
IDENTITY CRISIS IN ROMESH GUNESEKHARA'S *THE REEF* AND *THE SANDGLASS*

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Abstract: The present paper attempts to study identity crisis in individuals as depicted by Romesh Gunesekhara's in his novels *The Reef* and *The Sandglass*. *The Reef* recounts the relationship between a master and his cook and *The Sandglass* is about the displacement of Pearl's family in terms of place and times. Gunesekhara skilfully interweaves the internal strife of Sri Lanka with the narrative in *The Reef* and *The Sandglass*. The novels expound the travails of people who are caught unawares in war politics of the country and are forced to exile. The present paper focuses on issues such as isolation and alienation felt by individuals in the new country as emphasized by Gunesekhara in the two novels. Moreover, the author eloquently describes the role of memory and time in constructing one's own identity.

The novels reveal the havoc unleashed by the wars in the life of common men and the brunt which is carried forward to the future generations. The poignant manner in which priorities of individuals change with change in time and place is dealt in a very sensitive way in these two novels. Both the novels stress the fact that in the end that in situations like these, the past memories aid in shaping our present and the future.

The present paper is an attempt to study the reasons, extent and impact of identity crisis on human psyche.

Keywords: Identity crisis, alienation, isolation.

Introduction: In *Reef*, which may be termed as bildungsroman, Triton who works for Mister Salgado, a marine biologist, since his boyhood is in search for his identity past Sri Lanka, away from Mister Salgado and beyond England to where he was forced to move along with Mister Salgado due to the crisis/civil war in Sri Lanka. To succeed in his attempt to move away from his past, Triton has to make sense of his present based on his past and focus on his future.

Reef is a coming of age novel of the young boy Triton. As a young boy, Triton, hardly moved out of his master's home. He only ventures out to buy groceries and cooking ingredients. Yet, he is an amazing cook who innovates and reproduces the dishes described to him just by hearsay and is praised by his master's guests. Gunesekhara's efforts to sketch a self-made cook seem perfectly authentic as seen in the below quote from the novel:

The characterization reminds the readers of the character of Stevens, the butler in *The Remains of the Day*. *The Remains*, which is primarily a story of lost opportunities and regrets, reveals the life of Stevens on his six-day road trip. Ishiguro portrays Stevens as an exemplary English butler and similarly Gunesekhara describes Triton as a cook who is passionate about his job.

In *Reef*, it is revealed that Triton goes with Mister Salgado on several road trips.

We motored all over the country. We would fill up the tank on a Sunday morning and drive for miles visiting every historic house, garden, park and museum within a day's circuit (178).

In *Reef*, right from the beginning of the novel, Triton's character is portrayed as a very willing learner, be it cooking or assimilating to a new country. Accordingly, he makes efforts to educate himself and adapt himself to his new surroundings. Eventually, this passion helps Triton to find his identity in a foreign land to which he was forced to exile.

I went to classes and other libraries, night and day, for almost all the years we spent in London together; broke all the old taboos and slowly freed myself from the demons of our past: what is over is over forever, I thought (*Reef* 175).

The same cannot be said about Mister Salgado who leaves London to be with his estranged girlfriend who is in trouble. Mister Salgado finds it difficult to let go of his past and start a new life unlike Triton. This element probably depends on the fact that Mister Salgado has more at stake than Triton. Mister Salgado had his moorings in Sri Lanka whereas Triton could possibly be associating himself with Mister Salgado's presence. Mister Salgado tells Triton:

'It's not what you do every day, but the thoughts that you live with that matter,' he would tell me, tapping

his head with his finger. 'That, after all, is the sum total of your life in the end.' (Reef 174)

Mister Salgado prefers to live in his memories. He prefers to go back to the strife-torn world to be at the side of his one-time companion as he comprehends his life as the sum total of his memories.

It is significant to note that Mister Salgado identifies his self with his memory. He states that "we are only what we remember, nothing more. . . all we have is the memory of what we have done or not done" (190). His memories of his past are a firm anchor for him as an individual. He belongs not to his motherland, Srilanka; nor to the exiled country, London but to his memories. His memories and the people he loved are his strength that help him survive. That is the reason he goes back to his estranged significant other to make sense of his life.

In the Remains, Stevens feels remorseful for the road not taken in his life. He resolves to humour his new employer, an American. Like Remains, Reef is also a novel about lost opportunities and regrets. At the end of the novel, Mister Salgado expresses a feeling that he wasted an opportunity to prove his potential to the world.

Mister Salgado shook his head. 'I should have done something of my own with that bay. I used to think that in a month or two, the next year, I would have a chance to turn the whole bay into a sanctuary. A marine park. . . . We could have shown the world something then, something really fabulous. What a waste.' (177)

Sandglass is a complicated novel compared to Reef due to the theme and as well as the number of characters. It is a novel where the narration goes back and forth. Gunesekhara establishes himself as a master of story craft with this novel. The story of Sandglass is narrated by Chip, a character associated with Pearl in London. The children of Jason and Pearl face identity crisis after their mother is forced to flee to London after Jason's death. Prins tries to find out the true causes behind his father's death and his mother's self-exile from the motherland. Ravi is unable to find his identity and opts for an escape from life. The unexplained gaps in his life story leave him with an identity crisis. The Sandglass is a complex story where all the characters play important roles in bringing out the complexities caused by the strife-torn countries in citizens' psyche. Pearl, Jason, Chip, Ravi and Naomi portray innocent victims torn asunder by war politics.

