

They say in true simplicity lies the greatest complexity, and nowhere is this more evident than in Romesh Gunsekera's fifth novel, *The Prisoner of Paradise*. In many ways, this is perhaps the most cinematic of the works by a British author who was born in Sri Lanka and raised in the Philippines, and whose inspirations range from James Joyce to Milan Kundera to Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Unlike Gunsekera's earlier novels, *The Prisoner of Paradise* is set in an actual island — early 19th century Mauritius — instead of the fictional paradises of "Reef" or "Heaven's Edge" that closely resemble Sri Lanka.

The first half of the novel is spent in an elaborate exposition of its protagonists and the setting. In 1825, Lucy Gladwell arrives from England to live with her aunt and uncle in a palatial plantation house in Mauritius, and regards her expatriate life as the key to an emancipated womanhood and all-consuming love as described in the works of her favourite Romantics.

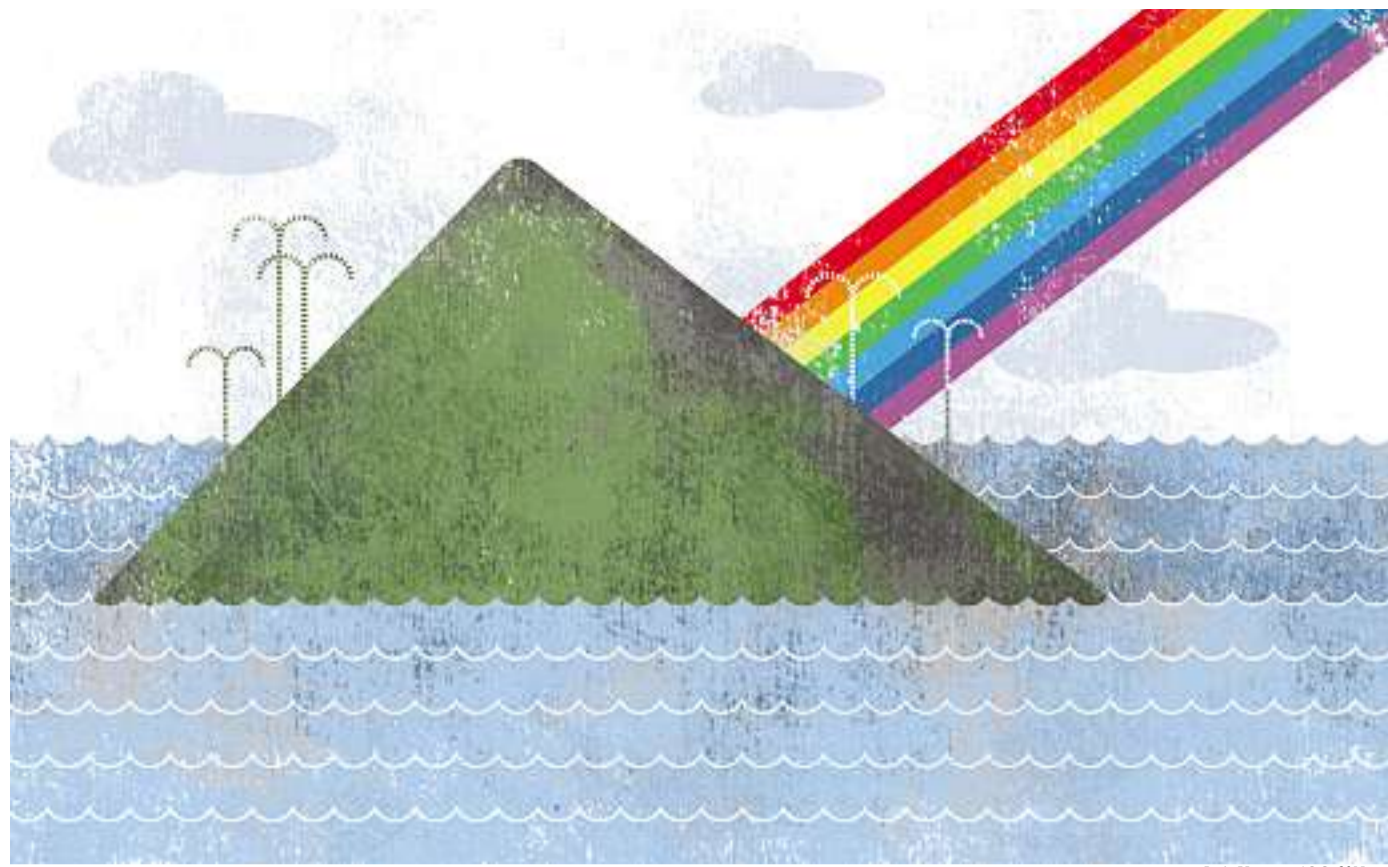
Instead, she is confronted with a newly acquired class-driven British colony still recovering from the vagaries of Dutch and French rule. It's an island full of discontent and colonial exploitation that challenge her idealistic beliefs — it's a world where her uncle George dispenses justice with utterances such as "that little sambo needs a good whacking", where Indian "coolies" fight for livelihood with the gradually disappearing African slaves, where Asian traders aspire to emulate the ranks of British gentry at the cost of their dignity — while the indifferent British genteel society focus on arranging elegant tea parties, manicuring their precious gardens every day and maintaining Victorian decorum.

