

# REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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## Lecture 34: Case Study Sri Lankan Diaspora: Reading Romesh Gunesequera's Reef

Thank you. Good morning, and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So today, we are going to discuss the Sri Lankan diaspora through our reading of Romesh Gunesequera's work Reef. Now, the Sri Lankan diaspora is one of the important diasporic communities in the context of the larger domain of South Asian diaspora studies.

**Sri Lankan Diaspora: An Introduction**



- The Sri Lankan diaspora is one of the important diasporic communities in the context of the larger domain of South Asian diaspora studies.
- It numbers about 3 million worldwide, with a significant community now settled in Europe, America, Asia and Australia.
- With reference to the global movements of South Asians, discussion of specific Sri Lankans living around the world fades in comparison to the Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi diaspora. But compared to the population of Sri Lanka, one can effectively say that one in eight Sri Lankans are living abroad :



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The Sri Lankan diaspora numbers about 3 million worldwide, with a significant community now settled in Europe, America, Asia, and Australia. However, when we look at the global movements of South Asians, discussions of specific Sri Lankans living around the world fade in comparison to the Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi diaspora. However, compared to the population of Sri Lanka, one can effectively say that one in eight Sri Lankans lives abroad. So, according to Peter Reeves, I quote, 'a remarkable diaspora-to-population ratio that is not matched by any of its South Asian counterparts,' unquote.

The Sri Lankan diaspora is not the result of a single political movement or the migration of a homogeneous group. Instead, it is a diverse collection of different groups, each moving to different locations at different times due to specific circumstances. Like other South Asian diaspora communities, the Sri Lankan diaspora can be divided into various

subgroups, each celebrating the specificities within their diaspora community. So, it would be problematic to homogenize the Sri Lankan diaspora as such.

There have been different junctures in history and different incentives that have led to emigration from Sri Lanka from time to time. People have settled in different parts of the world, and the decision to move out of Sri Lanka has been propelled by several socio-political factors. These diaspora communities all have their own cultural specificities, their own cultural realities, and localized realities, they have their own groups and even subgroups.

**Sri Lankan Diaspora: An Introduction**

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- The Sri Lankan diaspora is not a result of a single political movement or the migration of a homogeneous group. Instead, it is a diverse collection of different groups, each moving to different locations at different times due to specific circumstances. Like other South Asian diaspora communities, the Sri Lankan diaspora can be divided into various sub-groups, each celebrating the ‘specificities’ within their diaspora community.
- The various groups can be identified as the ‘Sinhala’ diaspora, the ‘Tamil’ diaspora, the ‘Burgher’ diaspora, or the ‘Moor’ diaspora.
- For an understanding of the various movements and the development of specificities of the Sri Lankan diaspora, one needs to have a preliminary preview of Sri Lanka, the people, the dynamics of social and political changes that the country had to go through.



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So it might be misleading to call them all one at once, just one homogeneous Sri Lankan diaspora, because it's not like that. The various groups can be identified in terms of the social groups they originally came from. For example, we have the Sinhala diaspora, the Tamil diaspora, the Burgher diaspora, the Moor diaspora, and so forth. To understand the various movements and the development of specificities of the Sri Lankan diaspora, one needs a preliminary overview of Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan people, and the dynamics of social and political changes that the country has gone through,

right. Historically, we see that the island was previously known as Ceylon, right. And now, it is known as Sri Lanka. But there have been many names for this island recorded throughout history.

In the 2nd century BC, it was known by the local name of Thambapanni, right? Later, it was called Lanka, according to the Indian epic Ramayana, and then Ceilao by the Portuguese. So, so many different names there. And it almost gives different names ascribed to the same place,

It is almost a kind of palimpsest existence of the same land. The same land actually having so many different kinds of histories, so many different kinds of mythical overlaps, so many rulers coming and reigning on that land. So with so many overlaps, history is being written and overwritten. It almost has a palimpsest quality, which is very interesting, right?

