



# The Concept of Spatiality in Diasporic Literature: A Critical Analysis of Romesh Gunesequera's Novel *Reef*

**Bincy P<sup>1</sup>**

Independent Scholar,  
Puliyoth House,  
Varityak, Kunnamangalam PO,  
Calicut-673571, Kerala State, India

**Dr. Baiju Krishnan<sup>2</sup>**

Assistant Professor of English,  
Division of English,  
Department of Sciences and Humanities,  
Vignan University, Vadlamudi, AP, India

## Abstract

'Spatial' as a term refers to position, area, and size of things. The term is borrowed from Latin spatium, used with a sense of 'space'. In the field of Humanities and Social Sciences, the term 'space' is deliberated in the milieu of social, geographical and psychological phenomena. 'Space' and 'place' have turn out to be totemic concepts in the attempt to cross-examine the relationship between literature, ideological representations and real and imagined spaces (Hubbard and Kitchin 2). Literary space actually projects an author's sculpt of the world, articulated in the language of spatial representation. The conception of space or sphere stages a catalytic role in asserting an authority on diasporic conceptualization and consciousness too. The researcher in this research paper studies and tries to explore that how this idea of 'spatiality' is seen in diasporic writing that involves a de-territorialization and a re-territorialization as portrayed in the novel *Reef* (1994) by Sri Lankan-British writer Romesh Gunesequera. The novelist employs Sri Lankan landscapes in order to represent the socio-political disintegration of Sri Lanka from civil war and also depicts the destruction of its natural ecosystems. In *Reef* by Romesh Gunesequera, he actually depicts a Sri Lankan heaven and/or paradise.

**Keywords:** Spatiality, Diaspora, De-territorialization, Re-territorialization, Consciousness

## 1.0 Introduction and Backdrop

*Reef* by Romesh Guneseckera (He is a British author who was born in Sri Lanka) is a novel that got published in the year 1994. His debut novel *Reef* (1994) is haunted by a sense of incorrigible loss of an earthly heaven despoiled by gluttony, bribery, corruption and political bloodshed and/ or violence. The select novel reiterates many of the preoccupations that surface in his collection of short stories, including the idea of feebleness and the need to preserve a heavenly world that in countries such as Sri Lanka are on the edge of devastation/ damage.

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” (Wikipedia). In the hands of the local politicians, the coral of the reef are an easily taken in for generating the source of income, and, for this reason, they are in a procession for unavoidable/ predicted destruction. It is the reef’s inevitable destruction that foretells the “death” of Sri Lanka (a tropical paradise). According to Guneseckera, the reef is used as a metaphor for representing/ depicting a country and, to a certain extent, for Salgado himself, the all other major/ most important characters in the select novel. There are some critics who gave their opinions and critical views on Guneseckera’s *Reef*.

### 1.0.1 Objectives of the Study

- The objective of this study is to convey and to highlight the concept of spatiality and its themes and how it is portrayed in Guneseckera’s *Reef* (1994).
- The study also examines certain literary representations not only of places themselves, but of the experience of place and of displacement, while exploring the interrelations between lived experience and more abstract or un-representable spatial network that subtly or directly shapes it.
- To study about the concept of ‘spatiality’ in diasporic literature that consists of deterritorialization and re-territorialization associated by expedition and travel.
- To study about the aftermath of civil war and its disastrous effects in the Sri Lankan island.
- To examine about the author’s portrayal of his homeland where he writes from a perspective of distance while emphasizing the trauma of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict.

### 1.0.2 Scope and Relevance of the Select Study

The scope of study is speckled and wide-ranging. It was during the time when Romesh Guneseckera started writing, as a minimum basically two different trends were becoming increasingly perceptible and/ or visible in Sri Lanka. The very first one is, Sri Lankan writing in English, which for the previous three decades was a relatively marginal activity, was becoming more prolific and more positive/ confident/ determinant in portraying the actualities/ realities of the nation. Secondly, the political turmoil/ chaos/ mayhem involving the minority Tamilians and the majority Sinhalese had taken on a sustained presence. The work of Romesh Guneseckera is written against this political backdrop of ethnic conflict.

