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Family Feud

By Jacqueline Carey

THE SANDGLASS

By Romesh Gunsekera.

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The New Press. \$21.95.

For a decade and a half, Sri Lanka has been the scene of violent confrontations between its Sinhalese-controlled Government and armed separatists fighting on behalf of its Tamil minority. By 1991, Amnesty International had reported thousands of disappearances, largely the result of state terrorism. Atrocities have been committed on both sides: torture, suicide bombings, executions, the massacre of whole villages. In 1993, the culminating year of Romesh Gunsekera's ambitious second novel, "The Sandglass," both the Sri Lankan President and the leader of the opposition party were assassinated.

The book concerns a feud between two Sri Lankan families, the Ducals and the Vatunas. It is hard not to assume that this rivalry is inspired, to some degree, by the division in the country, especially since its cause is geographic. The house bought by Jason Ducal in the capital city of Colombo was once part of the original Vatunas estate, and rich old Esra Vatunas thinks it still should be.

The novel takes place more in the business than in the political realm, but the oblique, insistent references to the war make apparently ordinary questions fraught: How do you reconcile the virtues of ambition and drive with the dubious maneuverings required by a corrupted world? Or, more generally, how can you continue to live, love and bear children, given the horrors you see all around you?

Jason Ducal, who has a natural gift for business, works constantly if unreflectingly and is good at the sort of ego-stroking that insures advancement. When the British-owned tea company he works for is nationalized in 1948, Jason is in the perfect position to benefit. In 1956, after consolidating his power in the company, he decides to engineer the purchase of a local distillery -- a stroke of genius, as it later turns out -- but before his plan can be put into action he is found dead, a bullet in his brain. The official verdict is accidental death, but Esra Vatunas immediately buys up the distillery himself.

This episode is the only part of the book's extremely complicated plot that has the heft of an expected moral choice. The reader assumes that Prins, Jason's son, will find out what really happened and will deal with it in some fashion that reveals certain truths about himself and his father -- a sort of "All the King's Men" in an even hotter place. At least Prins says that's what he's going to do. But that is not at all what occurs.

Gunsekera's novel has a frame: Chip, the expatriate Sri Lankan narrator, muses about what could have happened to his now-vanished friend Prins. Inside that frame is a mat with a variety of circles and squares cut into it, the mat being the day in 1993 that Prins comes back to London to attend his mother's funeral and talks to Chip. The chapters have titles like "Morning," "Ten O'clock," "Late Morning" and so forth. Yet each of these chapters contains not a single scene but a horde of them, working back and forth in time and place, suggesting the splinters into which Sri Lankan life has shattered.

Part of the singularity of "The Sandglass" is the way it expresses this splintering process through the virtually equal (but necessarily scant) attention given to the many secondary characters, which include four generations of Ducals and Vatunas, plus friends, business associates and one mad monk (apparently a staple of Sri Lankan political life). Pearl, Prins's mother, who left Colombo for London after Jason's death, spends her time watching old movies on television with Chip. She is nearly paralyzed by the past, especially by her mysterious connection to the Vatunas. Other characters -- in a big ahistorical jumble -- take a berth on a foreign ship, give the United States a try, commit suicide, marry Englishmen, smash up cars, take up art, take up drink, gamble, get religion, get pregnant, get blown up by bombs.

In this crowd, Prins, like his father, initially seems blessed. At one point he talks his way into a lucrative job as a management consultant in England, despite having no experience. When he gives this up to return to Sri Lanka in an attempt to make some sense of his life, he finds still more success in the corporate world. He has his own brilliant business

idea, falls in love with a Vatunas granddaughter and eventually starts working with a Vatunas grandson.

At the same time, it is Prins who is the most tormented by the situation in his native land, who makes sardonic remarks about goon squads and the like. "Sinhala kids, Tamil kids, it's all the same," he observes. "Fodder for the politicians. On every side the rich are scheming and the rest are reeling." This consciousness, coupled with his natural drive and energy, makes the question of reconciling a desire for success in the world with an acknowledgment of that same world's glaring evils particularly pointed. Prins has, in a sense, already got his answer through his father's story: such a reconciliation is impossible. Yet he still has the optimism of youth. He cannot believe things aren't going to get better.

"The Sandglass" is very different from Gunasekera's first novel, "Reef," which was a finalist for Britain's Booker Prize. A relatively limited, unified, faux-naïf story about a cook in a wealthy household, "Reef" has some of the most mouthwatering food writing I have ever read. The new novel is often as successful on the sentence-to-sentence level. Take this passage, when Chip is rooting about his house, trying to find some Champagne for a celebration: "The cellar was brimming with junk. I found the bottle in the well of a dead VW wheel, as I had suspected. It was cold. The doorbell rang while I was still rummaging, seized by a need to find a screwdriver I had once lost down there."

"Reef" is in some ways the more competent book. It has no awkward transitions or irritating digressions. It doesn't require two family trees to help keep the characters straight. "The Sandglass" may simply have too much crammed into too small a space. But there is no doubt that this is an important novel, and I would rather read it than many more timid works. It pesters, it cross-pollinates, it lingers. Early on, Chip says that he "wouldn't know what was going on anywhere in the best of times." At the novel's end, although he is the only one left to put everything together, finally he cannot. His chilling explanation: "I wanted to live in hope as much as in truth."