When a brash Ceylonese translator accompanying an exiled Sinhala prince further upsets her moral righteousness with his chauvinistic views, Lucy's yearning for perfect love finds a passionate but contrarian release — she feels immensely drawn towards the "highly disagreeable" Don Lambodar, and despite her "abhorrence of his opinions", she finds "something compelling about him".

With great attention to detail, Gunsekera thus builds up a world where people from Madras and Malabar mingle with the ideology of Adam Smith while the poetry of Keats recurs as a romantic refrain. The second half of *The Prisoner of Paradise* is a distinctly racy read.

The relationship between Lucy and Lambodar plays out as a love-hate tango, recalling more Blake than Keats: "Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence."

Debates on freedom further highlight the chasm between the two worlds: while Lucy boldly proclaims that a human being's "proper place is to be unshackled" and "only a criminal should be confined", the more pragmatic Lambodar



Luis Vazquez/©Gulf News

# Freedom and exile

## A vivid novel on racial prejudice and a clash of cultures in colonial times that leads to the ruin of an unspoiled haven

retorts that a horse should race rather than be set free and the slave be forever enslaved "only if it is their proper place".

Sublime discussions between the two on equality and independence are underpinned by a brooding sexual tension that finally dissolves in a tragic climax: the sea that brought Lucy Gladwell to the shores of a new life now takes it back in the aftermath of a hurricane, leaving Lambodar with unrequited love and a line from *Endymion* as the first line in a letter she had wanted to hand him over: "Hopes beyond the shadow of a dream."

Familiar Gunsekera themes abound in this novel: identity, exile, uprooted protagonists, clash of cultures and values, racial prejudice and an unspoiled paradise that gradually descends to chaotic ruin in course of the great churn of history.

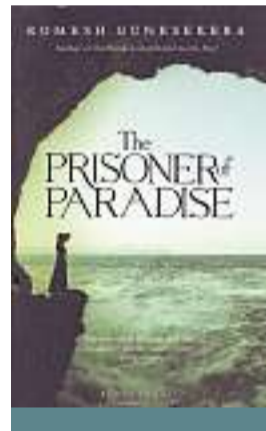
But with *The Prisoner of Paradise*, Gunsekera also takes us back to the golden age of the well-made novel: the intricate plot, the exquisite and elegiac prose, the blooming romance, the sea as a protagonist and precursor of things to come, the uprising of indentured labour and the hurricane that provides the perfect denouement, and the undertone of violence that explodes at the end with catastrophic consequences for all.

Gunsekera's stated inspirations notwithstanding, *The Prisoner of Paradise* recalls Hardy, Dickens and Jane Austen more than any post-modern or magic realist author or work.

A sunrise on the island, for instance, becomes a cadenced celebration of senses in the hands of Gunsekera: "The birdsong laced the sky in a tapestry of sound; melodies that burst the octaves she had always thought were the limits of harmony. Corcoros punctuated by coos and tweets; a chorus of pips and purls and curls and caws. Sunlight streamed in through the slats of the shutters."

There's also the signature Gunsekera humour: "The sun reached deep below her skin like the tongue of an inner flame. The air uncoiled. She wanted to shed her nightclothes and fly out of the window. Instead she slipped into her lightest summer dress and went downstairs to the morning room."

At times though, especially in the first



**The Prisoner of Paradise**

By Romesh Gunsekera, Bloomsbury, 400 pages, £16.99

half of the book, it seems that Gunsekera strives for perfection over passion, and compromises what Keats — so often quoted in the novel — called an artiste's "remarkable restraint".