In a way, Romesh Guneseckera’s perceptions are those of a writer who writes about ‘Diaspora’. His vision is that of the spectator, and that position empowers him to zero in on the stratagem. Frequently his accentuation is on delicacy – in human connections, in governmental issues, and in personality. In such occurrences, the accounts give groups of pictures that lead to a revelation. In *Reef*, the possibility of

delicacy and the need to save a paradisaical world that in nations, for example, Sri Lanka are nearing to destruction/ damage. The prevailing similitude is the reef, which turns into a method of drawing together the different subjects that go through the book. The reef is a common example in the novel, which goes about as an image for Triton and Salgado's life. The coral reef is the humming and living person in the novel *Reef* of Romesh Guneseckera. Being an insider-islander, the reef assumes an essentially amazing part in his view of the delicacy, weakness and imperiling ventures both by 'Man' and 'Nature' the same.

## 2.0 Review of Related Literature

In a book titled *Home Truths* Susheila Nasta is of the opinion that, *Reef* 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 (Nasta: 214). Romesh Guneseckera describes the lives of a Sri Lankan cook, Triton, and his master, Mister Salgado in *Reef* (1994). Their lives are intensely affected by the political chaos surrounding the country, most remarkably as they flee to England in 1972. The political situation is always on the periphery in *Reef* (1994). Romesh Guneseckera refers to certain specific historical/ factual events that occurred in the island. Especially he portrays the riots of 1971 and 1983 that he often generalizes on the state of civil war. The political history of Sri Lanka becomes vital in comprehending the actual context of the novel *Reef* (1994).

Susan Pichler (2011) in her article opines that, Guneseckera's novel *Reef* (1994) more blatantly evokes the correlation between environmental degradation and political violence, mapping through its narrative shifts and the links between the slow, invisible beginnings of the civil war and the slow, invisible destruction of the oceanic reef. The novel is set between the 1960s and the 1980s and traces the growing tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese leading to the outbreak of violence in 1971 and again in 1983.

## 3.0 Diaspora and Spatiality Theory

### 3.0.1 Diasporic Literature

The term 'diaspora' (from the Greek word for 'scattering') refers to the dispersion of people from their homeland. A simple definition of diaspora literature, then, would be works that are written by authors who live outside their native land.

Diaspora writing is regardless of language, style, artistic structure and the technique attract the perusers crossing the boundaries. It could be stream of consciousness or magic realism or immigrancy or estrangement/ alienation or flexibility of another land and culture. Such human developments have produced the idea of diaspora which implies human settlements from their unique country. Accordingly diaspora flags a commitment with a framework of assortment of societies, dialects, accounts, individuals, places, and times and so forth Diaspora Theory with its different constructions and elements has impacted the writing of each language of the world. William Safran's definition of the term 'Diaspora' in his seminal essay in "Diaspora" diasporic people are those who live "outside the homeland" and who are said to "retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland" (83).

Diasporic literature is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are associated with native culture and background. Diasporic writing captures the two invariables of their experience: exile and homeland. All diasporic literature is an attempt to negotiate between these two polarities. The writings of exiled/ immigrant writers undertakes two moves, one spatial, and one temporal. As Meena Alexander puts it, “writing in search of a homeland’ (199 :4).

### 3.0.2 Spatiality Theory

#### Spatial Criticism

The term, ‘**spatial**’ refers to position, area, and size of things. The term is borrowed from Latin spatium, used with a sense of ‘space.’ In the field of Humanities and Social Sciences, the term ‘space’ is studied in the context of social, geographical and psychological phenomena. Historians, geographers, critical theorists and philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, Paul Carter, Edward Soja and Richard Rorty have mostly used the phrases like “ritual space,” “cognitive space,” “narrative space,” “social space,” “historical space,” “heterotopias” and “heterochronias,” “chronotopes” and so on in their critical works which laid the foundation to spatial criticism.

