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**ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR**

**ON**

**DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE**

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



## **Romesh Gunasekera's Reef and the Politics of Srilanka**

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### **Abstract:**

Literature may be classified according to a variety of systems, including language, national origin, historical period, genre, and subject matter. Literature is the artistic expression of profound thoughts, which is replete with spontaneous and intense passions, imaginative ideas and reflective view points of the literature. Sri Lankan literature refers to the written or literary work associated with Sri Lanka, a tropical Island nation in the Indian Ocean off of the southern area of the famous Indian subcontinent. By far the largest part of Sri Lankan literature is written in Sinhala language, but there are bodies of written work in other languages such as English, and Tamil. Up to the present, short stories are a very important part of Sri Lankan literature; the output of Sinhalese short story writers are greater than that of the Tamil and English writers combined and have elicited a great measure of critical analysis.

**Keywords:** Reef, Disability, Politics, Srilanka, Tropical Island



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Romesh Guneseekera is a Sri Lankan born British author, born in Colombo to a Sinhalese Christian family in 1954. He was a finalist in the *Man Booker Prize* for his novel *Reef* in 1994. He is currently the chair of the judge of *common wealth short story* prize competition for 2015.

Political unrest is a term describing the disability of widespread dissatisfaction with the current government. Generally widespread protests qualify as a type of political unrest. The government may be at risk of a coup if political unrest is strong enough. The disability government can respond in a number of ways to political unrest. In democratic governments, there may be legal recourse available if dissent is widespread. When growth happens at a dangerously fast rate, it creates conditions that lead to poverty, crime and corruption, health and safety hazards among other issues. Political unrest, crime and corruption: when a large group of people migrate to one relatively small area, conditions are ripe for political violence.

In the novel *Reef*, Romesh Guneseekera describes the lives of a Sri Lankan cook, Triton, and his master, Mister Salgado. Their lives are profoundly affected by the political turmoil surrounding the country, most notably as they flee for England in 1972. The political situation is always on the periphery of this novel. Guneseekera refers to specific historical events obliquely, and generalizes often on the state of civil war. The disability of Sri Lankan politicians becomes vital to understanding the context of the novel. In *Reef*, Guneseekera refers to two specific instances of political unrest: the events of 1971, which act as a catalyst for Mister Salgado and Triton to flee to England, as well as the Turmoil in 1983. However, political instability had been present for decades. For example, the



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assassination of the prime minister in 1959, as well as the subsequent problems in finding a replacement for him, demonstrates this turmoil. Within the novel, Wijetunga, Mister Salgado's assistant, speaks to Triton of the five precepts: the simplified lessons that explained the crisis of capitalism, the history of social movements and the future shape of a Lankan revolution. These lessons sought to prove the failure of the executive leadership, as well as the assertion that the majority of citizens had not gained anything from Sri Lanka's post-independence economic development. Moreover, the lessons strove to instruct the people on how to gain power of the country within 24 hours, using Cuba as an example. In 1971, a revolution was attempted. Sinhalese youth rose up in the first large scale revolt against the government by youth in this country. Although the government quickly controlled the revolt, this incident indicated the level of anger and rebellion in the population of educated, rural, young Buddhists.

In *Reef*, Gunasekera refers to two specific instances of political unrest: the events of 1971, which act as a catalyst for Mister Salgado and Triton to flee to England, as well as the turmoil in 1983. Therefore the political history of Sri Lanka becomes vital in understanding the text. This political history of Sri Lanka is essential enough in understanding the postcolonial reality of the country which is entangled in Civil War, political unrest, death and destruction. This is the reason why the novel starts at a petrol station at England where the narrator notices that the cashier looks like him as he is also from Sri Lanka, a new refugee settled in the country which once ruled his own nation. Triton the narrator of the story came to England as a refugee but finds a life there as a restaurateur away from the conflict and the turmoil of Sri Lanka. As the author describes Triton's life both in Sri Lanka and England it appears that he is interested in the



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disjuncture, compressions and confluences of the past with the present, particularly as it relates to Sri Lanka and its conflicts in the post colonial period.

Disability politics started to erupt in Sri Lanka. Mister Salgado told Triton to prepare himself as they are travelling to London. He told him that he had an offer to work in a marine biology institute there and that he had accepted. At that time, in April 1971 violence escalated and they watched news reports about explosions, gunfire and insurgencies tearing up the country. Thousand were killed and tens of thousands grieved. Triton describes the events that he saw on TV. Mister Salgado said:

News reports of ghastly beheadings on the beach. But these were only precursors of the staggering brutality that came wave after wave, in the decades that followed: the suffocating infernos, the burning necklaces, flaming molten rings of fire; the Reign of Terror, abductions, disappearances and the crimes of ideology; this suppurating ethnic war. The bodies would roll again and again in the surf; they would be washed in by the tide and be beached by the dozen. (173).

The political situation is always on the periphery of this novel. Gunesekera refers the political dispute with some historical events and generalizes the difficulties of the disabilities often on the state of civil war. The political history of Sri Lanka becomes vital to understanding the context of the novel.

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