



## **(Re)Creating Eden: An Ecocritical Reading of Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef***

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### **Abstract**

*Reef* by Romesh Gunesequera was published in 1994 and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in the same year. Now an adult in exile in London, the novel's narrator remembers his Edenic childhood in Sri Lanka in the post-independence era of the 1960's, when at the age of eleven, he became an apprentice houseboy for a marine biologist, Mr. Salgado. Mr. Salgado is concerned about and obsessed with the fast disappearance of the coral reef in Sri Lanka. The paper originates from the way Gunesequera enmeshes the environmental concerns with the ethnic rivalries and the disturbed political and socio-economic situations in Sri Lanka, a country that was on the verge of its transition from a colonial economy to a neo-liberal, market-driven economy. The novel is interspersed with utopian longings and a desire to recreate the long lost Eden, the (im)possibility of which has been subtly questioned by the author himself. Although the characters in the text verbally discuss revolutionary strategies to conserve and save the eroding coastal ecosystem, yet nothing substantial is done in the end, just like the miserably failed governmental schemes that were supposed to protect the marine ecosystem but had ended up in wrecking greater havoc and had rendered thousands of people homeless. Finally, the paper will engage in examining Gunesequera's use of irony to perfectly capture the gap between 'theory' and 'practice,' desire and responsibility, power and agency and how in so doing, he has been successful in offering a critical view of the environmental degradation, which, often, is the result of the ethnic and developmental policies of Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Coral Reef, Ecological Concerns, Eden, Environmental Degradation, Utopia.





## **(Re)Creating Eden: An Ecocritical Reading of Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef***

In this paper, we propose to show how Romesh Gunesequera in his debut novel *Reef* brings to the foreground the awareness of the fast degradation of the environment, especially of the coral reefs and the marine ecosystem in Sri Lanka. In so doing, we will also throw light on Gunesequera's subtle fusion of the growing ecological concerns with the ethnic conflicts of the then Sri Lanka.

Gunesequera's debut novel, *Reef*, marked his prominence as a writer. *Reef* was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994. A novel of just one hundred and eighty pages, the story revolves around Triton and is told in the first-person narrative. It shows the development of Triton who is put to service of Mister Salgado, a marine biologist who is concerned about and obsessed with the fast disappearance of the coral reef in Sri Lanka. The novel, however, opens in Britain with a conversation between Triton and an attendant of a petrol station. Once Triton understands that the attendant is Sri Lankan, he addresses him in Sinhalese and begins his journey down the memory lane:

Then, as the stars brightened, I remembered a bay-fronted house six thousand miles away. (3)

In the forthcoming chapters, Triton informs the readers how he was exiled from Colombo after putting a thatched roof to fire and how he became a *kolla* (Sinhala for a 'boy') soon after. He was eleven when he was brought to the house of the affluent Mister Salgado. The young Triton started worshipping Salgado as his idol and very soon ousted the ill-natured Joseph, who was the attendant of Mr Salgado when Triton came to the house. Triton, in fact, became the so caretaker of his master's house after the cook-woman Lucy retired. He was totally devoted to his master and the entire little world of his revolved around his master whose voice made him "captivated" (7). Gradually, Triton began to experience the world through his master and his connections. As Triton grew up, he started learning facts of the world, from which he was totally detached, through his master. When Salgado became romantically inclined towards Nili, Triton also found himself getting drawn towards her. He tried to impress her and gain her attention through his culinary skill, a skill he was an expert in. But beyond the elitist world of Salgado and his friends, the novel shows a world of the increasing political conflicts and the ocean pressing on its people. Only when the island got totally engulfed in civil wars, Salgado and Triton fled to England and there they opened a restaurant. However, in 1983, Nili was assaulted for having sheltered the Tamils and, after knowing this, Salgado finally left Triton to meet Nili.