**Spatial criticism** examines literary representations not only of places themselves, but of the experience, while exploring the interrelations between lived experience and a more abstract or un-representable spatial network that subtly or directly shapes it. Literary space represents an author’s model of the world, expressed in the language of spatial representation. In a literary work, space models different relations of the world-picture: temporary, social, ethical and others. The concept of space or sphere plays a catalytic role in exerting an influence on diasporic conceptualization and consciousness too. Space or sphere defined in the terms of physical, psychological, ideological and virtual which functions as a potent platform to air the voice of diasporic communities. Space, the domain of settings and surrounding of events, characters and objects in literary narrative, along with other domains (story, character, time and ideology), constitutes a fictional universe. In order to describe some features of fictional spaces, the word space is used as a semantic construct built with linguistic structures employed by the literary text.

**The concept of spatiality** in diasporic writing involves a de-territorialization and re-territorialization connected by journeys and travel. **De-territorialization** is the loss of territory. It is both geographical and cultural. Diasporic writing across the world, is connected with spaces, landscapes and journeys. Since diaspora involves a change of place through a journey, this is a self-evident literary theme. De-territorialization is a term coined by Deleuze and Guattari in their philosophical object Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1972-1980)

### 3.0.3 The Political Chaos in Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan English writing since the ethnic conflict has arisen out of a contention formed by a pressure between an over-determined spatial talk – what political geographers depicts as the ‘territorial trap’ from one viewpoint and social and spatial movements of seismic extents on the other. The lush island

of Sri Lanka advanced by tourist handouts was for over twenty years the phase of perhaps the most destructive common conflict of the postcolonial world. The land has been destroyed, distorted and reshaped by governmental issues: “From the ethnic underlying foundations of July 1983 until the tactical loss of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009, Sri Lanka reliably managed the issues of psychological oppression, basic freedoms, ethnic brutality, and political vulnerability” (Jayasuriya: 1).

#### 4.0 Reef as novel with Spatial Setting: A Diasporic Reading

In *Reef*, Romesh Gunsekera alludes to two explicit examples of political distress: the occasions of 1971, which go about as an impetus for Mister Salgado and Triton to escape to England, just as the disturbance in 1983. In this specific situation, the diasporic voice of Gunsekera hangs out in the decision of a poetical triptych in which the transient characters battle with a past, “choked with wars, disputes, borders as pointless as chalk lines in water” (Gunsekera: 102). *Reef* projects the various associations between the socio-political crumbling of Sri Lanka from common conflict and also, the obliteration of its regular environments. Gunsekera portrays a Sri Lankan heaven in this book. The original opens in London with an experience between Triton, a Sinhalese traveler restaurateur, and a striving Tamil gas station chaperon, which reviews to Triton's brain the memory of his youth home in Sri Lanka, 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: 6) that is, however, still under the control of gunrunners.

Each work of fiction needs a foundation, a setting, a scene against which the story can be worked out. Scene in writing has turned into a significant piece of story because of the author. Regarding Gunsekera's fiction, scene gives the background to the story as well as the very fixing with which the story is woven. Legend and memory are viewed as a focal part in Gunsekera's depiction of scene. The beautiful pictures of "ocean," "ocean side," "coral reefs," and "island" stress the island's tropical excellence and become significant images that support the legend of Sri Lanka as an optimal heaven. Simultaneously the essayist involves the pictures of the scenes to grandstand how the “ideal paradise” is transformed into a “Spoiled Paradise” because of savagery, war and psychological oppression along these lines prompting the de-territorialization of the island.

