Death and Lifelessness in Sri Lanka

Family haunted by upheaval, exile and a 40-year-old mystery

REVIEWED BY Michael Upchurch, Special to The Chronicle
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The sandglass

By Romesh Gunesekera New Press; 278 pages; $21.95

Six years ago, the London-based Sri Lankan writer Romesh Gunesekera published a book of short stories, ``Monkish Moon,'' that seemed to herald the arrival of a major talent.

The tales were vivid in their detail yet guarded in their feelings, as Gunesekera tackled the racial and political strife that plagues his homeland. The book's variety of voices -- young, old, rich, poor, male, female -- was impressive. Luminous, lyrical prose leavened its sometimes sobering subject matter with occasional smile-inducing touches: a hefty business magnate leaning forward in his chair ``like a mountain tipping,'' a Sri Lankan Anglophile who sees England as ``rich, fertile, full of a kind of tubby valour.''

``Monkfish Moon'' was followed by a novel, ``Reef,'' about an 11-year-old house servant overly worshipful of his westernized employer. Nominated for the Booker Prize, the book had much to recommend it, although Gunesekera sometimes seemed uncertain in his handling of the longer narrative form.

Now comes a second novel, ``The Sandglass,'' in which the arresting, crystalline power of Gunesekera's short fiction has vanished altogether. The story -- of a family feud complicated by death and exile -- has potential, yet it fails to draw the reader into its world. It doesn't help that Gunesekera has developed a bad case of rhetorical overkill.

Chip (no last name) is the book's cipherlike narrator but not its focus. That honor goes to Prins Ducal, a Sri Lankan entrepreneur who, in the novel's opening pages, is reported missing in the country's capital, Colombo, following the city's latest wave of political violence. The question of Prins' whereabouts isn't addressed again until the end of the book. What we get instead are extensive flashbacks of the Ducals' family history and that of their neighbors, the Vatunases.

Prins and his mother, Pearl, tell most of this story. Chip, Pearl's London lodger turned friend, puts the details together as best he can. At the heart of these is a mystery surrounding the 1956 death of Jason Ducal -- Prins' father, Pearl's husband -- when Prins was a boy.

The grown-up Prins is sure it was murder and that Esra Vatunas, Jason's business rival as well as his neighbor, was behind it. Pearl perhaps knew more about this than she ever told Prins, but she goes to the grave with her secrets. (Her death and funeral in 1993 provide the framework for much of the story.) As for Prins' own siblings, they're dead too. His one niece, born and raised in England, is too far removed from Sri Lanka to take much interest in family lore.

Esra's descendants -- one of whom plays Juliet to Prins' Romeo -- can't, or won't, shed light on Jason's death. Much is made of the obfuscating powers of time, too. The very image of the book's title is echoed in the ``hourglass'' shape of the Vatunas family's land holdings and the way that land encloses the Ducals' home, Arcadia. (Yes, this is as contrived in context as it sounds in summary.)

Gunesekera clearly intends to explore the feelings of irresolution that death, exile and political upheaval can impose on a family's sense of itself, as he lingers on puzzles that never get cleared up and communications between far-flung family members that slowly atrophy. Trouble is, the book's narrative tension atrophies in the process. Even its prose, though peppered with Sri Lankan colloquialisms, remains strangely lifeless.

Characters are indistinct, scenes are fleeting and actions are flatly explained rather than evoked in animating detail. The protagonists' frustration at being cut off from the things that matter most to them gets lip service -- and that's all.

It doesn't help that Chip is so nondescript. We're given minimal information about his background and no sense of his inner life beyond his propensity for stating the obvious. Pearl's death, he says, ``made me aware for the first time of the density of what surrounds us, the transformations that take place in our lives, the capricious acts of disappearance performed every day.'' Throughout the book, similarly ho-hum epiphanies are stated in equally portentous terms.

Gunesekera occasionally offers good outsider's detail of London: its weather, its rowhouse gardens. But elsewhere, the usual understatement of his prose has given way to something close to bombast. Of Prins' niece's boyfriend, Chip says: ``I could see how his fingers might have reached into her heart, plugging each valve and ventricle until it seemed almost to burst in a big red corpuscular corona, but I was sceptical about his long- term intentions.''

Is this character observation or a clip from a splatter film? If it's an attempt at humor, it just seems goofy.

Where ``Reef'' raised a few questions about Gunesekera's gifts for extended narrative, ``The Sandglass'' raises serious alarms. Here's a writer who has made whole worlds come to life in his short fiction. Maybe he should consider returning to a smaller canvas.

Michael Upchurch's latest novel is ``Passive Intruder.''

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