In the novel we find that Triton, who is absolutely devoted to his master, never even for once questions his servitude nor does he express any inquisitiveness towards the topics





discussed by his master with his friends. For instance, Triton slowly learns the gravity of the prevailing political situations outside the house of Mister Salgado and the atrocities thereof only after he becomes the passive recipient of the thoughts of Wijetunga, a Marxist JVP supporter. It is only after being negatively termed as a *kolla*, does he realize that he wants freedom deep down in his heart. Gunsekera, however, does not directly mention the political turmoil of Sri Lanka. He does not directly refer to the formation of the JVP or the events of 1971 or 1983.<sup>1</sup> The political events are mentioned just as a few passing references during different social meetings at Salgado's place. But beyond these political and social discussions, or the growth of young Triton from a *kollato* to a mature man, lies a story of a greater concern. This is the story of the disappearance of the coral reefs, a concern Salgado is obsessed with.

What is a coral reef? About the coral reef, Pam Walker and Elaine Wood write in their book *The Coral Reef*:

These [coral reef] brightly colored marine communities are found off the coasts of more than 100 countries, including the United States, Australia, India, China, Japan, Mexico, and Belize. At first glance, the reefs appear to be magnificent underwater structures built from stone. Closer inspection reveals that these aquatic complexes are actually composed of millions of living organisms resting atop the skeletons of their ancestors. (1)

Gunsekera's novel looms large with an alarming awareness about the fast disappearance of the coral reefs, a concern that cannot possibly escape the readers' eyes. Gunsekera's concern for the reef becomes evident through Salgado's obsession as he is fully aware of the crisis being posed on the reef. He apprehends that it might soon become endangered like the jungles and the wildlife of Sri Lanka. Ranjan Salgado is busy with his research regarding the causes that are leading to the fast depletion of these giant underwater structures and is trying hard to conceive a reservation strategy. He tries to collect evidence and data to support his research regarding the coastal erosion and bleaching along with the impending threats on this giant living structure. When Triton along with his master and his friend Dias reaches the outskirts of Salgado's research-station, he has a glimpse of it:

Mister Salgado only slowed down when we came to the skull-heaps of petrified coral – five-foot pyramids beside smoky kilns – marking the allotments of a line of impoverished lime-makers, tomorrow's cement fodder, crumbling on the loveliest stretch of the coast. (60)

The horror that surrounds the sight of the dead coral becomes quite obvious from the quoted lines. The dead coral is a visible proof of what globalization has done to this island. Half of the population of Sri Lanka/Ceylon lives in the coastal areas. These people living in the coastal areas are usually the economically underprivileged classes and their extreme poverty accelerates fishing and coral-mining. Before Sri Lanka's government introduced





advanced technological methods to promote conservation of nature, these people used sustainable and eco-friendly methods for fishing and coral-mining. But now conservation of nature is being done at the cost of these magnificent living structures. Thus, the reef is being thoughtlessly and mercilessly destroyed and sacrificed to feed these deprived classes. To quote Pam Walker and Elaine Wood again:

Stressors include a variety of events, some natural and some human made. Storms and changes in weather can alter the conditions of seawater around coral reefs, but most coral damage is the result of human activity. Exploitation of reefs, overfishing, increased rates of sedimentation in the water, and increased levels of nutrients in water are some of the most recent causes of coral death. . .(122)

The fishing industry has also seen a significant rise but the sustainable consumption of the resources has not at all been planned. Fishers need to rub the reefs out of fish using cyanide and other poisonous chemicals which kill almost the entire population. Fishes that run into crevices are also usually caught by hammering the reefs.

The concern for the reef as well as the marine creatures almost comes alive through every character. There is an instance where Triton takes Nili out in the marketplace to buy deliciously exotic fish for the supper. Gunsekera offers quite a dispassionate picture of the whole marketplace filled with fish, dead fish:

Their [fishes'] eyes like buttons and their mouths wide open in 'O's of surprise at being lifted from the sea, gagging and drowning on a moon of warm air, their stomachs turning before being ripped open and gutted.(118)

Nili feels awkward and has a feeling of repulsion at the smell that pervaded the air of the market. She can sense death prevalent in the nauseating atmosphere. When people get excited at the thought of having caught a dolphin, Nili pulls Triton's arm as she is disgusted by the callousness showed by the fish-sellers while killing such harmless creatures. Although Triton explains that these people have no other way for survival, yet Nili is surprised by the very thought of killing a dolphin:

'Killing. . .' she shook her head to herself. 'Why dolphins? What next?' Outside a man was filling an unmarked van with baskets of dead fish. Small pieces of bleached white coral marked the municipal parking lot. (118)

