

An Island of Injustice: An Ecological Reading of Romesh Gunesequera's *The Prisoner of Paradise*

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Abstract

The story of Romesh Gunesequera's novel *The Prisoner of Paradise* (2012) is set in Mauritius; an island whose ecological history is a classic example of "ecological imperialism", a theory propounded by Alfred W. Crosby. The paper will undertake a critical reading of the protagonist Lucy's search for Eden in Mauritius which can be seen as an allusion to the Western civilization's quest for Eden ever since the fall of man, connecting it to the concepts of green imperialism and the impossibility of this trope of reconstruction will be analyzed through her death. Lucy's oriental gaze towards the island will be analyzed through the lens of Graham Huggan's "postcolonial exotic" theory.

Keywords: Colonization; Ecological imperialism; Eden; Orient; Postcolonial exotic.

Romesh Gunesequera, a Sri Lankan diasporic writer based in London, was born in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1954. He moved first to Philippines in 1966 when he was twelve years old and then to London in 1971 when he was seventeen years old. He has authored novels like *Reef* (1994), *The Sandglass* (1998), *The Match* (2006), *Heaven's Edge* (2002). He received the Sri Lanka Ranjaana Award in 2005 and the BBC Asia Award in 1998 for his contribution to literature. He was also the recipient of Premio Mondello Five Continents Asia Prize in 1997 and the Yorkshire Post First Work Prize in 1995, both for his novel *Reef*. He also was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1994 for *Reef*.

Romesh Gunesequera's *The Prisoner of Paradise* was published in 2012. The author sets the story in 1825. A naive Englishwoman, Lucy Gladwell, arrives in Mauritius to live with her uncle, George Huyton and aunt, Betty Huyton in his grand plantation house. The setting of the novel deserves an elaborate explanation since Mauritius has a long history of being colonized by the Dutch and French and later on being claimed by the Brit-

ish. Jean Houbert in his article, "Mauritius: Independence and Dependence" says:

Mauritius is very different from the newly independent countries of Africa and Asia in some important respects, having been entirely created by European colonisation. The economy, the society, the polity, the very flora and fauna of the island are all the direct result of its colonial history. (75)

In fact, the majority of the settlers in Mauritius are diasporans who had come to the island either as labourers or in search of employment and had later settled there. The island has a very interesting history to call its own. Colonization of the island started as early as 1638 by the Dutch colonizers. Due to spread of illnesses, crisis of food and pest infestations, the Dutch left the island in 1710. However, by this time the British colonizers had already started exploring the Indian Ocean. After the Dutch left the island, it became a French colony in the year 1715. In 1810, the island was captured by the British. The Dutch were the first to introduce sugar cane which originally came from Batavia (Indonesia). But after the British conquered Mauritius, there followed a number of social and economic changes.

Mauritius had almost no natural resources and was covered by tropical forests and boulders. No money could be made out of such an island but after the sugar plantations thrived, the leading European powers used this island as a military and trading base *en route* India. Mauritius, therefore, has been rightly called the sugar island. Sugar plantations have dominated the agricultural production in Mauritius since the British rule. After the British took possession of the island, their interest grew in producing cash crops. The reason behind this is possibly the opening of the British market to sugar. Although the French colonies made their slaves turn the areas into sugar estates, yet they needed more labour. The Parliament of Britain had already abolished the slave trade in Britain in 1807. But when the British took possession of Mauritius in 1810, slavery was still going on illegally. Then the Slavery Abolition Bill was passed in 1833 under the rule of King William IV following which slavery was abolished in Mauritius in 1835, on February 1. This made availability of slaves from Africa an impossibility. But the British and the French were quite familiar with the Indian labourers of the South Indian coast. So, the British started importing Indian labourers to work in the sugar plantations in Mauritius. *The Prisoner of Paradise*, set in the year 1825, uses all these historical ongoing events as the backdrop to the novel.

