"WE ARE ALL ARTISTS OF OUR OWN LIVES": A CONVERSATION WITH ROMESH GUNESEKERA

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Sri Lankan-born British writer Romesh Gunesekera is a poet and writer of fiction. His first collection of short stories, *Monkfish Moon*, was published in 1992, winning for him critical acclaim. It is a powerful collection, both for its deft mastery of style, characterized by poetic subtlety and understatement, and for the dynamic within the text that portrays the ambiguity of the exile who reflects on "home." This collection of stories presents differing views of Sri Lanka and emphasizes the need to return, albeit with the imagination, to that place which, in a sense, becomes a metaphor for change. In each story, the writer maps out how individual lives, in Asia or in the West, are marked by catastrophic political events that transform the spirit and identity of a country and its people: those who live there, those who leave, and those who choose to return. Gunesekera seems to imply, in this collection, that the land of one's childhood always haunts those who leave it, and the memories, coupled with the imagination these spark off, become central to the identity of the exile abroad.

This theme is one he retakes in his first novel, *Reef*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1995, which is a novel of remembering—and perhaps even defining—a lost home. Innocence in the years before a war is the theme of the book; *Reef* is an elegy for a time and place that is gone forever but which remains alive in the mind of Triton, the narrator. Triton works as cook for Mister Salgado, a marine biologist studying the country's reefs in an attempt

Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies 18 (1997): 43-54.

to check their destruction. The reef then becomes the principal metaphor of the novel, symbolizing the devastation from the inside of the precarious socio-political structure. This lyrical novel is a *Künstlerroman* laden with sensuous descriptions of the colors and fragrances of an island that is alive for Triton. One of Gunesekera's principal triumphs in this novel is the perspective he presents, which moves from that of Triton as an adult in England to that of himself as a local boy in Sri Lanka. The counter-orientalism of the novel is evident, as we are shown the island from the inside, replacing the Westerner's view of the East with the Easterner's view of the West.

Q: Can we begin with a brief story of your life, with some biographical details?

GUNESEKERA: My biographical details are very sketchy. That's the way I like writers to be, rather than having huge biographies. I was born in Sri Lanka in 1954 and lived there in my childhood. I went to the Philippines with my parents in the 1960s. We spent a few years there, and then in the early 70s, I went to Britain. I would have been about 17 or 18. I've lived in Britain since then.

Q: When did you start writing? And why?

GUNESEKERA: I've always been interested in books. And I think that people who are interested in books are people who are interested in somewhere else, somewhere else meaning just "not exactly where they are." There is a world inside books. So I used to be fascinated by worlds in terms of reading. Not reading great literature, I never read "important" books. I would read just pulp fiction, in fact. Then I started reading American fiction which I came across a lot of in the Philippines. And American fiction, as it was in those days, about ten years out of date by the time you got it in the sort of place where I was. So it was the generation of writers in America who were alive and writing for the moment which made me realize that writing was something people did, that books didn't just appear, that someone wrote them. So that's how I got interested in writing, and I think that's when I started writing. I must have been 14 or 15, that sort of age. And I've been writing since then. Mainly, I've always written short fiction, but a lot of the time I am writing poetry. And, that's just been there—all along.

Q: Who were these American writers, and are there any others who have, if we can put it this way, "influenced" your writing?

GUNESEKERA: It is very difficult to tease out influences. My mind goes blank every time I have to think about specific writers. Depending on what sort of period we were talking about, I would probably say different things. When I started reading something that was other than pulp fiction, which was still probably regarded as pulp fiction by everybody else, it would be things by Kerouac and Ginsberg and the Beat Generation. And then when I was a bit older, I had a mixture of reading things that I just had not read before, in terms of the "classical canon," if you like. There is one writer I never remember to mention whenever I'm asked this question, García Márquez. I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* before it became such a big thing, because somebody told me to read it. It was a book to read and I read it very early on. So I have read things from everywhere. And I can't work it out in terms of who has influenced me because, on the whole, as a writer you read everything and you react one way or the other, so there are negative influences and positive influences.

Q: What is your purpose when you select your material? Is there a conscious attempt to "do" anything when you write?

GUNESEKERA: No, not really. It would be very rare for me to have a formulated idea that I will work out. To me, writing is about living, it is the way I live. It has always been the way I think. It is in that engagement—that physically formulating words—that I find the way I deal with the world. That is the primary impulse and other things come out of that. It would depend on the story. If you take the stories in *Monkfish Moon*, for instance, I think one or two would be about a voice, about a mood, and then after that it was writing the other stories to create a book of stories. Because they are not miscellaneous, they are built to be, in a sense, complete, a shape, a pattern. I wanted to sketch out that imaginary world of a place which I hadn't read very much about. Not necessarily a physically real place, but the imaginative equivalent of all those other places that you can go to without moving your feet. And I wanted to explore that. It's an exploration, I suppose, a trying to discover something, what you understand about something, what it's all about.