While the coral reefs provide food to billions of people worldwide, protect the marine ecosystem, the conservation strategies are transforming reefs into a lifeless structure that deck the parking lots. In an article titled "Corals At Risk: The Need For Protection" by Priya Monagurusamy and Asha Dhanasiri, the destruction reefs have been well explained:

Reefs are being sacrificed for practical reasons. Coral forms a major component of lime, an important material in Sri Lanka's construction industry. From gathering coral rubble on the seashores,





people have been fueled by increasing demand to break, and now to mine the coral. Coral mining is a global problem, Coral is the principle source of lime for Sri Lanka's construction industry, supplying approximately 90 percent of the lime used. Coral is also used as an inexpensive source of soil ameliorate which reduces acidity in agricultural lands. In certain parts of the southwestern coastal sector, coral has been mined for almost four hundred years. Traditionally, only relic reefs behind beaches were mined. The growth of the construction industry since the late 1960's has stimulated the coral mining industry and led to the destruction of living reefs.

The ornamental marine industry has also seen a drastic rise in the last twenty-five years or so. The export trade of some 200-300 species of ornamental fish and invertebrates has added to the income of this island. Such a trade has no monitoring or scientific backup and thus is destroying invaluable species at large. Along with this industry, the coral reefs and the aquatic resources have attracted tourists. To quote Priya Monagurusamy and Asha Dhanasiriagain:

Hikkaduwa is a prime example of what developing tourism can do to a hitherto untouched island treasure. . .For people around the area, this means business opportunities in the forms of hotels, businesses, and one of the biggest threats to the reef, glass-bottomed boats.

Tourism has been a key feature of the economy of Sri Lanka from early 1970's onward. Coastal areas and areas with fringing reefs have become favored sites for tourism development. . .The Hikkaduwa Marine sanctuary was declared in 1970, to protect the coral reefs in the near shore area. The unplanned tourism development and various human activities have led to degradation of the coral reefs.

This shows how the conservation strategy which was implemented to protect the reefs actually aggravated its destruction. Though the governmental strategies are apparently directed towards saving the environment from further degradation, it is the human world that is reaping the maximum benefits out of these strategies.

Salgado desperately wants to protect the coral reefs, he wants to create a free space for these living structures where no human can ever tread. He expresses to Triton his wish:

'If only we could make the whole coast like Yala. A sea sanctuary, with not a soul there. A real refuge.' He turned and looked hard at me. 'I can see it like a dream, you, know, painted in my head.'(161)





This solution alludes to the ‘wilderness’ rhetoric of Aldo Leopold. But the dream of Salgado is almost unrealistic and next to impossible. Constructing sanctuaries to protect the coral reefs is not a proper solution for the threat of extinction that they are facing. National parks and sanctuaries could indeed be seen as a few potent instruments of globalization that help the bigger industries to churn more money out of them. For example, in an article, titled “5 Coral Reefs of Sri Lanka: Current Status and Resource Management”, Arjan Rjasuriya clearly states:

Coastal areas, particularly beaches and areas with fringing reefs have become important locations for tourism development. Swimming, snorkelling, scuba diving and viewing corals through glass-bottom boats are popular activities. The majority of the hotels have been constructed without proper planning and as result numerous problems such as liquid and solid waste disposal have become major issues. In some locations such as in Hikkaduwa these issues have become acute and it has now begun to have an adverse impact on the marine environment.

Creation of restricted areas like sanctuaries for the conservation of endangered living organisms does not fully bring to the fore the economic gains that would be reaped by the global market. Sanctuaries do not even solve or eradicate the problems that lead the coastal people in destroying their own habitat. As stated above, sanctuaries aggravate the environmental pollution by dumping garbage into the water, which unavoidably has a negative impact not only on the coastal ecosystem but also on the reefs.