We are exposed to the inhumanity with which the slaves were treated from the very beginning of the novel when Lucy finds chained men and asks George Huyton, her uncle, the reason behind it:

‘Convicts, my dear. Shipped from India. We have rather a lot of them here. They can be worked in the sun, you see.’ (9)

George Huyton, a perfect colonizer, is busy degrading the convicts and the Indian slaves and calls them “bloody chaps” (42) and “donkeys” (42) and is of the view that even the most ruthless punishments are not enough for them. From the time Mauritius was colonized, all the crops had been brought from other lands and had been sowed on the island to reap out benefits for the colonizers. This shows the presence of what the critics like Alfred w. Crosby call ‘ecological imperialism.’ Before we proceed further, it would be wiser to have a brief look at the meaning and implications of the term ‘ecological imperialism.’ Alfred w. Crosby in his article, “Ecological Imperialism,” in *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History Volume 1* says:

Imperialism is usually considered to be a political and sometimes an economic or religious phenomenon. But it also has an ecological side: Imperialists have intentionally, more often unintentionally, and always inevitably carried with them plants, animals, and microlife from their lands of origin to their new lands. Where imperialists have been successful not simply in conquest but also in settlement, they have done so with the indispensable assistance of the life forms they brought with them. The most successful imperialists have been those who have, as much by chance as intention, changed the flora and fauna, macro and micro, of their new environments to be much like their old environments. (368)

So ‘domination’ is a word that is almost synonymous with imperialism. Imperialism can be well connected with the environment because domination need not always be in the realm of humans only. Entities on the other end of this power-game might be the non-human. Nature, indeed, might very well act as the colonized ‘other.’

Eric Katz divides ‘ecological imperialism’ into four types in his article “Imperialism and Environmentalism”:

- Imperialistic humans exercise power over other humans; for example, the colonization of the Americas.
- Imperialistic humans exercise power over nature; for example, the practice of agriculture.

- Imperialistic nature exercises power over humans; for example, the destruction of beach houses in the December 1992 storm.¹
- Imperialistic nature exercises power over other nature. (273 – 74)

The Prisoner of Paradise is an example of the first as well as the second of these four types. By introducing plants that were not native to the island, the colonizers had successfully subverted the natural ecology of the island. By the time the British got the possession of the island, all the estates were covered with sugar plants only because the tropical weather was conducive to such a move that resulted in the birth of a mono-crop economy reaping benefits only for the colonizers. So nature had been subdued and “wilderness” had been tamed in order to produce a cash crop that was not the land’s indigenous product.

The portrayal of Narayena, a slave who was brought from the Coromandel Coast of South India along with a host of other boys like him and was put to work on a sugar plantation, is also very significant, particularly in the context of the interface between imperialism and environment. Readers first meet Narayena when he comes to Don, an interpreter for the exiled Ceylonese Prince, and requests him to write a letter to the authorities stating that the Hindu slaves need to construct a temple or *kovil*. As a naïve Indian, completely disconnected from his homeland, Narayena feels that they need to pray to God as a compensation for the crime of having left their motherland:

‘. . .we must do *pūja* to compensate. For leaving our motherland. For new vows. Must make this place our own. We need a *kovil* to worship.’ (76)

In Narayena, we have a replica of a long-suffering colonized ‘other’ who is not a native of the island. As the narrator describes Narayena and his position in the island, he explains:

Narayena had been brought to the island some twenty years earlier and put to work in the nearby plantation along with a dozen other slave boys caught on the Coromandel Coast of India. They lived severed from homeland and history, separated even from the community of free Malabar merchants and Madras artisans, reliant upon brittle splinters of random memories and a mish-mash of rituals to maintain their slowly fading identity. (75)

These plantation labourers were neither treated as humans, nor did they have even a small plot of land to call their own. But these Indian labourers were slowly rising against the tortures that had been inflicted on them for so many years. Gunesequera constantly feeds into the narrative present

the history of the island. One never forgets that it was the time when the pesky abolitionists were rigidly determined to stop slavery. Narayena and slaves like him want sons and that, in their understanding, could only happen when they would be able to set up their own temple and pray to and worship their Hindu God. He feels that there is a holiness attached to the ground beneath his feet. By attaching a holy and sacred value to the land that had been wrecked by years of imperialism, he raises nature to the level of divinity. Through the portrayal of Narayena, Gunesequera, thus, resorts to “nature religion,” which for these homeless diasporic people seems to be the only way of getting a temporary relief from the tortures of the colonizers. Narayena’s disturbances arise probably from the gap between the edenical landscape that he has left behind and the landscape of the tropical island he is trying to adapt to. His situation is best understood in the light of Barbara Deutch Lynch’s observations found in her article, “The Garden and the Sea: U.S. Latino Environmental Discourses and Mainstream Environmentalism” :