Q: Is there a process to your writing? Apart from the voice or the mood you speak of, do you see the form or does that develop as you write?

GUNESEKERA: Everything changes. I think my earlier writing would be pretty much open-ended and it kind of finds its own form. It would be com-

pletely untrue to say that about *Reef*, though, because, with *Reef*, I was writing a novel. I knew I was going to write a novel. I had finished *Monkfish Moon* and the next thing was to write a novel. That was part of it, so that much intention was certainly there. I did not think too much about what kind of a novel it would be. Probably I did have more definite ideas, maybe not so much on content, but on the type of novel I wanted. I wanted a novel of that size, for example. I didn't want a big, enormous novel. At that stage I thought it would be good to find this book, read it, and actually read it, not carry it around. I think I knew the size of it, the shape of it, before I started. But the actual content was an exploration.

Q: Who do you write for? Do you have a specific public in mind?

GUNESEKERA: Not with the first two books. But that again is, I think, a changing thing. The way I look at that whole question is that I write for someone who is willing to read. Willing and able to read. But actually that is an enormous demand I am making, though it sounds very slight. It means someone has got to be literate, which is a privileged position in the world—a billion people aren't. I write for someone who is willing to read responsively and open-mindedly, which again is quite difficult because most people bring a lot of baggage into reading anything. But I would like a little bit of openness. And I think I have discovered that readers need to have a sense of humour, otherwise they might end up going in the wrong direction completely. But I think after you have written a couple of books you do know some of the people who are going to be reading the next one. It's a bit like a relationship you have developed, like you've been talking to yourself and then suddenly realize that somebody has been listening to you all this time. You've then got to change it a little bit.

Q: When you are studied or reviewed, you tend to be considered a postcolonial writer. Does this label mean anything to you? Do you write as anything?

GUNESEKERA: With regards to the classification of "postcolonial writer," I still don't entirely understand it and I have not found anybody "in the field" who does either. The way I look at it, theoretical frameworks are simply a way of handling the world and if dividing it into those terms helps someone to get into a series of books, fine, that's one way. Now if you happen to divide the world slightly differently and say that you are only interested in books written between 1950 and 1975, well that is another way. To me, it

doesn't really make a lot of difference. I'm never quite sure how people see me either.

Q: But what do you think of yourself as?

GUNESEKERA: Well, only and basically as a writer. And even then, it's only when I am writing that I am a writer.

Q: Sri Lanka is clearly a pervading theme in your fiction. Does this respond to some obsession, considering that you left it as a child and have lived most of your adult life in England?

GUNESEKERA: I don't think it is an obsession. There are two ways to look at that, I suppose. With a novel like *Reef* which is, in one sense, steeped in Sri Lanka, some people see it very much like that. But that aspect of it came into the book unintentionally. The "obsession" there, for me originally had much more to do with the relationships of certain individuals, the characters in there. *Monkfish Moon*, on the other hand, was very much about getting a certain idea of a place. I think there is a kind of "convenience" again, in the way of looking at the world, to talk of how stories are located in places. Of course stories are not located in places. These are places that exist in stories. It is just very convenient for us and it is actually quite a pleasure to think of a book being about a place. But a book—a good book anyway—the sort of books that I am, in a sense, interested in— is about a place only in a very tangential way. A book is about itself. We like to think that books are about places, so if we were going to, say, Singapore, then we might want to read a Singapore story. But that doesn't work because if you actually go to Singapore, and want to know how to get from A to B, or where to buy a camera or something, you do not read a novel. And then you might read a Singaporean writer who is writing about Canada and you might actually get much more about the imagination, or about Singapore.

Q: So you believe that it is actually irrelevant to think of books as being about places?

GUNESEKERA: In a way. But, at the same time, there also is a pleasure involved in it, and part of the work of the artist is to play with these pleasures. So you end up reading about Dublin in Joyce, for example, and you can have a lot of fun with Dublin and Joyce but you are making a huge category mistake if you think you can retrace Leopold Bloom's footsteps. You can spend

money doing it, but that's not where he is, he's in the air. And that is the way I see the "place." In my own writing, in the two books on Sri Lanka, I put there the Sri Lanka I know, or have in my imagination. It was important to me. It was not so much an obsession, I think. It was more like a series. If you are a painter, and you paint your sunflowers, you do not paint another kind of sunflower every time, because maybe there is something about the colour that you're still excited about. You are still exploring it and you haven't gotten there. So I really write about this kind of place. It will change, with each book the mixture will be different.