Salgado’s dream of constructing a “sea sanctuary” could also be viewed from a few other important perspectives. The very idea of establishing a “sea sanctuary” by driving out its native or engendered inhabitants can be said to be related to the nationalist discourse of creating a Sinhalese or Tamil community by expelling the ‘others.’ To Salgado, Sri Lanka is a land of “demons” (84). Although he is scientifically sound, yet he gives an imaginative account of how the world was formed, or most importantly, of how the evil land of Sri Lanka was born:

It was all once one place: Gondwanaland. The great land-mass in the age of innocence. But then the earth was corrupted and the sea flooded in. the land was divided. Bits broke and drifted away and we were left with this spoiled paradise of *yakkhas* – demons – and the history of, mankind spoken on stone. That is why we in this country, despite the monsoon, love water. It is a symbol of regeneration reflecting the time when all evil, all the dissonance of birth, was swept away. . . (84)

What Salgado mainly does is to map the country’s situation of political unrest onto depletion of the underwater corals. Although he ardently wants to save the coral reefs, yet his statements sometimes smack of pessimism. While having a conversation with Dias





regarding the reefs, Salgado exclaims that although studies show that corals grow as fast as a human's fingernails, yet nobody has come to know the exact rate at which the corals are disappearing. He even lists the reasons behind such an unfortunate calamity:

'Anything! Bombing, mining, netting.' . . . 'You see, this polyp is really very delicate. It has survived aeons, but even a small change in the *immediate* environment. . . could kill it. Then the whole thing will go. The beach will disappear. This is my hypothesis. You see, it is only the skin of the reef that is alive. It is real flesh: *immortal*. Self-renewing.'(48)

Salgado's research and his futile attempts of saving the reefs might have stemmed from what Buell calls "toxic discourse." Lawrence Buell's in his article "Toxic Discourse" explains the meaning of the phrase;

It underscores the point that environmentalism must make concerns for human and social health more central and salient than it traditionally has if it is to thrive, perhaps even to survive. Partly in consequence, toxic discourse also calls for rethinking certain standard expectations. . . It unsettles received assumptions about the boundaries of nature writing and environmental representation generally; it provides a striking instance of hermeneutics of empathy and suspicion as they are pitted against each other. . .

Salgado's "toxic discourse" arises from the political conflicts and disturbances supported by his scientific research. Again, as Lawrence Buell in his book *Writing for an Endangered World* says:

Toxic discourse. . . arises both from individual or social panic and from an evidential base in environmental phenomena. (31)

Salgado knows well enough about the governmental strategies and he desperately wants to warn the government about the future consequences of the Mahaweli master plan. The coral reefs were already in danger and the transition of Sri Lankan economy from a colonial to a neo-colonial, market-driven economy has made it even more threatening and frightening.

Gunsekera subtly alludes to how the government had abandoned the project of conservation of the reef in order to begin the modernization scheme of Mahaweli Dam. It was a calculated move on the part of the government when, after the Second World War, the government busied itself in the resettlement of the Dry Zone. The Dry Zone, having a scanty population, was easier to be won over by the government. The novel incorporates the Buddhist myths and nationalistic discourse in the character of Salgado. His scientific pragmatism blends with his belief in Buddhist myths of economic progress and he emphatically foresees the apocalypse, the death of the civilization mapped on the death of the vast reef. He visualizes the intense impacts that the death of the reef will have and reminiscences the past histories of mankind's civilization:





‘ . . . Inland seas, really. That is why we say *muhuda*. These were engineering feats done in two hundred BC, in the golden age of the cities of Anuradhapura and then Polonnaruwa. Some were done even earlier. Huge areas were put under water through a hydraulic system that required our *yakkha* engineers to measure a half- inch change of water-level in a two-mile stretch of water.’(84-85)

These mythologizings of the past histories and the formation of Sri Lanka enthrall Triton: I was spellbound. I could see the whole of our world come to life when he spoke: the great tanks, the sea, the forests, the stars. . . His words conjured up adventurers from India north and south, the Portugese, the Dutch and the British, each with their flotillas of disturbed hope and manic wanderlust. (85)

But later this same Salgado who was trying to amass data and evidences for his research gets so much involved in his romantic affair with Nili that he becomes quite nonchalant towards his work. Even his desire to warn the government about the ecological crisis posed on the reef gets suppressed somewhere. After Nili leaves her job, Mister Salgado and she remain confined in their room and if they are outside, they spend their time in meeting friends or going to night clubs or restaurants. Even Triton senses the urgency and is critical of the delay in the completion of the project:

Mister Salgado’s coastal project passed its zenith; he should have been drawing his conclusions together in some big report but, rather than analysing and writing, he procrastinated. (119)

Salgado leaves no stone unturned to gather evidences to support his research statements, but, unfortunately, he does not later examine the data he has asked Wijetunga to produce.

