which they construct their idea of "home." But the memory is not nostalgic in the sense of yearning to bring back the "lost home" or "lost city" or the "lost time," as Salman Rushdie claims but recognition of the irretrievable erosion of things as one lives (11). The "home" is structured on new linkages and circumstances of habitation as a requisite for survival. It exists on a constantly shifting axis driven by a desire to reshape whilst exposing the fictionality of all "homes." The territory of "home" is circumscribed as much by mental geography as by its representation in spatial and temporal terms. In Gunesequera's work, there is a movement well beyond the stereotypical vision of a narrative of reclamation to a foregrounding of the impact of troubled Sri Lankan history and the rooms of memory they have spawned. The fundamental concern is a need for constant deferral, for "home" is an emotional construct constituted by memories and desires that question their own terms of reference and the makings of history.

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