Ravi explains to Chip about his need to identify his self with a place:

Except for me it was almost an old world I was looking for. A place I would recognize and feel I had arrived. Perhaps even come across myself already living there. (64)

Pearl describes Jason as a person with an 'insatiable need to belong' (170) to the new world of entrepreneurs, potential politicians and professionals. Chip, somehow, gets enmeshed with Pearl's family's predicaments - 'a sense of accelerating loss for what is behind us - the lost opportunities, the unregainable past - and fear for what lies ahead' (220). He is also dragged away in the flow of life's regrets along with Pearl's family and their identity crisis.

In both the novels, the protagonists move to London to escape from the disturbances in their motherland. Both the novels focus on memories, dreams and history. The novels sensitively describe the clash of the past lives in Sri Lanka and hopes generated by the times and foreign shores. Eventually, people are left with angst when hopes are not realized. The novels assert that an ambiguous past always haunts a person and drives him/her to seek clarity.

The characters cling to their past as they are forced to flee their country as refugees. Their identity is compromised by fear and trauma; their sense of belonging is questioned by the traumatic events that occurred in their motherland. Like Ishiguro, Gunesekhara's writing style is somewhat indistinct regarding the details of war and its affect on the citizens but he compensates by cleverly using emotional upheavals and struggle for power among people to describe chaos in their lives.

It is interesting to note that there seems to be an influence of Kazuo Ishiguro in these two novels of Romesh Gunesekhara. The Reef reminds us of the relationship between the master and the butler which was dealt in Ishiguro's renowned novel *The Remains of the Day*.

Similarly, the theme of *The Sandglass* reminds us of the search for the protagonist's vanished parents in *When We Were Orphans*. Gunesekhara attempts at a similar kind of autobiographical detection in his *Sandglass* where the protagonist, Prins, tries to unearth the cause for the accidental death of his father after many years. At the time of his mother's funeral, Prins seems to concentrate more on his father's death than the loss of his mother.

In fact the family trees and chapterization also remind us of the literary greats like Mario Vargas Llosa whom Gunesekhara admires and contemporary writer Kazuo Ishiguro.

Both the novels prove the significance of identity for mankind. Identity may be connected to a place or a person, however, it becomes unsettling for an individual if this identity is not established. In Reef, Triton associates his growing-up years with Mister Salgado. Mister Salgado leaves his home country which deprives him of his life and friends. London is unsettling for him as he has to resume his life in an unfamiliar environment.

Also, as is the case of many individuals, their nationality, individual uniqueness and past life stand in the way to connect with the new country. Hence, when the opportunity is imminent to connect to their previous life which is more reassuring, they seize it firmly.

Once Triton realizes that Mister Salgado has to get back to his roots, he works on his own identity. However, Triton also faces a similar predicament like Mister Salgado. His past is his life spent with Mister Salgado. He is more connected to Mister Salgado than his home country. Unlike Mister Salgado, Triton does not get a chance to go back to his roots; he has to establish his roots in the new environment. The author opines in *The Sand Glass*, through his character, Prins: "You have to escape and go where you can find yourself," he feels, "or you stay and transform what is around you until it becomes your own" (37). This sums up the identity crisis of Mister Salgado and Triton where Mister Salgado tries to escape from London in his quest for identity, Triton is left with no chance but to transform or adapt to his

surroundings. Both the novels bring out the extent of physical and psychological damage done by strife-torn countries in citizens' lives for no fault of theirs. The onus lies with the people who govern the countries and are in a position to make powerful decisions that change the lives of innocent citizens.

When citizens are forced to exile from their home countries, there is bound to be upheaval in their psyche and their lives. Many individuals end up feeling isolated and alienated in the new countries as emphasized by Gunesekhara in the two novels. In situations like these, people are quite often left only with memory and time to re-construct their identity.

Romesh Gunesekhara like Ishiguro seems to convey the selective yet distinctive nature of memory and time in accepting identities through his narratives. Memory plays a key role and also a selective role in shaping the identity of an individual. The narratives are but the voice of a multiple common people who are displaced from their countries due to circumstances beyond their control. Many a time, hostility greets them in the new countries they exile to making their efforts to relocate meaningless. Gunesekhara implies that forced changes in place and duration of time spent in a new place cause a lot of damage in the lives of individuals.

Both the narratives portray the mayhem let loose on the common men and reveal the fact that the burden is passed on to the future generations as well. Furthermore, the reality that time and place have an impact on the concerns of an individual is dealt in a very sensitive way in these two novels. The narratives expound that an individual's past memories have a greater role in shaping his present and future.

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