

## **Be Moral with Coral: A Concern on Coral Bleaching in Romesh Gunesequera's Reef**

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### **Abstract**

Coral reefs occupy less than one percent of the surface area of the world oceans, but still they provide a home for 25 percent of all marine fish species. Coral reefs together with sea grass beds and mangrove forests are some of the most productive ecosystems in the Indian Ocean Region. However, loss and degradation of coral reef habitat due to increasing pollution, and overfishing including the use of destructive fishing practices, are threatening the survival of the coral reefs. A progressive decline in reef condition in Sri Lanka has been observed and reported within the last 3 decades. Prior to 1998, the decline in reef condition was attributed primarily to human activities, sedimentation and crown-of-thorns starfish infestations. In 1998, the El Nino induced coral bleaching event accelerated this decline and recovery has been low and variable. The environmental situation has become even more strained due to global change. The temperature increase of the atmosphere as a result of the greenhouse effect is increasing the water temperatures to lethal levels for corals and bleaching – the sign of dying coral reefs – now occurs almost every year in the Indian Ocean.

**KEYWORDS:** Moral, Coral, fish species, surface area

Romesh Gunesequera was born in Sri Lanka where he spent his childhood and later moved to England, via the Philippines, where he has lived and worked since. His first novel Reef (1994) offers a tempting taste of exotic flavors and textures of life embedded and presented in the form of a coming of age narrative. Reef is the story of Triton, a boy growing up in 1960s Sri Lanka, working as a servant boy in the house of Mister Salgado, an expert on oceans and an eager student of the coral barrier that protects the beaches on the southern tip of Sri Lanka. Salgado's tracking of the island's protective coral reef's slow destruction by pollution and over-fishing provides the title to the novel and the central metaphor for this story in a world heading for self-destruction.

Mentioning the beauty of corals Gunesequera tells in the Introduction that: "THE REAL BEAUTY of a coral reef is in the way it renews itself and creates the strongest of structures with the most delicate of life forms. If the fragile polyps are damaged, the reef crumbles. It is a lesson we have been slow to learn". (Gunesequera i)

The narrative unfolds in retrospect as Triton imagines from his present life in England, where he has immigrated and become a restaurateur, to the memory of his childhood in Sri Lanka, now deeply affected by the savage 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" (Gunesequera 12). The novel measures the tragic distance between the heavenly memory of a homeland and the reality of its disintegration from civil war. It also focuses towards the deep connections between the sociopolitical disintegration of the country and the destruction of its natural ecosystems.

The novel highlights the environmental impact of the prolonged ethnic conflict. An eco-critical perspective of the novel pays attention to the dominance of human power over the natural world. In the present context, while Gunsekera may not be explicitly espousing an ecocritique in his narrative, his choice of the protagonist - a marine scientist, and the significance of the names of other major characters: Triton- named after the son of Aphrodite and Poseidon, the legendary fish with a human head whose voice you can hear in sea shells and Nili, Salgado's lover, is by far the brightest fish on the reef; she gleams in the sunlight, signals his preoccupation with the ecological problems confronting his native country.

“The tensions engendered by the increasing civil conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, catalyzed by the Mahaveli irrigation project, form a subtle but powerful environmental backdrop to the novel” (Jain 144) The narrative advances to the tense sociopolitical conflicts covertly, with the worsening state of the reef acting as a powerful symbol of the worsening ethnic relations in the country. Mister Salgado's professional approach to his scientific knowledge lacks a meaningful phenomenological consultation, one that could possibly enable him to understand and connect the meaning of the vulnerable coral and reef in a larger context. Salgado would explain his studies to anyone who would listen to him, but even after understanding that the sociopolitical conditions are responsible for the deterioration of the country and its ecosystems, and his role in limiting or reversing this destruction he remains silent.

The reef being threatened by pollution and other human exploitations is a microcosm of the island nation being threatened by corruption. The abyss next to the reef surely symbolizes Sri Lanka's possible future. Mister Salgado's marine study reveals the devastating effects of bombing, dynamiting and netting on the fragile reef and coral, thus obliquely referring to the destruction ensuing from both developmental activities (coastal tourist resorts, large scale irrigation projects), and the violent political activities of rebellion and suppression engaged by government and separatist parties.

While being aware of the immediate threat to the marine life surrounding Sri Lanka, he makes little or no attempt to transform his knowledge and concern into meaningful and environmentally relevant interventions. His friend Dias stresses the importance that this marine study has for Sri Lanka, invoking both Mister Salgado's scholarship and his nationalistic duty. Dias's words infer a critique of the upper Sinhalese and Tamil classes who are educated and cognizant of the unfolding destruction to their environment but have done little to halt this exploitation.

Mister Salgado, the landed and elite scientist, is unable to intuit the truth that his country is as endangered by ethnic and class divisions as the reef he researches is by pollution. Recalling the regenerative role played by the ocean in recreating a new world after the breakup of the supercontinent Gondwana, Mister Salgado indicates firmly to the need for another renaissance in his country. “Mister Salgado's environmental awareness is ultimately unable to transform into meaningful agency; the failure of his love affair, coupled by political trouble, causes him to abandon his project and migrate to a secluded life in Britain” (Jain 152). His broken life is used as a metaphor to portray the working of other forces- there's trouble brewing, politically and socially, and even Mister Salgado's beloved coral reefs are coming under threat from development and pollution. Thus

Gunesequera presents through Salgado, a person of high class social order, aware of everything happening around him but being reluctant of acting for a cause affecting the whole nation only for his personal comforts.

“Nature, however, is not always a passive victim of human brutalities. The Indian Ocean in Reef is also an imposing and terrifying figure in its own right; while a source of life and livelihood, its enormity is incomprehensible and even frightening. The sea, while appearing to silence human atrocities by sweeping away the bodies murdered on its beaches, is also a powerful witness by re-washing them back for public knowledge and exposure” (Jain 153). The novel portrays different ecological damages created by human beings to the marine ecosystem. The wars on the shores make a devastating effect on corals and other marine organisms.

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