Migration may be associated with an emphasis on “happier” rural environments of times past coupled with a heightened consciousness of particular patterns of environmental degradation that have impelled exodus. It may also provoke contemplation about the root causes of those changes and of the differences between the landscapes in which migrants find themselves, those which they had expected to find, and those left behind. (113)

While the colonizers are busy destroying the natural ecosystem of the island, through the portrayal of characters like Narayena, Gunesequera shows the way for absolution.

When Narayena requests Don to write a letter to the authorities asking for the permission to build a temple, Don suggests that they should address the letter to George Huyton who was the superintendent and thus the Governor’s representative. But George Huyton does not grant the permission and, in turn, Narayena and slaves like him rebel against the authorities. As a result of this, Kishore, a supporter of Narayena, gets brutally killed. His hands are cut off after being shot and other body parts are butchered too.

In such circumstances, the narrator introduces us to Lucy Gladwell, the niece of George Huyton, who, after her father’s death, comes to Mauritius to stay with her uncle and aunt:

When her aunt recommended, six months earlier, that Lucy travel with her to Mauritius, Lucy had imagined a journey into Eden. (13)

She was a woman with her imagination charged up by the tales of romance, such as *Lalla Rookh*, the oriental romance by Thomas Moore. In fact, the setting of her uncle's house at Ambleside instigates her imagination further. Although the sun is a little hotter on the tropical island, yet the natural surroundings with all its beauty enthrall her. She finds the weather "balmy" (10) after she reaches her uncle Huyton's place and is captivated by the beauty of the garden which belongs to her aunt Betty. While the whole world outside is busy destroying the forests and the natural landscapes to set up sugar estates, Betty Huyton prefers to keep a garden of her own:

Lucy could sense again the great chaos of vegetation pressing in from the periphery: tall palms and busy trees surging in all directions, a jumble barely held at bay by the garden's line of pert cannas and ornate arches.(34)

Betty Huyton is a quite a pragmatic woman, who wishes to cure Lucy of her fantasies. She has almost no role to play in her husband's life and and is only confined to managing the household. Being deprived of her husband's love and affection, she finds peace in the arms of nature as she herself confesses:

'When you find the management of the house is too much on top of you, I recommend you come here, my dear, and revive your faith in nature, if not, alas, human nature.'(34)

It seems that the garden that Betty Huyton nurtures and cultivates is full of lively colours that can enliven the mood and can renew life's vigour.

That the nature in this island is very much alive and breathing is something Gunsekera never fails to bring to the reader's notice in the novel. Lucy can hear the sound of the waves:

'Here, on this island, you can hear the surf break upon the beach to an iambic beat. Each wave like a drumbeat calling us to an epic as old as the ocean.'(62)

At every point, Lucy is shown in search of a paradise where she could be alone in the lap of nature. While she always busies herself in escaping into a dreamy pastoral world where she would be living in seclusion, the imperial policy of ruthless exploitation of nature continues and her passivity is as toxic as Huyton's dehumanizing measures. Her constant search for Eden seems to be alluding to the Western civilization's quest for the reconstruction of Eden ever since the fall of man. The search for Eden can be traced back to the Renaissance when the conception of Eden often took concrete shape in the form of the early systematic botanical gardens

that were themselves derived from Zoroastrian notions of Pairidaeza that had originated in Persia and had been further developed throughout the Islamic world. Eminent theorists like Richard Grove has pointed out that as early as the fifteenth century the tropical islands had been appropriated as paradises and the establishment of botanical gardens on such islands reasserted such appropriation. Eventually the botanical gardens expanded over the large tropical islands thus nurturing the colonialist expansion of the Britishers. This task of restoring Eden had begun already in the fifteenth century by appropriating the tropical islands as Edenical paradises. This, in fact, was one of the main agenda of green imperialism as argues Richard H. Grove in his seminal book *Green Imperialism*:

This role was reinforced by the establishment of the earlier colonial botanical gardens on these islands and on one mainland 'Eden', the Cape of Good Hope. . .Conceptually, they soon expanded beyond the physical limitations of the botanical gardens to encompass large tropical islands. Subsequently the colonialist encounter in India, Africa and the Americas with large 'wild' landscapes apparently little altered by man, along with their huge variety of plants, meant that the whole tropical world became vulnerable to colonisation. . . (5)

In this novel too, the narrator mentions about the "Botanic Gardens" (97), which "had been nurtured as a haven – an island within an island" (97). These botanic gardens became the road to colonial exploitation and environmental degradation. Introducing species that were not native to the tropical island, these gardens did not only subvert and modify the ecological balances but also led to the birth of diseases. These "Botanic Gardens," simply referred to as "Gardens," are not free from the clutches of history. Gunsekera mentions in the novel how the "Gardens" had all kinds of imported species, a microcosmic representation of the macrocosmic diasporic population, which were more cared for than the human slaves outside:

Foreign plants from all over the world – Ceylon, Polynesia, the Ivory Coast – had been imported, much as the people of Mauritius had been, but to a condition of care largely absent outside its walls and railings. (98)

In fact, the "Botanical Gardens" are also replete with histories as Mauritius too is. In this context, I would like quote Grove again to trace the origins of these Gardens:

Labourdonnais embarked on a series of attempts to introduce and

breed new crops on his estate, 'Mon Plaisir', at Pamplémousses. This crop-trial garden formed the basis of the later botanical garden at Pamplémousses. Labourdonnais had particular success with one crop, manioc, which had been introduced from Brazil, and it proved a useful staple food for the slave population. The success of this innovation and more especially the idea of cultivating new crops in a specialised garden on a trial basis, meant that his initiative became widely known among English as well as French botanists and later provided part of the inspiration for the introduction of the botanical-garden system in India. (Grove 175)

Similarly, the species bred in the gardens were totally alien to the land and the lack of technological equipments and native people made Mauritius an easy target for the European people. Thus, the new island became a fusion of the imagined Eden and a safe empirical island where there was no chance of resistance from the imported enslaved people. The care that the "Gardens" received shows that these artificially constructed areas were just a few instruments of actualizing the dream of reconstructing Eden in the otherwise fully colonized landscape, almost acting as a façade to the actual colonisation of the island. To quote Grove again:

Paradoxically, the full flowering of what one might term the Edenic island discourse during the mid seventeenth century closely coincided with the realisation that the economic demands of colonial rule on previously uninhabited oceanic island colonies threatened their imminent and comprehensive degradation. . . Some of the worst consequences of early colonial deforestation were well documented in the island colonies of St Helena and Mauritius, and it was on these islands that a coherent and wide-ranging critique of environmental degradation first emerged. (7)

While constructing a paradise, the English were taking up a utilitarian attitude towards nature by only resorting to reaping benefits out of the wild tropics.

Although Lucy finds a preliminary shock in the colonialist attitude of uncle Huyton, in the disgracing comments of Don on women, and in the Indian slaves being chained, she never fails to keep her dreams alive. A cure for her ailing heart, nature is always present to balmify her senses and soothe her mind. The garden that Betty had so lovingly built offers her all the care that she needs. In the garden hut she "could be alone without the fear of consequence. . . No marauders, no pirates, no roving strangers" (86). In such conditions, she always loves imagining herself as the Oriental princess of *Lalla Rookh*. Throughout the novel we find the author dropping

hints about exoticizing the Orient. While in a conversation with the Ceylonese Prince, Lucy tells him :

‘Your Ceylon, I have read, is the island of the fabled lotus’ . . . ‘Is it then Homer’s land of the lotus-eaters?’ she asked, bemused. ‘Do you eat the flower to forget and sleep?’ (61)

These instances of the tourist gaze regarding the Orient are not new in Gunesekera’s novels. In *Heaven’s Edge* also, Gunesekera portrayed the typical exoticized gaze of the West well painted through the attitude of Marc towards the despoiled unnamed island. Lucy always associates herself with the Oriental princesses:

Lucy was not sure what she had expected to see, perhaps a scene out of *Lalla Rookh*: a garden of perfume, peacocks and Persian minstrels. (203)

