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IMAGINED GEOGRAPHIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROMESH GUNESEKERA
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About the Interviewer
Lawrence L. Ypil teaches literature and writing at the Ateneo de Manila University. He has published poems and essays in journals and magazines in the Philippines and abroad, and has won first prize in the Carlos Palanca Awards 2006 for his poetry collection The Highest Hiding-Place.

About the Interviewee
Romesh Gunesekera, Sri Lankan-British novelist, is the author of most recently The Match (2006). His earlier works of fiction either earned or were shortlisted for various awards: Monkfish Moon (New York Times Notable Book for 1993), Reef (finalist for the Booker Prize and the Guardian Fiction Prize), The Sandglass (BBC Asia Award for Achievement in Writing and Literature, 1998). This multi-awarded writer has lived in Sri Lanka and the Philippines before coming to Britain, and has been writer-in-residence in Copenhagen, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Southampton. He was plenary speaker in the international conference “Reading Asia: Forging Identities in Literature” held in February 2007 at the Ateneo de Manila University.

Lawrence L. Ypil (LY): Was your novel The Match difficult to write?

Romesh Gunesekera (RG): In a way it was easy in the sense that I enjoyed writing it, and it kind of wrote itself. I’ve said it before that my plan was to write this novel now—well, last year, 2006 was when I wanted to write it—for lots of reasons. One tiny but careful reason was the interest in Sri Lankan cricket in the book. Sri Lankan cricket hasn’t featured in my writing before, though Sri Lanka has and a lot of subtler accents to the Sri Lankan story. These are things that I’d been trying to explore and understand: the tragedy of the war, the constant fighting, the politics—Sri Lanka has had a very tough time. But [this book will have] an upbeat story about Sri Lankan cricket. Out of nowhere, it seemed, in the middle of the nineties Sri Lanka burst into the sports scene as a champion team, and in 1996 won in the World Cup and that was a very, very big thing. So I thought it would be nice at some point in my writing to try capturing that, and 2006—ten-year anniversary—would be when to write it. But I would be writing about a sport—I’m not a sportswriter—and I didn’t think
I’d be interested in it. So I thought about it just to see whether I could think of characters or any way of handling a story about it. For a long time too I kept thinking about its being a story that used a Philippine experience, or my Philippine experience.

LY: Why was that important? I can imagine if it came as a cricket novel initially, you could have let the characters stay there.

RG: I thought of bringing something into the fictional world that I inhabit, you know, that imaginative world which I populated in certain ways. I wanted to bring that experience there. I wanted to extend that world again to the Philippines—not that I haven’t written about the Philippines, because when I started writing I was here in Manila. And for a long time that I was in England I wrote stories that were set in the Philippines. But the stories that got published at that time, when I was getting published for the first time, were about Sri Lankan characters in Sri Lanka and that was Monkfish Moon. I got completely absorbed in that, captivated, it was like I wanted to hear more voices, meet more of these imaginary creatures, people. So in a sense I kind of let the Philippines fade away a bit. And I thought, can I somehow bring it back? So there were two sorts of ideas: I saw I could write about a sport even though I’m not a sports person, and I could write a story set in the Philippines, or use that experience somehow. I set off toying with both ideas, thought of a combination, and it seemed to me great.

LY: How important was for Sunny to be from, or to have grown up in, the Philippines?

RG: I thought it was just right because writing about a character growing up in Sri Lanka and playing cricket seemed to me like too much work. There would be a lot of people reading it and I would have to think whether this conforms to the reality that’s there. I wanted to be really free in my imagination—I mean, I never played cricket when I was in the Philippines, but what a great idea it was. So I experimented and wrote to see whether it could work, kept at it for five years and wrote it in 2006. I just started doing it, just did a bit to see if it was worthwhile, and then a bit more, and then a chapter, and then I thought, well, I’ll write this book now.

LY: One of my experiences was flipping back and forth between your novel and your biography. And so reading about your life, I must admit, was an important part of the shaping of my reading experience of The Match. Was that something you were conscious of doing? I couldn’t help reading it as semi-autobiographical, a memoir of sorts.
RG: Well, yeah, I wanted to play with the idea. I’ve been writing for a long time, even before my first book, *Monkfish Moon*, was published. I was writing stories for ten, fifteen years before that came out. So by the time I was writing *Monkfish Moon*, I had no need to write autobiographically. Most writers have to start autobiographically because that’s the material they have. But I kind of got rid of all that ten years before...