Q: Can you say something about the role and the importance of memory in your writing?

GUNESEKERA: I think all writing is about memory, about the past. All writing is clearly about the past. Even scientific writing merely records your observations, what has happened. The same happens with science fiction. And our imagination is fed by the past, by the impressions we remember, the things we've heard and seen. So more than just memory, I try to put in my writing impressions of things, of nature, for instance.

Q: Moving on to your novel, why did you choose a child as the narrator for Reef?

GUNESEKERA: The novel is about a man who is trying to tell the story of his life. He is trying to understand who he is, how he has come to be what he is, which means, in a sense, exploring memory, trying to understand memory. If you look at it at that level, it is a changing shape. So the picture he has of his life is a particular one. It would change if he looked back at his life ten years later, or twenty years later. It would be a very different story he would tell. But at this point in his life the important things are these particular things to do with his past which, chronologically, if you like, may not make up much of his biographical portrait, but is actually psychologically important for him. And the idea of moving from the child's view fits in with the convention. Also, the book is about identity, gaining a voice, finding a voice, which to me again is linked with the whole idea of an artist. It is an artistic enterprise, which is about finding a voice. And what you get in the book is the idea that actually we are all artists, we are all artists of our own lives. We make our own lives. And, in a sense, we do two things: we make our own lives by living the way we do, and then we recreate it in our memory, trying to deal with the things we didn't do right, for example. There is a

creation and a recreation process, which is the artistic process as well. So, that birth of the artist, the birth of the voice, to me, paralleled this idea of the child becoming an adult. That you can see in the book. In the early sections, we have a very closed, primal world which then becomes more like a family world, and then it becomes wider. It gets bigger and bigger just like in our lives. So that's what is going on, with the child, really, and that perspective allows you to see that. It also allows you to see the world as naturally as one can, I think. People who read the book and are looking for the big events of life, as it were, and want more of it, are in a sense looking for sociology or political history. But you should be looking for an imaginative life.

Q: I have the impression that much contemporary Sri Lankan fiction has deep political significance or maintains a political stance. In Reef, *for instance, you do actually imply the whole political upheaval and the child is aware of it, though he may not know how to articulate the tension.*

GUNESEKERA: The center of the story is not the situation. It's the imagination and the mind that is working and what is happening. And that is why it is fundamentally much more about memory, much more about being alive, about how you stay alive, and what you need to stay alive. Also, I want to suggest that what you need is not just memory. You need memory but, like the reef, where you have a huge amount of solidified memory, you have and need imagination on top to keep it alive. And so all those other things are going on, but those are not central to it.

Q: In Reef *and several of your short stories, there are extremely vivid, detailed and sensuous descriptions of food and the preparation of food. Were you aware this was happening?*

GUNESEKERA: Well, I don't think that was conscious. Certainly it wasn't, initially. When I look back, I realize that in *Monkfish Moon*, there are stories that do have entire meals in them. But that, to me, is simply natural. I suppose it might even be naturalistic writing in a rather old-fashioned sense. There is something else going on as well, I hope, in the books. But the truth is that in your life you really spend quite a lot of time eating or getting ready to eat. That whole process is a big thing. And it is invisible in lots of books. I don't think it is invisible in really good books—we can talk about Proust if you want. Or you take any of these big books and there are huge scenes to do with it, along with other things. The only difference is that in

Reef, you've got a narrator who is a cook so it becomes more of an obsession. And I use that. I take it from what I think is a natural level, which should be there always. Maybe it is not there only in books written by people who presumably do not get involved with cooking at all. But it is a mystery. It is fundamental to life, to social life as well, and therefore fundamental to the sort of things I write. But I think in different books, in different stories, the ways I use that will be different. So in *Reef*, it is enhanced by the fact that Triton is a cook. But, more than that, Triton is and functions as an artist. It is also the birth of an artist. Triton becomes an artist in the sense of becoming a cook, a chef, very much in the way a painter finds his palette and a writer finds his voice. In the other book, if there isn't a chef, the food will be there, but it will be in the background maybe. But having written *Reef* and having to talk about it, I have been thinking about it more. I also think it has a lot to do with my experience, biographically. I obviously use my experience and in my experience, everyone is cooking.

