

Diaspora conditions in *The Match*

GUNESEKERA, Romesh. **The Match**. London: Bloomsbury, 2006. 310 p.
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Susanne Pichler

University of Innsbruck, Innrain 52, A-6020 Innsbruck, Austria. E-mail: Susanne.Pichler@uibk.ac.at

Romesh Gunesequera, a Sri Lankan born British writer, “a connoisseur of displacement” who has been “brought up on three separate islands – Sri Lanka, the Philippines and England” (IYER, 1995, p. 30) and a London resident since 1972, belongs to those “‘South Asian’ (diasporic) writers” (NASTA, 2000, p. 96), who seeks to write (concepts of) ‘home’ from a series of multiple locations (NASTA, 2002, p. 216). In all of his texts, Gunesequera’s primary concern is not to (re)create a particular place, or a real landscape, it is rather how to write the diasporic stories of individual lives based on personal and highly private fragments of memories. *The Match* (GUNESEKERA, 2006), Gunesequera’s latest novel, takes up some of the themes already elaborated upon in his prize-winning short story collection *Monkfish Moon* (GUNESEKERA, 1992), or in the Booker Prize Finalist (1995), *Reef* (GUNESEKERA, 1994), a short novel: Sri Lankans (in)voluntarily leaving their ‘home’, faced with the intricacies of setting up ‘home’ way from ‘home’, frequently idealizing the place they have left behind, nostalgically yearning to re-turn, re-access and re-inhabit their homeland, only to realize – painfully, at times –, that this place cannot be returned to, and if it can, then only in their imagination. Longing to belong – geographically, mentally, spiritually –, through movement and attachment, Gunesequera’s characters are ‘on the move’, on a quest for the missing link in life, and, as the title of *The Match* intimates, they are on a quest for a “match” in life, i.e. on a quest for happiness, and purpose.

The Match is divided into six chapters of unequal lengths. The chapter headings are taken from the semantic fields of both cricket and photography: “Viewfinder 2002”, “Wristwork 1970”, “Chin Music 1973”, “A Duck’s Egg 1986”, “Ground Glass 1994”, and “Chowkidar 2002”. However unrelated these areas seem to be a first glance, sports and photography strongly alter the course of the protagonist’s, the Sri Lankan, Sanath – ‘Sunny’ –

Fernando’s, life.

In the narrative present, Sunny, aged 48, is based in London and extremely unsettled. Upon receiving a letter from his Sri Lankan fatherly friend, Hector, Sunny dives into a land of memories of his childhood in Sri Lanka, his youth in Manila, and his present in London. All of a sudden, Sunny feels compelled to “go back at least to this halfway house, between the Colombo he had been born in and the London he now lived in, [...] and find the hidden heart of his life” (p. 4), “hop[ing] it is not too late” (p. 3). These cryptic remarks hint at Sunny’s drive to connect the fragments of his memories, to join them together, and to find a compromise between the ‘here’ and the ‘there’, the ‘now’ and the ‘then’, so intrinsic to migrant identities. From that moment onwards the readers are swept back in time, to Manila in 1970, where the Sri Lankan teenager Sunny, born in Colombo, and his father Lester, a journalist, have set up their lives not only for his father’s job-reasons but also to overcome his mother’s suicide. Then, the narrative unfolds chronologically, charting the development of Sunny, the boy, into an adult, a partner to the Englishwoman Clara, and a father to his now adolescent son, Mikey.

Sunny arrived in London in his early twenties, lured by “the promise of metropolitan glamour” (p. 107), setting out to study engineering, however, soon abandoning his studies for a career as a photographer. Confused, he fears he ends up completely unmoored – adrift on a wild, voracious sea, with no anchor in sight. Unhappy in his job and in his relationship with Clara, Sunny is constantly searching for something he cannot grasp or name, “want[ing] more than he had. Something more” (p. 181). In one way or another, this uncertainty has to do with a “longing for something that goes to the heart of everything” (p. 178), for a sense of ‘home’ and belonging, for adequate means to capture a sense of things passing and passed (p. 183); for

much of his life, Sunny has always been looking in the wrong place at the wrong time, be it in London or on his belated travels 'home' to Manila and Colombo. Fissures and cracks in his relationship with Clara widen, he is unable to find the right words, unable to reduce the distance between himself and his son – mirroring his diffident relationship with his father in his youth. Fortunately, however, epiphany arrives, back in London in 2002, via a cricket match between Sri Lanka and India at the London Oval. It is there that Sunny watches a player pick up a pigeon struck dead by a hurtling ball; catching it on camera, Sunny regains some sort of balance and purpose in life. Now fully conscious of the fragility of any moment in time, Sunny is filled with hope at the prospect of a

[...] tender possibility of renewal. This man, this game, this bird was salvation. The timing was perfect. Anything seemed possible: peace, love, joy, life everlasting [...] It was all in the frame (p. 304).

Eventually, Sunny has discovered that his identity is in transition, that it is identity as transition, always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming. Furthermore, Sunny has learned that 'home', which earlier on he believed to be a geographical place only, in fact, exists on shifting axes of differently articulated positionalities (HALL, 1996) and that where you are at, geographically, spiritually and mentally, is what gains momentum.

Gunasekera's protagonist is exceptional in many ways. Utterly insecure, tentative, passive, and torn between action and inaction, so caught in a spiral of reflectiveness, Sunny does stand out. He stands out because he deeply probes into metaphysical and ontological issues, and once the slow trickling away of his life is revealed to him – for once at the right moment in time –, he is able to consciously stop its

flow, to renew his relationship with Clara and Mikey, to eventually recognize that happiness can be achieved and a sense of 'home' and belonging can be established if only one is open enough and patient enough. And yet, seeing that catharsis presents itself to Sunny almost at the close of the novel, after so much procrastination, this sudden insight is not entirely convincing. However, in spite of this weakness, Gunasekera combines spiritual sensitivity with enormous intellectual understanding – also in *The Match*.

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