LY: …before your first book came out?

RG: When my first novel, *Reef*, came out, again people thought it was autobiographical. It’s a first-person story that reads very autobiographically. It’s about a guy who leaves Sri Lanka, comes to England, but most of it is set in Sri Lanka. He was a servant boy who achieves something for himself and ends up running a restaurant in London. A lot of people used to think it was my story and I was pleased about that because it meant I made the fiction really work, if it felt like it was a real person’s story. Since then, I suppose, like with *The Sandglass*, I thought I will make this autobiographical because I kind of established my point that fiction doesn’t need autobiography. So now, maybe I can [write autobiographically], because [my fiction] worked. But it didn’t work [like that] in *Sandglass* because there are probably just two sections in it that’s true-to-life.

LY: Do you find that important for fiction to do, at this point, for fiction to establish itself as “not real”? Is that something you feel that the novel wants to prove, especially in light of the popularity of non-fiction?

RG: I think it’s important not only to prove that. I think it actually gives fiction its staying power. It even applies when I think of poetry because poetry is usually more commercialized particularly at the moment, I suppose with this thing going on between performance poetry and printed-word poetry: performance poetry is having a great time because it has immediate effects and it’s great fun and I enjoy it. But with written poetry, I think people are beginning to forget just how powerful it is. With performance poetry, a lot of it is just blown out of the water, you miss something.... Good poems have a sense of time, they handle time almost perfectly. Well, they survive. And when you think of fiction, when it’s fiction that relies entirely on the real world and gets its strength there, is contained by it, then it becomes fettered as well, whereas fiction that creates a world is actually a world that’s always fresh. But because of the way the world is at the moment—and this is interesting—there is always the temptation to play with reality. I find fantastic the way it is
played with. If you go to Dublin you’d see people walking around like they were Leopold Bloom—you know, the main character in *Ulysses*—following his footsteps and stopping where he dropped his hat, and so on, forgetting for a moment that he didn’t exist, that he didn’t actually *walk* like people do. I think that’s wonderful, I think we all love that kind of...

**LY:** ...fantasy.

**RG:** Yeah, and the fiction that is not fiction that interplays the real world and the imaginary world. And a bit like V.S. Naipaul, I suppose. He uses his autobiography quite blatantly, but it’s very interesting what he does with his own story.

**LY:** There are very good novels that obviously have nothing to do with the author, that are clearly, to the extent, imagined—is there an expectation for the novel to say something about a real world?

**RG:** Yeah, it has to say something about the real world but it doesn’t have to say anything about the author. I suppose that’s the difference. But with this book, I’ve decided to play it much more with people, and still it’s not my story in the sense that my relationships aren’t the same as Sunny’s relationships, and so on. I just use it like a template, the locations.

**LY:** Do you mind that it could be read as a semi-autobiographical novel?

**RG:** I don’t mind, actually. It doesn’t make a lot of difference how people read it. What I hope is that people read it and feel it and think about it and see that the value of if has more to do with their responses—what they think, what they feel.

**LY:** How’s your reception in Sri Lanka?

**RG:** Up to now, pretty good (*laughs*).

**LY:** Because we do have the case of a Third World writer who doesn’t live there, who is celebrated by the West and totally not liked in his home country.

**RG:** I think at the moment it’s OK. I’m aware that there are schools of thought about people like me and there are criticisms of my life, you know, by people who think that I’m outside
and have no business looking in this way, or that I’m doing things that I shouldn’t be doing or whatever. To me, really, the best reviewers, the best critics, are the ones who can come open to a book—completely open-minded and responding that way. I run into trouble with critics who have a slightly closed mind, who have an agenda, a doctrine, or a manifesto, or they’re looking against...

LY: …and the novel becomes mere proof of whatever they already have in mind…

RG: ... and it happens that the novel is not looked at as fiction. For example, in Reef, Triton is of the oppressed class, if you like, I mean, he is a poor boy who makes a living as a domestic servant, and he has to make his own way. Now, it could be convenient to think that people in that position would be radical revolutionary types, but in fact, in most societies they’re incredibly conservative. The radical left tends to have come from some education...