Gunsekera points out the significance of the ‘sea’ in the book. The novel may be viewed as a sort of authentic memory, overflowing with life yet compromised by tides of history, contamination and savagery. The story is set against a foundation of political viciousness as referenced before, and of the sea squeezing around its kin. The account moves toward the strained sociopolitical clashes secretively, with the weakening condition of reef going about as a strong image of the deteriorating ethnic relations in the country. Salgado's expert way to deal with his logical information comes up short on a significant phenomenological interview, one that might actually empower him to comprehend and associate the importance of the weak coral and reef in a bigger setting. Salgado would disclose his studies to any individual who might pay attention to him, yet even in the wake of understanding that the sociopolitical conditions are liable for the de-territorialization of the nation and its environments, and his job in

restricting or switching this obliteration he stays quiet. The Mahaweli Development program is known as the biggest multipurpose country advancement program throughout the entire existence of Sri Lanka and is likewise considered as the cornerstone of the public authority's improvement program that was started in 1961. The pressures induced by the expanding common clash between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, catalyzed by the Mahaweli water system project, structure an unpretentious yet strong natural setting to the book. Minoli Salgado in her book *Writing Sri Lanka Literature, Resistance And The Politics of Space*, expresses that the Mahaweli project was:

*“enforced through resettling nearly 130,000 families- including 100,000 Sinhalese peasantry into Tamil- dominated areas and and also resulted in the dramatic cultural and material dispossession of the indigenous forest dwellers of Sri Lanka, whose dwelling space and haunting lands were made into a national park”* (14).

The novel registers the sublimation of environmental worries in myths of Buddhist social recovery and monetary advancement, exhibiting how the public authority leaves the venture of reef protection for shady modernization plans, for example, the Mahaweli Dam.

Progressively retained into the powerful intensity of Buddhist patriotism and going to ideological groups wearing his “grey nationalistic tunic,” Salgado alleviates his whole-world destroying uneasiness of beach front disintegration with nostalgic memories of the muhuda water system tanks. These were designing accomplishments done in 200 BC, in the brilliant age of the urban communities of Anuradhapura and afterward Polonnaruwa. Some were done significantly before. Gigantic regions were put submerged through a pressure driven framework that required our yekkha designers to gauge a half-inch change of water-level in a two-mile stretch of water: “Imagine that! Real precision. Enough to match the Egyptian pyramid makers” (Gunsekera: 85).

Triton is from the get go enchanted by Salgado's mythologizing of Sri Lankan history as “pageant of long-haired princes” and “elephants adorned with tasseled canopies and silver bells raising their sheathed, gilded, curved tusks and circling the bronze painted cities of ancient warlords” (Gunsekera: 85). However, to knowing the past he wryly reports:

*“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”* (Gunsekera: 119).

While the nation prepares for, “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” (Gunsekera: 120-121).

Salgado's beach front venture passes its apex and he neglects to caution the public authority designers about the possibly intense environmental outcomes of the Mahaweli conspire: siltation and expanded saltiness, obliteration of prime regular living spaces in a naturally rich locale, an awful decrease

of the extraordinary stream's watershed to eight percent of its previous limit, leaving the whole district helpless against pulverization by floods and disintegration. Coral reefs are dynamic specialists of coherencies and discontinuities and hold fast to one of the Foucaultian standards of heterotopias which "juxtapose in a single space several incompatible spatial elements" (Heterotopian Studies 2017). Reef's textuality and reformulation of the coral reefs right at the start vigorously draws on Michel Foucault's conceptualization of emergency heterotopias, as topographical, worldly and spatial spaces to oblige the conspicuous going against dissimilarities. These reefs, in their condition of disintegration reflect the tragic Sri Lankan history of the, "whole country had been turned from jungle to paradise to jungle again" (Gunesekera: 15). While Foucault looks at space in its multi-layered faces, Gunesekera appears to take on the reefs as the heterotopic space of emergency which the analyst calls the "reef oppressed world". The story of Triton-Salgado follows the socio-verifiable, political, social and mental affinities of the reefs with his Reef illustrations to Triton, his "kola," Miss Nili and his friend, Mr. Dias Liyanage. Being a marine biologist, Salgado is highly concerned by the depravity and sluggish death of the, "crushed coral sand churning" (Gunesekera: 124) reefs which are at serious risk.