Although Salgado’s study has become stagnant, the world outside is still being torn apart by the political and social conflicts pertaining to the new governmental policies. Triton records the upheavals of the macrocosmic world outside Salgado’s microcosm:

Meanwhile a nationwide concern for *inland* seas grew as politicians invoked the spurious visions of ancient kings. All our engineers, trained in London and New England, suddenly saw great advantages in reviving the traditional skills of irrigation. But Mister Salgado let all their machinations pass in a haze. None of it mattered to him then.(119)

Later we find that the country engulfs in preparing or rather celebrating the “inauguration of the era of the Mahaweli Scheme. A giant leap into inland irrigation not seen for a thousand years. The diversion of the biggest river in the land” (120-121). In fact, this celebration was the biggest to be held in the post-independence era. The country engages in the implementation of the Mahaweli scheme while Salgado fails to warn the people and the government about the harmful impacts of the apparently conservational scheme, the







destruction of the marine habitats that will accompany the scheme and also the increased levels of salinity and siltation. Just as Gunesequera talks of the environmental degradation following the neocolonialist schemes like the one about Mahaweli, Vandana Shiva, an eminent ecofeminist also suggests that in order to homogenize the capitalist visions of the elitist classes, the Asiatic societies have suffered from two kinds of erosion. In her book *The Violence of the Green Revolution* she explains in the Introduction these two types of crises:

The first is the ecological crisis and the threat to life support systems posed by the destruction of natural resources like forests, land, water and genetic resources. The second is the cultural and ethnic crisis and the erosion of social structures that make cultural diversity and plurality possible as a democratic reality in a decentralized framework.  
(11)

She also warns about the harmful impacts that extensive irrigation system can have. In Sri Lanka, the destruction or eradication of social structures has created long civil wars between the state and the Tamils. Triton also uses the metaphor of the encroaching sea to paint the picture of the state programme of 1983 against the Tamils:

Down on the beach, the bodies of men and boys who had disappeared from their homes, who had been slaughtered by him and thrown in the sea, were washed in by the tide. Every morning they reappeared by the dozen: bloated and disfigured, rolling in the surf. The fishermen. . .burned heaps of the dead in bigger mounds than the fish they caught.  
(167)

At various points in the novel Gunesequera has successfully used the metaphor of the sea to paint the picture of the horror that accompanies or will accompany the globalization and modernization schemes. What Gunesequera tries to hint at in his novel, that is, the ecological devastation of the coral reefs, has indeed been the concern of the ecologists since years. For instance, an article titled “The Environmental Impacts of Mahaweli River Engineering and Reservoir Construction Project” by A.D.Moonasingha talks about the environmental impacts of the dam:

It is cited that soil erosion can be as high as 308 – 913 tonnes/ha/annum in badly managed tobacco lands. Neglected tea plantations are also a source of heavy soil erosion. . .The reservoirs on Mahaweli Ganga will adversely affect the river fish marshier and several other species. . .As the downstream settlement projects are implemented, the mammals are displaced and move into remaining forest habitats in the surrounding areas. Displaced animals entering these habitats causes overcrowding. Imbalances in the natural ecosystems may result in a decrease in wildlife populations. Damage to paddy and other crops by displaced elephants have increased since the accelerated downstream development.