The Orient to her is a romanticized and exoticized space where can exist no evil and she believes that her spirit will be liberated in such a space. Although she is disdained at her uncle’s behaviour and the treatment of the Indian convicts, she never actually feels the intensity of the situation and seems to be untouched by the socio-political turmoil of the island. Her attitude towards the nature around her is that of a typical tourist who already has her imagination charged up with Keats’s odes. She herself does not seem to be aware that this exoticizing may actually add to the imperial rhetoric of occupying the colony and subjugating the other. Graham Huggan explains in *The Postcolonial Exotic*:

The exoticist rhetoric of fetishised otherness and sympathetic identification masks the inequality of the power relations without which the discourse could not function. In the imperial context, as Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo have suggested, this masking involves the transformation of power-politics into spectacle. If imperialism, as they define it, is ‘the expansion of nationality’, then exoticism is ‘the aestheticizing means by which the pain of that expansion is converted into spectacle, to culture in the service of empire’. (14)

Thus, even though Lucy feels for the enslaved convicts and is horrified at the sight of their suffering, or is shocked at the way horses are treated in the island, she somehow does not comprehend the perils of the ecological imperialism prevalent outside the walls of Ambleside. She safely distances herself from the perturbed situations around her and wraps herself up in her make-believe world of exoticized nature.

In addition to the maltreatment of the Indian slaves, there is an instance of the

ill-treatment of the animals as well. The colonizers never failed to miss even a single opportunity of reaping out benefits from the resources of the colonized countries. In the novel, there is an instance of horse-racing which the “. . .the ladies . . .especially the French Mesdames seemed to enjoy” (90). Lucy, however, finds it to be unfair:

To be whipped so vehemently simply to run around a silly ring was a monstrously unjust thing, in her [Lucy’s] opinion. The creatures spurred to the course rarely looked magnificent; browbeaten and broken in spirit, they were forced to subjugate their own passions for the infinitely more prosaic ambitions of their heartless owners and stunted jockeys. (90)

Lucy would have loved them roaming and running about freely on the natural grounds just as she wanted to live the life of a free soul.

The story as it unravels, in fact, shows Lucy in a complicated relationship with nature. She wants to be left alone with nature:

A small cottage of her own was all she needed – whitewashed with blue shutters and bright red geraniums in pots. A garden where things would be left alone as much as possible. Where trees and plants would gain their natural shape; where the land and earth would breathe at their own pace. A garden where any kind of plant could find a place to grow. It would become an asylum for endangered beauty. . .She wondered if it would be here on the isle of Mauritius? (113)

Just as she wants to live like a free spirit, she wants nature also to grow freely without being trampled by the footsteps of men. She wants to save the natural environment. But her lack of awareness of her surroundings and her innocence do not allow her to comprehend the gravity of the situations outside her uncle’s house. She is a woman of dreams and according to her, no evil can ever exist anywhere in the world. She seems to be completely unaware of the fact that Mauritius has been a colonized land for almost three hundred years. She is a woman who has read romances all her life and, for her, nature serves as a space that could release her stress and rejuvenate her senses. But even after being exposed to the growing inhumanities of imperialism, she fails to respond to these. That she loves nature and wants nature in an uncontaminated form is true but her lack of knowledge about the island and her tourist and romantic sensibility do not allow her to produce any meaningful response or action for protecting and preserving nature. For her, the romantic world portrayed in her books seems to be more real than the real happenings of the island. I have already mentioned earlier how she had thought that she would find Eden

in the island. In fact, throughout the novel she is shown at seizing every single chance she can get to romance with nature, to feel its marvellous beauty and bring to life the world she has read about. Shortly after she comes to know of Kishore's murder, her uncle, Huyton, also gets killed by the slaves. But she, even after knowing the causes of such hideous offences, still dreams of finding her paradise. After the disastrous storm, Don goes in search of Lucy and meets her by the shore. Even at that moment she quite naively gives him the following proposal:

'Let's take a boat then. Let's pretend we are sailing to your Ceylon.'

'Another dreamland?'

'Is it not your home?' (370)

It shows that she still has her dreams of finding her perfect divine land alive. Gunsekera, thus, renders Lucy as the perfect "prisoner of paradise" who refuses to step out of her utopic and romantic world and see the naked reality.