It makes the history of that land all the richer. So Sri Lanka faced two major post-colonial migrations around the 1970s. a. The opening of contract-based jobs in West Asian countries, Singapore, and some parts of East Asia, and b. The migration, especially of the Sri Lankan Tamils, during the time of insurgency that lasted between 1983 and 2009. So, a large number of migrations took place in the name of the contract labor market where both men and women moved while facing economic difficulties in Sri Lanka. The post-colonial era in Sri Lanka was

**Sri Lankan Diaspora: An Introduction**

- Historically, the island was earlier known as Ceylon, and now it is known as Sri Lanka, but many names of the island can be recorded throughout history. In the second century BCE, it was known by the local name 'Thambapanni'. Later it was called Lanka in the Indian epic *Ramayana* and then Ceilao by the Portuguese
- Sri Lanka faced two major postcolonial migrations around the 1970s:
  - a) The opening of contract-based jobs in West Asian countries, Singapore and some parts of East Asia
  - b) The migration, especially of the Sri Lankan Tamilians during the time of insurgency from 1983 to 2009
- A large number of migrations took place in the name of the contract labour market, where both men and women moved while facing economic difficulties in Sri Lanka

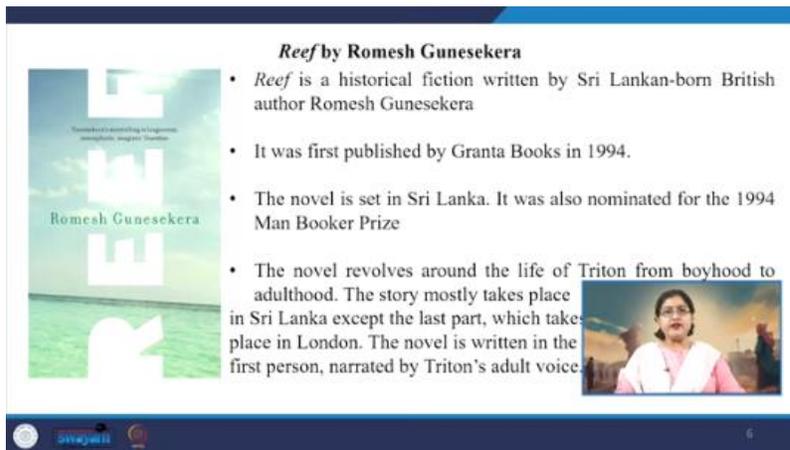


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a period of immense significance, saw the rise of a political structure which handed over the nation's power to the Sinhala-speaking, predominantly Buddhist majority, who constituted almost 74% of the population. And this dominant culture of the Sinhalese people placed other political groups and minorities in a subordinate position, underscoring the dominance of the Sinhalese majority, like I was saying. So, in terms of language, in terms of culture, even in terms of the Buddhist religious practices, the majoritarian habits, you know, would push other political groups and minor, you know, practices and habits to fringes or in a subordinate position. So political violence became a common phenomenon between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority and more and more of militants and violent situations formed over the decades between 1950 and 1970, and then it blew up in a way, it took the form of a civil war from 1983, resulting in the defeat of the Tamil forces in 2019.

So, these are such events in the history of Sri Lanka which led to the movement of the Tamil populace seeking asylum and protection as refugees in order to safeguard themselves from the civil war. They sought to work outside Sri Lanka. Due to the civil war, the disturbed economic conditions also motivated the Sinhala population to emigrate from Sri Lanka. So, we see the Tamils living in large scale during the civil war and also a section of Sinhalese wanting to avoid the civil war and so they also emigrate from Sri Lanka. The reading of Romesh Gunasekera's debut novel Reef is therefore placed within this historical backdrop of Sri Lanka and the ongoing civil war.

Reef is a historical fiction written by Sri Lankan-born British author Ramesh Gunasekara. It was first published by Granta Books in 1994. The novel is set in Sri Lanka. It was also nominated for the 1994 Man Booker Prize. The novel revolves around the life of Triton from boyhood to adulthood.



**Reef by Romesh Gunasekera**

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The story mostly takes place in Sri Lanka, except for the last part, which takes place in London. The novel is written in the first person, narrated by Triton's adult voice. Born in Colombo to a Sinhalese Christian family, Romesh Gunasekara grew up partly in Sri Lanka and then in the Philippines. Currently, he lives in London. His first book was a short story collection titled *Monkish Moon*, which came out in 1992.

**Romesh Gunsekera**

- Born in Colombo to a **Sinhalese** Christian family, Romesh Gunsekera grew up partly in Sri Lanka and then in the Philippines.
- He currently lives in London. His first book was a short story collection, *Monkish Moon* (1992)
- The collection reflects on the ethnic and political tensions that have threatened Sri Lanka since its independence in 1948.
- His other collections include:  
*The Sandglass, Heaven's Edge, Suncatcher*




The collection reflects on the ethnic and political tensions that have threatened Sri Lanka since its independence in 1948. The author's other collections include *The Sandglass*, *Heaven's Edge*, and *Suncatcher*. In *Reef*, Romesh Gunsekera mentions two prominent examples of political distress: the occasion of 1971, which became a turning point for Mr. Salgado and Triton to escape to England, as well as the disturbance in 1983. So, against the backdrop of such a situation, the diasporic voice of Romesh Gunsekera emerges in the decision of a poetic triptych, in which the transient characters battle with the past, choked with wars, disputes, and borders as pointless as chalk lines in water.