The disintegration of the reef by the ocean can be perused as a notice against the disintegration of social personality with regards to common conflict. The pith of the novel is the frenzy of the common conflict, the deficiency of man and coral, a dread which is passed on in the novel through Salgado's anxiety for the coral reefs and deciphered by Triton as an apprehension about being devoured by savage fish: "I could feel the ocean pressing around us" (Gunesekera: 154). At the point when Triton joins for a visit alongside Salgado to visit his observatory on the seaside side at Yala, he additionally fears the broad obliteration of the two men and coral. Rather imagining an answer for the environmental or political emergency, Salgado skeptically predicts the possible obliteration of Sri Lanka's reefs and shores and the resulting submersion of the island which signals apocalypticism. The reef going about as the defensive boundary of the island from the upsurge of the ocean, is seriously compromised because of Global Warming, contamination, mining, bombarding, netting and other pillaging exercises of the marine circle.

Reef specifically underscores the manner by which nature can neither be disregarded nor effectively intellectually made due. Mr Salgado, engrossed by the island's gradually vanishing reef, depicts to Triton about: "reef's fragility, a function of its thin, living skin of polyps, 'Anything! Bombing, mining, netting is possible.' This polyp is really very very delicate. It has survived aeons, but even a small change in the immediate environment -even su if you pee on the reef -could kill it. Then the whole thing will go. And if the structure is destroyed, the sea will rush in, The sand will go. The beach will disappear" (Gunesekera: 48).

Salgado's poisonous/ toxic discourse/ talk of reef danger and ecological flooding is associated with the social frenzy brought about by the rising tides of rebellion by Marxist progressives and Tamil successionists. Lawrence Buell characterizes harmful talk as a manner of speaking and morals of envisioned peril, which emerges both from individual or social frenzy and from an evidential base in natural peculiarities (Writing: 27-31). Salgado's talk of reef peril is obviously established in logical proof, yet it additionally works as a declaration of political and social frenzy. Surrounding the island, limiting

the ocean's viciousness, the reef is incorporated into patriot and liberationist ideas of insularity, which envision Lanka as a homogenous, limited entity, belonging to one individuals or the other, darkening its actual topographical beginning as an island among islands, associated in a land scaffold to the subcontinent. The reef consequently turns into an undecided image in which the signifiers of environmental emergency and class disparities are curbed and overwritten with the signifiers of ethnic viciousness and political struggle. Amusingly, as waterfront disintegration builds, the political manner of speaking of insularity strengthens. Regardless of his logical logic, Salgado, resorts to closed-minded legends of Sri Lanka as a 'paradise of evil spirits to express an imaginative geography of the island's despoilment. At the Christmas party, in at the center of the novel, Salgado conveys on Sri Lanka with a great historical sweep, going back literally hundreds of millions of years,

*"Africa. The whole of the rest of the world, was part of us. It was all once one place: Gondwanaland. The great land-mass in the stage of innocence. But then the earth was corrupted and the sea flooded in the land was divided..."* (Gunesequera: 84).

For Salgado, Sri Lanka's island-ness is a "fate that pre-dates and contains the countries tensions: an inescapable geopolitical reality, almost organic by nature" (Jazeel 594) maps the island's political struggles onto the geography of the teeming underwater world circling Sri Lanka's coasts.