LY: …a middle class one.

RG: Yeah. You know, some people read things and think it’s autobiographical, that the author is trying to say something through the characters. I’m not. I really have nothing to say. I just want the characters to come alive, that’s all. I don’t mind what they say, they can say all sorts of uncharitable things. But sometimes people might confuse what Triton (in Reef) says about what’s happening in the country as my saying that.

LY: Do you have a particular audience in mind when you write your novels?

RG: No, not at all, other than someone like me who’s interested in reading a book the way I used to like to read … someone who wants to go somewhere and read, go to libraries that don’t actually have cobwebs and just pick a book and start reading. But I suppose the audience for me has changed in the sense that I’m “discovered” … so when I write a book now, I’m conscious that maybe millions won’t be reading it, but at least a few people will, and those people will be reading it with a pure ideal of just having a good read and doing something with their minds. I don’t think I’m going to write a book for a particular group of people because the readers I know of, those who write to me, are from all over. Some of them know Sri Lanka but don’t like my Sri Lankan stories, some of them have no idea where it is.
LY: I was wondering if you had a white British audience in mind and you were writing as a Third World writer, in that sense of the label.

RG: No, not really. I mean, I don’t buy that kind of label at all. Take *The Match* for example, because of the different locations [in it] it brings in potentially very different levels of knowledge about the world from what a reader brings into it. So a reader from Sri Lanka probably wouldn’t know anything about Manila, and wouldn’t have any idea when I write a sentence with a kind of true-to-life or anything; the reader won’t necessarily have a way of picking up on atmosphere clues to get any sense of it. So the words have to work as one, and to me that’s the interesting challenge. In that book, I hope it would be readers in the Philippines who’d read it, who wouldn’t...

LY: …who wouldn’t know anything about cricket...

RG: …who wouldn’t know anything about cricket or Sri Lanka, but who would read a sentence and go, “Hey, this doesn’t make sense” or what-else, so that’s the kind of challenge, but the same challenge I would have had with anything I write. Some readers will come with familiarity and some with complete unfamiliarity and some may make the same sentence into two different things—the pleasure of recognition or the pleasure of discovery. It’s not easy and that’s why good writing is quite hard. I mean, it’s easy to write the first draft but it’s hard to get it to inspire your share of readers.

LY: In the conference earlier, you mentioned an interesting word, “autogeography.” Can you talk about that some more?

RG: It’s related to what I was saying about autobiography. For a long time I think my first books said very, very little about me, but then they were coming out in fashion—the biographies on the back of books. I used to think that, you know, sometimes people’s biographies are more interesting than the books themselves (*laughs*). They’ve done all sorts of things and it’s really interesting that very often the book has nothing.

LY: It becomes a question of authenticity, I think. In autobiography, one is impelled to be loyal to the life. So it’s interesting to use “autogeography,” as if one would have to be loyal to the space...
RG: I was just interested, I suppose, in using my life because obviously writers use their lives and experiences and emotions. Some tell their story, and that’s the story; others use it and transform it into something else and to me that’s what art is. And unashamedly, I’m interested in art and emotion.

LY: How important was going to Manila for you, as Romesh (versus as Sunny of The Match)? As Romesh, because I’m interested in the fact that you were in Manila at a very critical time, I think, in Philippine history.

RG: In Philippine history it was a critical time, but I don’t think I was aware of that (laughs). I mean, I knew lots of journalists here, and there are lots of journalists in the book, and an important part of the book is the idea of authenticity, the idea of what’s true—is it the journalist’s view of the world, or the photographer’s view of the world? And of course more than that, reality is actually the transmitted views about reality. So I was very interested in that. But when I was a kid, yes, I was aware of big things happening, was lucky enough to know people who were involved in certain spheres of interest. But I wasn’t political myself, so I suppose I was observing, watching. But a crucial thing about the Philippines for me was my reading experience. It is interesting because the different places I lived in had provided different experiences. In Sri Lanka, when I was growing up, my reading experience was reading a lot of pulp fiction—thrillers, westerns—I loved it. I’d buy it second-hand, read it, sell it. Buy it, sell it; buy it, sell it, that whole thing. And some of it was American, but only the westerns probably. It was when I came to the Philippines where all the American books were.