Q: It has also been said that the smell and taste of food is fundamental to the process of remembering.

GUNESEKERA: Yes, very much, yes. You can take the Proustian element, for instance, and even joke about it. But you can look at *Reef* in those terms, it's just got no madeleine, you have all these smells and ways of cooking which just sets it all off. But it is memory, it is a trigger.

Q: In Reef, the narrator reflects on the past on several occasions, claiming that he is either "emptied of all the past" or that he can only succeed "without a past, without a name." Why is there this need to reject or forget the past? It seems contradictory to his being led to remembering.

GUNESEKERA: I think he's a kind of cheater really. Triton as a child comes without a past, in effect. We know very little about him. We don't even know his name, he has no name. "Triton" is a kind of given name, which he acquires once he enters this other world. And he has to make a life out of it. If you look at the identities of Triton and Salgado, you see that Salgado is a man who has a well-rounded past, he has a lot of things going for him and yet, throughout the book, you see him moving from, if you like, his huge view of the world, from being quite at ease with the world, into a person who is not at ease with an open world and actually wants a closed, familiar, small world. In a sense, neither his sense of the past nor his past privileges have helped him. As far as we know, of course. Triton, in a sense, survives

because he rejects the past. Or maybe because he has no past. He started from those humble origins and becomes a survivor in the West. You get the feeling he can survive anywhere because he has learned something about himself. And he has apparently freed himself from the past. But of course, ironically, he hasn't, because when he tells this story he is telling everything about the past. So the question hangs there: is he actually still dominated by these old monsters, by the past? Does he have no imagination still? I think you have to respond to that in your reading. You need to question who the survivors are, what helps them survive, or, ultimately, who do you want to survive. Sympathies may change, your feelings may change, and there is a sense of the difficulty of making that kind of choice. There is also the desire to move away from that setting somehow, which you imagine to be safe or comfortable, a bit like coming to the end of a book and feeling you would rather like to be sucked right back in again so it can go on forever. You also know you can never do that because now you know it. That is the kind of emotion I'm trying to get into the book.

Q: In the novel, you do create a space. There is a consciousness of the reef, the house and the country. Are you trying to recreate a particular place? Is this a real landscape or one you have in your mind?

GUNESEKERA: As I was saying earlier, there are no real landscapes in fiction. They are all in the mind and we share them to some extent. Sometimes we share them with a handful of people, sometimes with communities. Sometimes, as what happens in Sri Lanka now, communities no longer share the same vision of the landscape, what it looks like, who is there, what identities. So you fictionalize everything. I feel that perceptions are a kind of negotiation with what might really be out there and what you think is out there. Having said that, at the same time, you can have this imaginary landscape that does bear resemblance to what other people might see as the same place. So there is an element of that and I was interested, I think, in just exploring again that sort-of real place at that sort-of moment in time. What I was clearly interested in was how any moment in time can suddenly seem terribly fragile and special and about to change. Urban late-60s Sri Lanka is one which was not in my consciousness, or wasn't enough. So it was an area to explore and put down into a story. It may be accurate or not. In a sense, the point about fiction is that it doesn't really matter. What matters is that, while you're in the book, it is real. Some people write and tell me that this is great because it is so familiar to them, that this is the world they know. Other people write and tell me that I know nothing about Sri Lanka.

But this is also entirely understandable. This is their world. Something like that goes on when you read books, and that is what we work out, trying to find out about us.

Q: What about the way you use language? In Reef, *there is a large amount of native terms, and there is clearly a change in the way Triton uses language.*

GUNESEKERA: That is conscious. There are some Sinhala words at the beginning. I am not sure in terms of volume whether there are more towards the end. I think there is a period when they get more. Also, the language itself becomes a little bit more complex towards the end, the articulation becomes more complex. But that is because Triton reads. And because the novel is also trying to keep together two things. One, if you like, is the linear narrative of the child growing up and therefore becoming more complex. The other one, of course, is that the complex man is already there telling the story but has to relive it. But he is also discovering something about himself as he grows through the story, so there is a natural mirror working there to make the language more elaborate. And at the same time, as Triton frees himself and achieves his independence, his identity—as he finds himself—he's getting his English. As the English becomes more sophisticated, his Sinhala is also coming back as important. It's just playing with all of that, I think, to try and make a pattern that somehow made sense within that book.

Q: The novel is also very counter-orientalist, in that it reveals how the concept of "exotic" exists only in the eye of the beholder. Yours is probably the only piece of writing that has described a turkey as an "exotic bird"! Any comments on this?

