

Literary Review

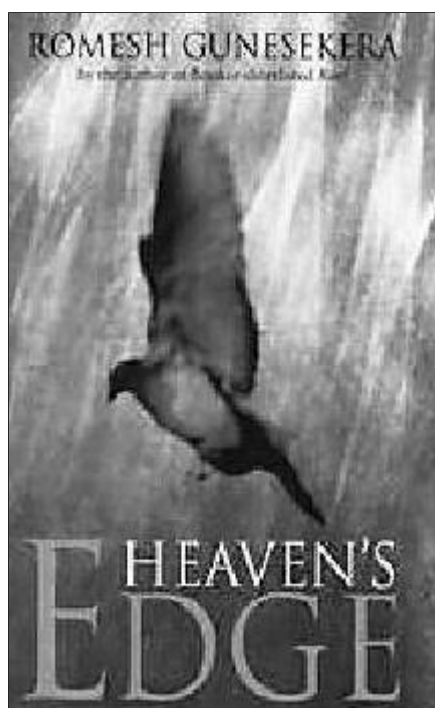
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Where hell begins

Using motifs and elements from fairy tale, fantasy and SF, Romesh Gunesequera narrates a bleak story of the contagion of violence, says TABISH KHAIR.



ROMESH GUNESEKERA'S third novel, released by Bloomsbury on April 22, is set 30 years in the future in a place identified only as "the Island". Called **Heaven's Edge**, it starts in a manner that might make some roll their eyes skywards and put away the book. To do so would be a mistake, for the novel gathers force and what appears to be a woolly, romantic start turns out to be necessary and crafted.

The protagonist, Marc, who narrates the story in the first person, has come to the "island" for the first time in his life "to explore an older terrain and discover what was best to remember, and what might be better to forget". His grandfather had emigrated from the island, refusing to kill for any cause, and his father had returned to it to fight for a cause and die. Now, 30 years in the future, the island is a torn and empty shell. The initial pages describe Marc in a tourist resort where there are no tourists, where people seem to lack voices and where even the birds do not sing. This creates the eerie image of a place without a soul. However, into this silent, empty once-paradise — where violence is not really visible to Marc yet — comes Uva, a strong and beautiful woman who has set herself the mission of releasing birds into nature. He first sees her using a butterfly knife to cut the strings of a tied bird, next to a fairy-tale lake in the forest.

Evidently, these few pages in which romance blossoms in natural surroundings might strike the reader as artificial: and to an extent,

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that is the point of the description. The romance enables Gunesequera to narrate the paradise that has been destroyed — by creating a paradisaic romance that will be destroyed over the rest of the book. It is also made to stand out as odd, even fantastic, which highlights the depths of human degradation to which the island has sunk: degradation that makes even love seem impossibly like a fairy tale.

But Uva also has a secret farm in the forest in which she cultivates fruits, banned by authorities. Once the farm is discovered, Uva disappears — killed or captured by the authorities — and Marc turns into a fugitive. His search for Uva — along with two powerfully etched characters, Jaz and Kris — is rewarded in the end. He finds Uva, or rather Uva finds him. But the romance that he had imagined for them in the initial pages cannot come true: too much has happened in between. The novel ends with Marc, who has consistently avoided killing, shooting down soldiers and Uva, whose butterfly knife had once released birds to life and freedom, jumping from the trees to kill with that very knife.

Between the fairytale-like romance of the first pages and the comic-book, action-film like ending of the last pages — with a female Tarzan swinging down on the soldiers, knife in hand — Gunesequera manages to pack in a number of other sub-genres. Of these the most important are those of Fantasy Writing and Science Fiction, both used carefully and with an eye to their potential to comment on the present and the past. Gunesequera combines the "trek" and nature motifs of the Fantasy sub-genre with the apocalyptic and urban elements found in Science Fiction to narrate a bleak story: that of the contagion of violence, the pitfalls of memory, the implacability of hate.

Not only islands but entire sub-continent can learn from it: hell starts at the edge of heaven.

Heaven's Edge, Romesh Gunesequera, Bloomsbury, 2002, p.206, £16.99.

Tabish Khair, author of Babu Fictions, is with the Department of English, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

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