Thus, it can be safely concluded that the Mahaweli project is just another example of a project undertaken in the name of the so-called ‘development’ of a Third World country at the cost of the destruction of natural resources and habitats of living organisms. Rather than eradicating poverty, the dam scheme focuses on the benefit of few. In *Paradise Discourse, Imperialism, and Globalization: Exploiting Eden*, Sharae Deckard says:

Ecologists have observed that rehabilitating the ancient systems of dispersed tanks and irrigations channels would likely have been more cost-effective and less destructive to the environment than the massive investments of the Mahaweli scheme, and that even the great works of the ancient irrigation kings were likely to have been intended more as monuments. . . Large dams as those of the Mahaweli scheme or the Narmada Valley in India exploit the natural resources of remote regions for the benefit of the few, and are by their nature among the least likely to generate improvements in the lives of the rural poor. (169-170)

But after the failure of the Mahaweli scheme, Triton reflects that “human history is always a story of somebody’s diaspora” (174) since the Mahaweli scheme led to the relocation and dispersal of innumerable settlers. As Minoli Salgado writes in her book *Writing Sri Lanka*:

This project was enforced through resettling nearly 130,000 families – including 100,000 Sinhalese peasantry into Tamil-dominated areas – and also resulted in the dramatic cultural and material dispossession of the indigenous forest dwellers of Sri Lanka, whose dwelling space and hunting lands were made into a national park. The relocation of the capital from Colombo to Kotte also served to mark a shift away from the island’s colonial past towards an identification and reintegration with the pre-colonial period of Sinhalese rule . . . (14)

Near the conclusion of the novel Gunesequera shows a rueful and disillusioned Salgado who finally rejects the nationalistic rhetoric that tries to call environmental technocracy as progressive. Finally at the end of the novel, we have a disillusioned, prisoner of exile Salgado as a man who understands:

The urge to build, to transform nature, to make something out of nothing is universal. But to conserve, to protect, to care for the past is something we have to learn.

Salgado has never quite realized the fact that nature and humans cannot exist separately and that human beings are a part of nature. It is this failure that proves to be a hindrance in his way of conceiving a preservation strategy for the coral reefs.

Throughout this engrossing text, the environmental concerns have been finely mixed with the disturbed political and social situations of Sri Lanka. Although the characters in the text verbally discuss revolutionary strategies to conserve and save the eroding coastal ecosystem, yet nothing substantial is done. Dias, Salgado’s friend, is no doubt enthralled by the vastness of the sea but does nothing to retain this overwhelming capacity of the fast-





degrading marine ecosystem. Although Wijetunga, Salgado's research assistant, dreams of purgation and a radical cleansing, yet like Salgado he too fails to channelize his revolutionary zeal into proper actions. Like Salgado, he too stands as a failure. Nonetheless, Gunesequera successfully weaves a tale of the then political unrest of Sri Lanka mapped onto the metaphor of a fast-degrading coastal ecosystem. Although no concrete solution is arrived at in the end, yet the verbal discourses presented in the novel are sure to make the readers aware of the depletion of coral reefs which needs urgent protection.

Gunesequera reiterates the fact that nature is registered with an omnipotent agency. The fragility of the reef and the encroaching ocean evoked through scientific, mythical and emotional instances remind the readers of their relationship with nature. Neither is nature a separate entity, nor is the human. Both of them are interrelated and human beings should be more respectful and compassionate towards the natural surroundings. In this respect, the sense of irony that pervades the novel cannot be overlooked. Gunesequera uses irony to perfectly capture the gap between

'theory' and 'practice,' desire and responsibility, power and agency. In so doing, he has been successful in offering a critical view of the environmental degradation, which, often, is the result of the ethnic and developmental policies of Sri Lanka.

### Notes:

1. The political conflicts need a special mention here. The first instance of political conflict begun with Janatha Vimukti Peramuna or simply by the activities of the Peoples Liberation Front, or more popularly JVP. The formation of JVP was carried out in a very secretive manner. Although the formation of the JVP dates back to 1964, yet the political activities of the group came into the limelight much later. The potential leaders and participators of JVP were the youths of Sinhalese-Buddhist communities who wanted to bring in a revolution in the existing sociopolitical framework and also the Marxists who belonged to the left-wing of the Sri Lankan parliament. Gamini Samaranayaka mentions in *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1971-1987*:

The historical evolution of JVP falls into four stages. The first stage covers the period from 1964-1971, during which it emerged as a left-wing guerrilla organization. The armed struggle which the JVP launched in 1971 was of a short duration and was quickly suppressed by the government in power with great force and intensity. Yet the brief conflict created turmoil in Sri Lankan national politics and international relations, unparalleled in recent political history. As a result of the armed struggle, the JVP was proscribed in 1971 by the regime in power. (34)

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