GUNESEKERA: There are several things going on. One of the things I do is to play with these ideas of East-West which, partly, is Salgado's problem. His failures are, I think, in not being certain as to how to handle this world. He seems to be able to handle it and then suddenly, he has something like a nervous breakdown, except that he is probably just getting older, because he is quite a young man at the beginning of the story. But, as he gets older, he finds that it doesn't all fit together properly. In the end, the only way to make things fit together is just to close your eyes, as it were, and hope it doesn't catch up with you, that it doesn't matter. That is part of what is going on. The other part is just really to play with this exotic idea, which is what using language is all about, really. It is to refresh the language in some sense. Again, to come back to the figure of the child, I believe that the

child's eye of the world is the poet's eye of the world. It is there to be used, it's something incredibly alive. I love that in the book and that to me is at the heart of literature. If ever the book brings out a life in it, no matter what anyone says, that is the thing for me. It is interesting how people talk about how exotic all this food in the novel is. And I say that this is the way memory works. You read the book and you have this impression of exoticism, but if you look at it again, it is not exotic, it is all terribly ordinary.

Q: Reef has been compared to The Remains of the Day, *because of the way it portrays the master-servant relationship. What do you think of this connection?*

GUNESEKERA: Again, I think that is an example of those categories that one has to use. I think that the concerns of both books, what they are trying to do, are actually very different. I don't know *The Remains of the Day* well enough to make a proper comparison. I think the fact that Ishiguro is who he is and that we share many things, including perhaps a tonal similarity—which is simply a different way of approaching language—has brought about this comparison. This may be deceptive, but if you look at a lot of books you see that *Reef* clearly follows a pattern set by somebody else. There are all sorts of books about the servant in the house. What is different, I think, is the view taken, what the expectations are, what will happen, and what actually happens. And I think the concerns with language in terms of art and the idea of the artist and the birth of the voice, are all completely different concerns. It was not an arbitrary putting together. It's a bit like a meal, you know, a book is like a meal. And a lot of meals share the same things: they are all made out of certain types of food and then you have to heat them in some way to cook them and you all eat them by putting it in your mouth. So superficially you can look at any meal anywhere in the world and see it as the same, just the way you might see all books as the same. That's the way I see it. There are other books published which have a ten-year-old starting to tell a story and there may be lots of similarities and yet they are completely different.

Q: Do you prefer writing short stories? Are you more comfortable with the form? Now that you've written a novel, a very successful one, and you can choose what to write, what will you be doing next?

GUNESEKERA: I find all writing difficult. The novel and the short story require equal amounts of imaginative energy. You have to get the story, and

that takes as much out of you whether it's a novel or a short story. Because you have more time with a novel, it seems a bit more relaxing. But it's not more relaxing because it's desperate, really, a kind of life or death thing. I still don't know how to write.

Q: What are you working on now?

GUNESEKERA: I'm just finishing the next novel. It's called *Sandglass* and it will be published next year. It is a bit about Sri Lanka, so it has the same axis as the others. The proportions are perhaps slightly different. I hope people who found something in *Reef* will find something in this, but it will be different, and longer. *Reef* is like a "what am I doing here" kind of question novel, but in the other one, the question is "how do I live, how can I survive"? It's about mortality.

Nice, March 21, 1997

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ANONYMOUS DEATHS:

A READING OF DEREK MAHON'S "A REFUSAL TO MOURN" AND CRAIG RAINE'S "IN THE MORTUARY"[1]

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in their *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, "[a] shift of sensibility has taken place very recently in British poetry" (1982: 11). Young poets coming from different backgrounds have initiated what seems to be a break away from the poetry of their immediate past: the techniques and intricacies of Modernist poetry; the socially and politically committed poetry of the 30s, an exaltation of humanist values and in itself a break from the previous modernist period; Dylan Thomas's new romantic movement of exaltation of the cycle of life and death; and the so-called "Movement" poetry of the 50s and 60s, a self-effacing, modest, unobtrusive poetry, with a didactic aim aided by a concern with structure and perfect syntax, and written in reaction to the romanticism and traditionalism of the period before their own.[2]

Nevertheless, if we have a look at the poems of this generation of poets, we will discover that a complete break with the past, a total dissociation from a previous poetical manifestation, is never fully attained. These poets cannot avoid using elements, themes, images, etc., from the poetry which they have, no doubt, read at home or been taught at school. However, their usage of elements from previous poetry is not simply an imitation but rather a reappropriation from which an essential difference will spring. As a result of their impossibility to escape from the old themes, images and techniques,

Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies 18 (1997): 55-67.