LY: Who were you reading then?

RG: I started out by reading what’s still in the bookshops now, those serious books. Then I began to discover living American writers, and that was a real discovery for me—that I was actually picking up a book written by someone still alive. And it was here—coming back to what we were talking about—where I would know something about the author. This Jack Kerouac, for example—and he does this, that. And that was very, very heavy for me, like, “What, people do this sort of thing?” That’s probably when I wanted to write stories, see them in print in some form. What matters to an author is not necessarily publishing books or readership, just creative satisfaction...
LY: Were there any particular writers who made you want to write?

RG: Yeah, it was the beat generation—American, basically. They were gone already, way past, but as always I was a little late in finding things out. I suppose they were the ones who made writing look easy, as if anyone could do it. And there’s a good thing about that, and a bad thing: the good thing is that it provided the encouragement—anyone can do it, so can I. The bad thing is...

LY: …it’s a lie (laughs).

RG: Yes, it’s not true. So you can kick yourself for a long time! (Laughs.) And then when I went to England, suddenly there was this unimagined world, with books all over the place, with lots and lots of things I was not familiar with. It was really exciting.

LY: I want to ask you about—since this is an Asian Identity conference—the place of the novel in Asia: were you influenced by any Asian novelist? And I’m also wondering whether you’ve thought about the genre itself, and how important—or not important—it is in Asia.

RG: I mean, an interesting talk yesterday was about the short story and the novel in Asia, and it was interesting to focus on the fact that there’s a lot of talk now about looking at Asian writing. But a lot of them are looking at, basically, novels, whereas probably there are more short stories than novels that are significant to historical Asia. I think the novel is a very special problem. I think it’s a brilliant invention, if it is invented. I don’t completely accept the notions that these forms are culturally bound. I’m not sure—I mean I can see lots of arguments that say that the novel came out of this particular tradition, particularly Western, modern tradition that may not be similar with other traditions...

LY: Like in your case for example, it seems like the Western novel is your...

RG: Yeah, if you take a materialistic view of literature, why not? The stuff that I read, of course, were the stuff that was around because of the colonial history of the places I happened to live in. Therefore, I haven’t read Sri Lankan stories, though there was a very long tradition of Sri Lankan writing in English. And that’s a problem as well, they weren’t around in the bookshops I looked in. And even if they were around, they didn’t attract
me, you know? *(Laughs.)* They didn’t look good, they didn’t grab me … I [also] didn’t like the James, the Dickens, and the Shakespeare until much later … But when I was initially writing, I was just purely responding to what was around, the stuff that’s been published. And I tried responding to the words I was using as well. And then I started reading what other people were reading in different parts of the world—I read more Sri Lankan and Indian writers. But as a writer your choices are really pretty weird—all sorts of things …

[When I was writing] my first novel, I abandoned it because it was almost the complete opposite of what I really write; the novel was fabulous, big, surreal, magic realist—only because [the style] was so popular. Everyone writing in the seventies of my sort of age was doing that sort of thing—they were doing, you know, Marquez. I remember someone telling me, “Read this book, there’s been nothing like this before, this guy’s going to get really, really famous one day.” And you think, “Yeah, really? I’ll give it a try.” And it was fabulous. And as I was writing that kind of book, I thought, “There’s no point in me doing this,” *(laughs)* because…

**LY:** …he already did it *(laughs).*

**RG:** And he did it better than I could have done it at the time, I’m sure … So as a result *Monkfish Moon* was probably the smallest book that was published in that decade *(laughs).* So I suppose, at the time of writing, you [move away] from the monstrous stuff … *(laughs)* I think the problem with the novel is the form in the world, that it has its own traditions. I don’t see it as an English tradition, although there are English roots to the novel, or say, a Russian tradition. I think it’s something in the world which anybody reading the novel contributes to it, to that tradition. It’s a bit like with anyone who’s starting to write poetry: you do in a sense invent a tradition, you make a tradition for yourself … somehow in that way you’re extending it. What is fundamentally human, I suppose, [is that with] poetry you always think, “What is my connection to this? How long is the line of connection?” And that feeling comes whatever language you use.