These are the words that Gunsekera himself says. So, *Reef* projects the associations between the socio-political crumbling of Sri Lanka from common conflict toward the erasure of its normal, mundane ambience altogether. So, Gunsekera also presents Sri Lanka as a heavenly country through its ecological implications throughout the novel. The novel opens in London with an interaction between Triton, who is a Sinhalese traveler, restaurateur, and a striving Tamil gas station chaperone.

and this brings back memories of Triton's youth in his home in Sri Lanka, which is scarred now by the massacre of war. To quote, I could see a sea of pearls, once a diverse paradise, now a landmark for gun runners in a battle zone of army camps and tigers, unquote. Triton observes that even after 10 years have passed, the country is still under the control of gun runners. The story is told in flashback in which Triton, even after 20 years of his so-called exile in London, suddenly falls back on his past life of 10 years. As the title itself suggests, to quote Binci P. and Baiju Krishnan, the title, you know, itself suggests that a reef is a ridge or a shoal of rock, coral or similar relatively stable material lying beneath the surface of a natural body of water, unquote.

**Introduction**

- The novel opens in London with an interaction between Triton, a Sinhalese traveller restaurateur, and a striving Tamil gas station chaperon, which brings back memories of Triton's youth in his home in Sri Lanka, which is scarred now by the massacre of war:
 

"I could see a sea of pearls. Once a diver's paradise. Now a landmark for gunrunners in a battle zone of army camps and Tigers" (Gunsekera)
- Triton observes that even after ten years have passed, the country is still under the control of gunrunners.
- The story is told in flashback in which Triton, after 20 years of his so-called exile in London suddenly falls back on his past life of 10 years
- As the title suggests, "A reef is a ridge or shoal of rock, coral or similar relatively stable material lying beneath the surface of a natural body of water" (qtd in Biney P and Baiju Krishnan)



So, title reef, when we talk about reef, we are talking about a coral or similar relatively stable material lying beneath the surface of the natural body of water. It is very much symptomatic of the Sri Lankan scenic beauty. It immediately reminds one of the natural ecological beauty that Sri Lankans have always seen in their native land.

So according to Gunsekera, the reef is used as a metaphor for depicting a country and to some extent it stands for Salgado himself, the character of Salgado himself as well as other major characters in the novel. So Neil Gordon states the title of the novel to be the central metaphor for this story, right? So in a book titled Home Truths, Susheila Nasta states that Reef, to quote Nasta, is a precisely and carefully shaped novel that is all about Sri Lanka itself, the beleaguered fraught island where it is set during the 1960s to 1980s, a period of brewing political, ethnic and religious turmoil, unquote. Nasta further equates the disappearance of the coral reefs with the migration of the Sri Lankans to Australia,

Other countries. She says, to quote again, the reef of the novel's title becomes suggestive of transformation and rebirth that characterize a diasporic past, right? So, when we talk of the reef, it is, as I said, symbolic of the nature that defines Sri Lanka. It also suggests transformation and rebirth, which aligns with the diasporic experience—the migrant's journey of evolving, transforming, and metamorphosing, right? This is also symbolized through the reef.

The colors, tastes, and sounds of Sri Lanka pervade Gunsekera's reef. It is a bildungsroman that shows the development of Triton, a cook in Mr. Salgado's house, from childhood to adolescence. So, it follows the journey of Triton from childhood to adolescence. Reef documents a story reflecting the political insurgencies in Sri Lanka after the colonial period.

**Political Insurgency in Sri Lanka**

- The colours, tastes and sounds of Sri Lanka pervade in Gunesequera's *Reef*. It is a bildungsroman that shows the development of Triton a cook in Mister Salgado's house, from childhood to adolescence.
- *Reef* documents a story that reflects on the political insurgencies in Sri Lanka after the colonial period
- The first chapter of the novel "Breach" begins with the descriptions of violence and turmoils that Sri Lanka went through. It is also suggestive of both the gap between a native and a diasporan; as well as a gap between a Tamil and a Sinhala
- It was in 1971 that political unrest grew in Sri Lanka, which forced Tamil and Sinhalese to leave their native land. Even after 20 years, Sri Lanka is still soaked in violence and bloodshed. The Tamil boy is shown as leaving Sri Lanka because of the ongoing civil war.