But he makes up for it with his craftsmanship: the legend about the tomb of Virginie and her unrequited romance with Paul as described by Monsieur Bernadine de Saint-Pierre early on in the novel turns out to be a leitmotif that reinforces the unravelling plot.

"Great art," Gunsekera said in an earlier conversation with *Weekend Review*, "endures not due to any one aspect of the work or of the situation, but because of its supreme values. That's why the works of greats such as Homer, Shakespeare and Joyce endure."

In this book, it's evident why the Booker-nominated Gunsekera is a master of his craft. Above all, however, it stands out as a celebration of the art of the novel and its enduring appeal through the ages.

# A fertile bed of thoughts

## Romesh Gunsekera sets foot in the garden that had occupied his mind for seven years

For the last seven years I have been walking around the Botanic Gardens of Pamplemousses (Mauritius), in my mind, weaving it into the heart of my novel *The Prisoner of Paradise*. I had been there only once, and that was years before I had started my novel.

In early March, I reached the gates of the gardens for real once more.

The drive to Pamplemousses had taken longer than I expected and we had only an hour and a half before the gardens would close. It was my one free afternoon, as the rest of my stay in Mauritius was tied up with the inaugural Confluences Book Fair where I had come to talk about my novel. I could barely contain my excitement. I wanted to follow my characters Lucy and Don under the trees, to see for myself whether what I had put in front of their eyes on the page might really be there. Would I, like Lucy, be bowled over by sight of the arum lily, the smell of cinnamon and clove?

I had planned every excursion in the book in meticulous detail and knew these gardens better than my own backyard, but at ground level it looked so different. I hadn't brought my map with me and

there wasn't one for sale at the ticket office. "Where is the information board?" I asked.

The ticket seller smiled. "Nothing to read. Just to enjoy." After ten minutes, I realised I wouldn't be able to find anything on my own. I went to a gardener and told him what I was looking for: the gravestones of Paul and Virginie (the other brush of imagined characters and the real world that Mr Amos in my novel is so offended by); the talipot palm from Sri Lanka, brought by the Prince exiled here, both in my novel and in the real world of the 1820s; the sausage tree and the cannonball tree I put in the Avenue Erotique of my book; and Mon Plaisir, the colonial stately house. A name I transferred to a nursery nearby which imported roses.

"Come with me," he said. "I can show you everything."

The talipot had spawned a whole line. Small ones with just one or two large green leaves swaying, half-grown brush heads and the full-size palm rising 30 feet (9 metres) up. "Flowers only every seven years," my guide said. "You are just in time." I don't know how long they live but this one came from a seed that originated from one the prince from Ceylon had brought. It made my mind rock a bit. Just like the thought that the church opposite the front gates was there, along with the baobab tree next door, when Lucy and Don and the Prince and Mr Amos walked around here in the pages of my novel, and their inspirations, the Adikar Ehelepola exiled by the British in 1825 and his bemused interpreter Don Bastian really did.

The gravestones I had asked to see turned out to be only a bust of the famous



**Mon Plaisir**, the stately house whose name the author transferred to a nursery nearby

18th-century French author Bernardin de St Pierre, with a scene from his famous Mauritian tragedy of doomed love. Not the site of an imagined grave. I know I made up the coco de mer tree. There isn't one in the gardens, but the gravestones I had been sure I'd seen before. I wanted a strolling reader to be able to find them, like finding Desdemona's handkerchief, or D'Arcy purse, on a garden path. Only after I got back did I discover in a book of photographs that the monuments are there. Really there, even though Paul and Virginie, like Lucy and Don, never were. There was one last thing: the ink tree.

"Ink tree?" My guide was flummoxed. "No such tree, sir." I said I had seen it

the last time I had come. I described the black sap that flowed. You could write with it, I said. "Black sap?" He scratched his head. "You mean the Bleeding Tree?"

We walked to the centre of the gardens. He explained this one was a medicinal tree. He had a long story about its efficacy. As long and fascinating as the story I had heard about the ink tree. He went on until the sky itself seemed to turn to ink.

That was the real beauty of these gardens. Every tree had more than one story to it. Each a novel in itself, or at least the pencil from which the words could flow.

■ Romesh Gunsekera wrote this exclusively for the Weekend Review.