But nature is not just a nourishing mother and a balm which relieves humans of their stresses. Nature could have its revenge on the human world too for destroying her thoughtlessly and mercilessly. Ecological colonialism undoubtedly has had its toll on the humans. The history of Mauritius shows how in order to gain profits from and dominance over the Indian Ocean Britishers had exploited the natural landscapes of Mauritius. Many species of birds had become extinct and famines and cyclones had already wrecked havoc. But nature ultimately takes its revenge. Towards the end of the novel, a few days after Kishore's death, rises a storm. Mr. Amos foresees the danger:

'The rain on its way, but it's the wind that is fearsome'. . . You will see, it has no mercy,' he added. 'It comes to rid us of our wickedness.' . . . The hurricane is both a punishment and a lesson.' (338)

After describing a tranquil and colourful nature, Gunsekera now portrays nature as an angry woman avenging the wrongs done to her:

A river burst out of the sky. Daylight was doused. The whole world sank into a cavern of wailing and drowning. . . In a flash of lightning, he [Don] saw the huge tamarind out on the road being pulled upwards by the wind: the leaves and branches turned inside out as if in shock. (339)

After the storm dies down, Don goes up to Ambleside to enquire about Lucy's safety and finds that George Huyton had been killed by the rebellious slaves during the storm but Lucy was safe, though shattered. Betty

Huyton's garden had also been totally destroyed:

Ambleside was ravaged, she remembers, the gardens gutted, the placid pond pummeled and poisoned; her serenity severed and sephulchred in sods of sorrow... (356)

The storm seems to be nature's way of taking the revenge on the humans who have moulded and remoulded the natural courses and destroyed the ecological balance to suit their needs. Gunsekera, though, at the end, tries to hint at the regenerative capacity of nature and that nature will create something new after destroying its world:

As a child Don had often marvelled at nature's capacity for regeneration. . .In the garden of Mr Berwick's house there was a hedge of lantana that was periodically cut down to waist level, but within weeks seemed to recover its full size and blossom into a hundred sunset rosettes as though it had never suffered from a pruning blade. Life, it seemed to him, was amazingly robust. (264)

Lucy, however, meets a tragic end. She is drawn in by the sea and she drowns while Don haplessly watches on, being unable to save her. In the context of this incident, the story of Paul and Virginie, two ill-fated lovers, told by Mr. Amos to Don much earlier in the novel achieves a different significance. In that story, Paul and Virginie were almost living in a paradise when Virginie was sent to France for her education. Although Paul, in her absence, learns to read and write, yet Virginie on her return is caught in a whirlpool and is drowned in the sea. Later Paul also dies of grief. After telling the story, Mr. Amos had explained the significance of the story saying:

The point being that they can only be united in a true heaven.(101)

Lucy here almost becomes Virginie, who in search of Eden, probably reaches the final true heaven of the lord and echoes Mr. Amos's words that only a true paradise can be reached after death.

In this novel, Gunsekera has finely shown how, in the name of constructing Eden, the Britishers have benefitted from the tropical wilderness of an island by bringing in deforestation at large and thus also paving the way for the global climate change due to the subversion of ecological equilibrium. He shows a picture of a despoiled paradise and the failure of human attempts in reconstructing it. The relationship that Lucy shares with nature is also shown as a complicated one. She loves nature but her romantic fantasies about nature identify her as a typical imperial tourist who looks at the Orient as the other. Although Gunsekera shows a tremendous love for nature in Lucy, who wants nature to be left alone

to grow by itself and who herself wants to live in the vicinity of nature, yet the gap between her dreams of an untamed natural world and her awareness of the actual atrocities imposed on the real natural world looms large throughout the novel. Lucy's tragic death probably suggests that mere love for nature without a proper understanding of the causes of its destruction is not enough to save nature. Gunesequera, probably, portrays Lucy as a real prisoner—the prisoner of illusions and fantasies, the 'prisoner of paradise.' The novel, in this sense, is an alarm call to all those who fantasize about nature and remain callous to the havoc wrecked on nature. Gunesequera's concern about the damages being done to nature has been portrayed with a remarkable sincerity. In a sense, this concern itself is the most important antidote to the thoughtless consumption of nature by man.

Notes

¹: The December 1992 nor'easter storm produced high tides and record snowfall in the northeastern states of the United States and affected the area badly.

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