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The first chapter of the novel, *Breach*, begins with descriptions of the violence and turmoil Sri Lanka endured. It also suggests the gap between a native and a diasporian, as well as between a Tamil and a Sinhala. So, this gap in terms of origin and position exists at two levels: whether one is a native or a diasporan, and whether one is Tamil or Sinhala. In 1971, political unrest grew in Sri Lanka, forcing Tamils and Sinhalese to leave their native land. Even after 20 years, Sri Lanka remains soaked in violence and bloodshed.

So the Tamil boy is shown as leaving Sri Lanka because of the ongoing civil war. So the scars never really dry and disappear. They keep coming back recurrently, right? In the chapter titled 'Cook's Joy,' Gunesequera describes the revolutions that erupted in Sri Lanka as well as other parts of the world. So to quote Gunesequera,

'All of the globe's revolutions erupted.' 'The world's first female prime minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, lost her spectacular premiership on our small island,' unquote. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party leader, SLFP Bandaranaike—she was the leader of the Sri Lankan Freedom Party—said, 'formed a permanent alliance with Ceylon's Marxist party called the Union Front.' So there was this alliance between the SLFP and the Marxist party called the Union Front.

It defeated the United National Party, or UNP, which was headed by PM Dudley Senanayake. During the coalition of these two parties, Sri Lanka became trapped in violence. Murder and mass killings became common practice. So during these disturbances, we see the elites also became targets in the mass killings. A case in point would be the death of a millionaire named Palitha Aluthgoda, who was killed by

An ice cream vendor. So, this millionaire was killed by an ice cream vendor who shot him and then escaped without being identified. This violence increases in number, resulting in

the mysterious death of Dias, an elitist. Mr. Salgado, too, is an elitist, and therefore, he feels threatened and decides to leave Sri Lanka along with his cook, Triton. Now, talking about violence, the chapter title, A Thousand Fingers, is significant in this discussion.

It refers not only to the brutal slaughtering of the Sri Lankans but also to the myth of Angulimala. So, this is a kind of myth that becomes a point of reference in this narrative. After receiving the news of Dias's mysterious death, Salgado comes to Triton and asks him to narrate the story of Angulimala. Now, Angulimala was actually a trap for Prince Ahimsaka, the harmless. This is how the myth goes, right?

**Political Insurgency in Sri Lanka**

- This violence increases in number resulting in the mysterious death of Dias, an elitist. Mr Salgado, too, is an elitist, and hence he feels threatened and leaves Sri Lanka, along with his cook Triton
- Talking about violence, the chapter titled "**A Thousand Fingers**" is significant in this discussion. It refers not only to the brutal slaughtering of Sri Lankans, but also refers to the myth of 'angulimala'. After receiving the news of Dias's mysterious death, Salgado comes to Triton and asks him to narrate the story of 'angulimala'
- 'Angulimala' was actually a trap for Prince Ahimsaka, the harmless.

Prince Ahimsaka was a bright young man devoted to his studies. Naturally, other princes were jealous of him and spread ugly rumours about him having an affair with the headmaster's wife.

- Their master went furious and decided to punish him.

The great master asked Ahimsaka to go out into the world and collect a thousand bleeding little fingers in a garland



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The myth is as follows. Prince Ahimsaka was a bright young man devoted to his studies. Naturally, other princes were jealous of him and spread ugly rumors about him having an affair with the headmaster's wife. Their master went furious and decided to punish him. The great master asked Ahimsaka to go out into the world and collect a thousand bleeding little fingers in a garden.

So we see that following his master, Ahimsa started cutting fingers. It then became an addiction for him. And ironically, this is happening with someone whose name means the non-violent one, Ahimsa. So this Ahimsaka now could not sleep properly until he chopped ten little fingers. When he completed 999 little fingers, the other fingers started rotting.

Hence, Ahimsa continued cutting more and more fingers to complete the task. And before he could ever meet the goal, the fingers would rot. So through this story of Angulimala, Gunesekera is basically trying to show that violence begets violence and there is no end to it. In the original myth, Ahimsa was ultimately saved by Lord Buddha. He was saved and guided to become a pious and religious man.

