

Readers' Notes: Going Home

Romesh Gunesequera-Independence [*A Short Story*]

Introduction

People have always been haunted by the idea of home: the Garden of Eden, Shangri-la, a place in our personal or collective past to which we long to return. Home is more desirable once we have left it and often disappointing when we return.

Many famous stories open with characters leaving – or being expelled from – home: *Genesis*, where Adam and Eve are shut out from the Garden of Eden; many fairy tales, such as *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Dick Whittington*; Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*; Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*; Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*; J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and Esther Freud's forthcoming novel as sampled in *New Writing 14*. Other – and sometimes the same – stories are fuelled by the wish to return: the *Old Testament* after *Genesis*, Homer's *The Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and many quest narratives. Sometimes home is despoiled or destroyed, as in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*. But, whatever their fate, the greatest homes in fiction stay potent symbols. *Bleak House*, *Jalna*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Manderley*, for example, are not just places to live in. They are characters in their own right, fuelling conflict, provoking and thwarting desire, and expressing the story's main themes.

The 20th century was marked by human migration, often forced, and on a larger scale than in any previous epoch. In fiction, the loss of home and the longing to return has taken on new urgency and depth. The strength of this preoccupation can be seen in *New Writing 14*. James Lasdun's *Peter Kahn's Third Wife*, discussed last month, ends with the heroine leaving one home and setting out for another. In Anuradha Vijayakrishnan's *Narayani's Journey*, the heroine goes home after 20 years and finds herself stuck at the station because of a taxi strike. In Douglas Cowie's *The White of Her Arms*, Jose has been forced to leave his home to find illegal work; and the sailors in C.D. Rose's *The Neva Star* find themselves cut off from home for ever.

Romesh Gunesequera – Independence

Romesh Gunesequera was born in Sri Lanka in 1954 and now lives in London. He has published three novels, and also *Monkfish Moon* (1998), a volume of nine evocative short stories about his home country. As in *Reef* (1995), his ambiguous, lyrical fiction often explores the idea of the spoilt paradise. It also examines the loss of innocence - for instance, in *Heaven's Edge* (2002) – and, frequently, exile, the inevitability of history, and people divided between two locales (typically England and post-colonial Sri Lanka, as in *The Sandglass* (1998)).

The story itself is set in Colombo, capital of Sri Lanka, in 1998. This was the year when the Democratic Socialist Republic was celebrating 50 years of independence from colonial rule and, ironically, the Tamils were fighting for their own independence in the north. Although government soldiers claimed the situation was under control, it was feared that Prince Charles's proposed presence at the celebrations would spark further violence.

Independence never depicts bloodshed; but by hinting at a strong military presence – the roads 'choked with new checkpoints', the army sandbags, the curfew, the cordoned-off main road – it conjures up an air of imminent danger. Rohan and Sonya have returned from

London because, we learn from the story's one short flashback, Rohan wants them to get themselves 'sorted'. In the past they had been not happy, but happier, in Sri Lanka, during a holiday on the beach. For Rohan, at least, home is a place to touch base, to try and put things right.

As the heat rises, so does the couple's detachment from each other. Like the pair in a related short story in *Monkfish Moon*, Sonia and Rohan are of different races. But whereas in *Batik* both characters were Sri Lankan (Tamil and Sinhala) in *Independence* we infer from their forenames and attitudes that Rohan is Sri Lankan and Sonya English. Through deft, economical touches, Gunesequera suggests from the start that the trip will fail. In the opening scene, Sonya wants to stay and listen to the jazz. Rohan wants to leave. He says he'll see her at home, later. Sonya's reply is ambiguous: 'You don't really want to, do you?' By the story's conclusion we assume she meant that he didn't really want to see her at all. However he reads her meaning, Rohan does not dissent, but drifts to the home of Nara, 'a bright young tycoon'. Though Rohan is critical of Sonya, cut off from the world in her club, his new contact is scarcely a man of the people. His guests giggle over his tales of snorting on the beach, and he titters over his joke about 'the dirty war' his factory makes industrial strength detergent for the army. Ironically, the factory is in Kandy, where, as those present would know, a Buddhist temple seen as the country's holiest site had just been destroyed by a truck bomb, causing the celebrations to be moved to Colombo. For Nara, however, Kandy is simply a place to make money and to own a house with a fabulous pool and a view described – perhaps with authorial irony – as 'out of this world'.

Independence ends on a dying fall. The rattle of what seems like gunfire proves to be fireworks ineptly set off in advance of the celebrations. The guests disperse before curfew, and Nara's chauffeur, in an 'absurd white liveried uniform and white cap', drives Rohan safely through the deserted streets before curfew. When Rohan reaches 'home' to find that Sonya has left – presumably for England – he shoves his single suitcase back in the cupboard and shuts the door. Like many exiles torn between two worlds, he ends up numbed by contradictions, and with no context in which to express himself.

With its lightness of touch and economy of style, *Independence* could be said to resemble the stories of Anton Chekhov. It is also Chekhovian in its treatment of regret, and of choices not being made: big subjects are dealt with in a minor key. Structurally, like *The Third Wife of Peter Kahn*, Gunesequera's story comes full circle. It begins with the rising heat and ends with Rohan on the bed at 'home' (a rented flat), waiting for the room to cool. Though we, as readers, do not see deeply into him or his country, the ambiguous title hints at a link between them: is he too in turmoil, and coping with warring forces under his tightly controlled exterior?

For Discussion

- How do you perceive Sonya's attitude to Sri Lanka and how, if at all, does it differ from Rohan's?
- What hints do you see, if any, of Sonya's unhappiness with Rohan and her impending departure?
- What do you learn from the flashback of the couple's relationship in London?
- The ending of every successful short story hints, however briefly, at the character's future. What do you think lies ahead for Rohan?
- Anuradha Vijayakrishnan's Narayani's *Journey* also describes a return and also ends with the central character in limbo. Compare the two stories' attitudes to home.
- As the phrase 'home truths' suggests, home is often seen as a place to learn about ourselves. What, if anything, does Rohan find out?
- Can you identify elsewhere in the anthology, or in your previous reading, of a happy return home in which the hero's or heroine's expectations are met?

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