The 'sea' assumes a significant part. Sea is the trespasser on the island, as Sri Lanka is encircled by water on all sides. For Gunesequera's chief characters, the ocean turns into history's excellent observer and avenging holy messenger. Sea is the reason for attack, yet the ocean and its assets are attacked by humankind also. The sea is just about as risky as man who had failed to remember the need of subjugation between individuals. The general population is in steady feeling of dread toward the looming war, yet not that of the danger to which nature has been projected into. The change between Mr. Salgado and his companions shows the effect of developing turmoil in the country comparable to nature which clearly prompts the de-territorialization of the island. As indicated by Gunesequera, the reef is depicted as an allegory for the nation and, as it were, for Salgado himself. Like the reef and the excellence of nature submerged, everything about the nation and the expert is being disintegrated. The Salgado family in Sri Lanka has no future. It is by all accounts imploding. Breaking down is finished uniquely to be supplanted by viciousness, bedlam and terrible executions near the ocean. Triton reviews: Back home that April, in 1971, the first of the insurrections emitted in a furor of gunfire and little blasts. Band of passionate youthful guerrillas meandered the towns and municipalities marking out their place in an unrefined ceaseless cortege. Thousands were killed in the backlashes (Gunesequera: 172). It was Sri Lanka's grimy conflict or "dirty war" with hundreds being killed each week. Indeed, even as migrants residing in London Triton and Salgado are spooky by the pictures of savage contentions back home: Then, in the mid year of 1983, hordes went on the frenzy in Colombo. We saw pictures of youngsters, who appeared to be no unique from me, going wild on what might have been our primary street. The widespread brutality made the TV news consistently for quite a long time (Gunesequera: 178). It is extremely obvious from the above lines



how the effect of common conflict experiences totally obliterated the harmony and serenity of the Sri Lankan island.

### 5.0 Conclusion and Findings of the Study

- In the select novel for the study *Reef* (1994), Gunesequera uses the paradise motif to criticize environmental degradation, deconstruct national myths of the island, and demystify the migrant's memory of the homeland.
- "The erosion of the sea" is used as a metaphor for the "erosion of the native's identity". The author traces the transformation of the Sri Lankan landscape from a site of picturesque beauty to a site of sublime desolation.
- In *Reef*, Romesh portrays how the fragile, living coral is partly a metaphor for a land poised to crumble into fratricidal self-destruction.
- These dangerous coral reefs and the country's blood-spattering civil war leads to the **de-territorialization** of the Island.
- The author has efficiently articulated about the devastation and violent behavior/ aggressive nature through the Salgado and Triton's affluent 'exile' in London.
- The epigraph from *The Tempest*, establishes the link between man and nature and suggests human and environmental fragility relative to the impending civil war. "Of his bones are coral made" is specially connected to the destruction of both man and environment, thereby initiating the metaphor of a shared human condition.
- Re-territorialization involves 'finding a new place.' In *Reef*, Triton moves to London and stays there by becoming a restaurateur, whereas Salgado returns back to his homeland Sri Lanka after spending an exile in London.

## References/ Works Cited

- Daniels, Stephen and Simon Rycroft. "Mapping the Modern City: Allan Sillitoe's Nottingham Novels." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. 1993, pp. 460-480
- Deckard, Sharae. "Jungle Tide, Devouring Reef: (Post)colonial Anxiety and Ecocritique in Sri Lankan Literature." *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives*. Ed. Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt. Charlottesville: U of Virginia. Ebook.
- Erney, Hans-Georg. "RomeshGunesekera." 1997. Web. Oct. 21, 1997.
- Grbin, Miloje. "Foucault And Space." Vol. XLIX, no 3, pp. 305-312. 2015.
- Gunesekera, Romesh. *Reef*. London: Granta Books, 1994. Print.
- Jaggi, Maya. Lost Horizons. *The Guardian*, May, 2007.
- Jayasuriya, Maryse. *Terror and Reconciliation: Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature, 1983-2009*. Lanham: Lexington, 2012. Print.
- Jazeel, Tariq. "Unpicking Sri Lankan 'island-ness' in RomeshGunesekera's
- Nasta, Susheila. *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. Print.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. India: Pearson, 2008. Print.  
New York: Routledge, 2007. Ebook.
- Reef." *Journal of Historical Geography* 29. 4 (2003): 582-98. Web. 5 Oct. 2021.
- Salgado, Minoli. *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance, and the Politics of Place*.
- Wikipedia contributors. "Reef." Wikipedia, 1 Oct. 2021, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reef.