In the case of Gunasekera's narrative, we see that Mr. Salgado stops Triton's narration midway, referring to the unstoppable violence in Sri Lanka. So there is no such figure as Buddha in the current situation who can guide and turn a waylaid man into a pious and religious person. So there is no stopping of the violence in Sri Lanka that is happening in the current times. So Gunasekera keeps mentioning the civil war of Sri Lanka through his works and the other works that deal with the Sri Lankan civil war include *Monkfish Moon* and *The Sandglass*.

**Political Insurgency in Sri Lanka**

- Following his master, Ahimsaka started cutting fingers. It then became an addiction for him. He couldn't sleep properly until he chopped ten little fingers. When he completed 999 little fingers, the other fingers started rotting; hence Ahimsaka continued cutting more fingers to complete the task. Through the story of 'Angulimala', Gunasekera tries to show that violence begets violence.
- In the original myth, Ahimsaka was ultimately saved by Lord Buddha. He was saved and guided to become a pious and religious man. But in *Reef*, Mr Salgado stops Triton's narration mid-way, referring to the unstoppable violence in Sri Lanka.
- Gunasekera keeps mentioning the civil war of Sri Lanka through his works. Other works that deal with the Sri Lankan civil war are *Monkfish Moon* and *The Sandglass*. It seems that Gunasekera wanted to portray cosmopolitan violence through *Reef*.



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It seems that Gunasekera wanted to portray cosmopolitan violence through *Reef*. As *Reef* belongs to a novel, Gunasekera's *Reef* also portrays the development of treatment from a household help to a business entrepreneur who owns a restaurant now in London. Since the novel deals with a cook's life, there are continuous references to food items in the novel. Hence, the novel can also be read as a culinary narrative from Sri Lanka. However, food in this novel is not only represented as a medium for satisfying one's appetite, rather for various people it has different connotations.

Mr. Salgado was a marine biologist in Sri Lanka who likes Western food. As Triton points out, he usually liked to eat bread and Western food, courses, corned beef was a favorite and so forth. So, the fact that Salgado does not adhere stubbornly to pure Sri Lankan essence speaks of his willingness to engage in a more hybrid understanding of identity. So, in terms of food, in terms of habits, he espouses hybridity. This hybridization is primarily possible because of the cross-cultural exchange that took place in Sri Lanka during the colonial period.

The hybrid identity of food hints at the socio-political changes in the history of a country. Like his master, Triton prefers a criss-cross of Sri Lankan and Western cuisines. He experiments with traditional dishes and gives them a new dimension. Another character in

the novel named *Lucy Amma*, who is the former cook in Salgado's house, is just a contrast to Triton. She says, to quote Lucy Amma, culinary taste was not fickle and the way you swallow food, like the way you make babies has not changed throughout the history of mankind.

**Representation of Food in *Reef***

- This hybridization is primarily possible because of the cross-cultural exchange that took place in Sri Lanka during the colonial period
- The hybrid identity of food hints at the socio-political changes in the history of a country. Like his master, Triton prefers a crisscross of Sri Lankan and Western cuisines. He experiments with traditional dishes and gives them a new dimension.
- Another character in the novel, Lucy Amma (the former cook in Salgado's house) is a contrast to Triton. She says: "Culinary taste was not fickle and the way you swallow food, like the way you make babies has not changed throughout the history of mankind". Lucy-amma upholds the old tradition, whereas Triton, while not foregoing traditions, tries to reform them by creating a harmony between tradition and modernity



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So Lucy Amma upholds the old tradition, whereas Triton, while not foregoing traditions, while not really challenging traditions, Triton tries to reform them, to kind of experiment with them by creating a harmony between tradition and modernity. So, to conclude, *Reef* is a novel that leaves room for multiple interpretations. One major reading of *Reef* also takes into account its ecological implications. Although the novel ends on a note of ecological elegy, it simultaneously provides an optimistic view, creating a larger awareness or a larger consciousness among the readers.

Connecting ecocriticism to anthropomorphism, it cautions the readers by hinting at the apocalypse, an impending dystopian world. So this elegiac tone itself is cautionary. It is wary of the dystopian world, the dystopia that pervades Sri Lankan society. So it is a reef's inevitable destruction which foretells the death of Sri Lanka, which happened to be, which was once a tropical paradise.

So, there is this very romantic, very beautiful vision of Sri Lanka on the one hand, the ecological consciousness on the other, and this impending dystopian world kind of pervading, kind of crushing the Sri Lankan society altogether that is mourned. So this mourning tone is also found throughout the narrative. With this, we come to the end of our lecture here today. Let us meet with a new topic in our next lecture.



Thank you.