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The Present Is a Foreign Country

By Akash Kapur

HEAVEN'S EDGE

By Romesh Gunesekera.

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Grove Press. $24.

THE nation-state is a creation of empire, but for a generation of postimperial subjects the legacy of colonialism has been one of homelessness and exile. Romesh Gunesekera was born in Sri Lanka in 1954, six years after independence. He left soon thereafter -- first for the Philippines and then, in the early 1970's, for the imperial homeland, a star that glowed brightly from afar but, up close, offered the chill of alienation and racism.

Gunesekera's fiction, unsurprisingly, is preoccupied with various kinds of rootlessness. His first novel, "Reef," which was a finalist for the Booker Prize, is a heart-rending tale about losing the innocence of childhood; "Monkfish Moon," a collection of stories, is bathed in a similar nostalgia. "The Sandglass," Gunesekera's second novel, addresses the search for a personal and national sense of belonging. All three books are set primarily in Sri Lanka, or an imaginary place very much like that island. Each, in its own way, is about the plight of postcolonial exile.

"Heaven's Edge," Gunesekera's third novel, has much in common with these earlier books. Like "The Sandglass," it is the story of a narrator who travels from England to his ancestral island, again a thinly disguised Sri Lanka, in search of a missing past. It is also Gunesekera's most accomplished work yet. Wistful, melancholy and mysterious, "Heaven's Edge" is a complex novel that entwines the individual's quest for wholeness with a country's longing for lost -- and better -- times.

There are many forms of exile in the novel, many opportunities for Gunesekera to meditate on the irretrievability of the past. Marc, the narrator, visits the island that has been described to him by his grandfather and father, both of whom spent much of their lives in England. At some point in Marc's childhood, his father made his way to the island and died in a plane crash while defending it from a military threat. Marc is in search of his father, and he is in search of his roots. His existence in England has been hollow; he is also, as he says, a man "in search of himself." To these preoccupations, another is soon added: Marc meets a young woman named Uva, with whom he falls in love, but their idyll is interrupted by a paramilitary intrusion. The bulk of the novel consists of the attempt by Marc (accompanied by two of Uva's former acquaintances) to be reunited with his lost love.

Hovering over all these personal quests is the sadness of a country that has also lost itself. Sri Lanka was once the jewel of the subcontinent, a rich island with an educated and sophisticated population, a place where various ethnic groups coexisted harmoniously. For two decades, however, it has been racked by a separatist civil war that has claimed some 65,000 lives, many of them in brutal suicide bombings. (Although recent peace talks have offered hopes for an end to the fighting, they are still fragile hopes.) As in other recent Sri Lankan expatriate novels -- notably "Anil's Ghost," by Michael Ondaatje -- the exile's journey is clouded by this violence: Marc wants to go home, but the home he anticipates exists only in his imagination.

"Anything was possible," he thinks early in the novel, recalling his father's and grandfather's idealized descriptions. "That was the point . . . about an island of dreams." But by the end of the book, as his quest for Uva drags him ever deeper into a confrontation with the island's brutality, there are no dreams, only nightmares. His ancestors' paradise has become a war-scarred land where soldiers roam unchecked and a military government controls every aspect of its citizens' lives.

In its bleakness, this landscape resembles a tropical version of the urban desert in Terry Gilliam's film "12 Monkeys." Indeed, although Gunesekera might bristle at the classification, his novel is a work of science fiction. It takes place in some unspecified future after an unspecified disaster has driven the population from its homes into an underground existence as hunter-gatherers. Although the island's name remains unspecified as well, the novel is filled with futuristic-sounding places like Samandia and Farindola and with fabulous, abandoned mansions "at the top of the world." In one scene, Marc makes a quick getaway from soldiers in a flying machine shaped like a peacock -- a mythical "Trojan peacock" invented in 2525 B.C.

We never do learn exactly who these soldiers (or their masters) are, and we never learn the precise nature of the disaster that has taken place on Marc's island. This indeterminacy can be troubling: the narrative sometimes unfolds in a state of delirium, and there are moments when it veers dangerously away from storytelling toward vague metaphysical ponderings. ("Our lives," Marc tells himself, "were ethereal links in a great sacred chain that must not be broken.")

BUT Gunesekera's prose is spare and muscular, and ultimately it is the writing that rescues his novel from its "ethereal" digressions. For every moment of vagueness, there is a precise -- and often beautiful -- description of nature, a vivid action sequence or an all-too-real encounter with violence. Gunesekera's story may be dreamlike, but his prose is resolutely grounded, and the result -- as in the best science fiction writing -- is a story that uses realism to transcend reality, to hint at deeper mysteries and more profound truths.

Lurking within the story of Marc's exile is, of course, an allegory about the human condition. "Heaven's Edge" is a somewhat self-conscious reworking of the Edenic myth, but what gives the novel its power is an awareness of the irredeemability of that condition. By the end of the novel, Marc succeeds in tracking down some of his roots. But something is amiss: we sense the violence lurking below the surface, and the melancholy refuses to lift.

Marc says early on that he is looking for something "primal." Ultimately, he comes to the conclusion that "too many deaths had blotched our separate lives to allow for a simple return to our beginnings." His exile, like all exile, is chronic -- after the passage of time, there is no home left to return to.

Drawing (Julia Vaksar)