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Multiple Dislocations, Temporality, Cricket As A Root's Thing In Romesh Gunsekera's Diasporic Novel The Match

Jennifer Cynthia N¹ & Dr. K. Radah²

PhD Scholar (FT), Research Department of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College
(Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirapalli, Tamilnadu, India

Associate Professor of English, Research Department of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College
(Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirapalli, Tamilnadu, India.

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Abstract

Diasporic literature encompasses stories about those who disperse or scatter away from their homeland. Diaspora is simply the displacement of a community/culture into another geographical and cultural region. Such movements were common during colonialism. Such diasporic movements developed their own distinctive cultures which preserved, extended, and developed their 'original' cultures. Diaspora culture is the effect of migration, immigration, and exile (Nayar 187). Immigrants undergo displacement in their lives both geographically as well as culturally. Diaspora literature talks about the stories of these individuals who are portrayed as the victim of multiple dislocations. The word 'multiple' means 'collective.' The word 'dislocation' means 'displaced.' It also throws light on the complexity of identity, the hybrid and hyphenated identities as well as the difficulty in finding a sense of belonging. An individual who is a victim of multiple dislocation is always an "outsider" in his host country (Sukumary 921).

Introduction

According to Sukumary, multiple dislocation can also cause the problem of locating and identifying a place for oneself. Different locations and an individual whirled in it – that is the situation of the victim of multiple dislocation. An individual's psyche is also affected by dislocation and relocation. In this case, the entire idea of home itself is fragmented. It also results in fragmented childhood memories, fragmented adolescent years, fragmented cultures, customs, traditions etc (923). The diasporic writers portray these themes in their writings. The theme of multiple dislocation, its consequences, its merits and demerits, usually find a dominant role in their works. Multiple Dislocation is coupled with the problems of alienation, exile and nostalgia. The question of 'Home' and 'Homeland' arises. The Match is Gunsekera's fourth novel, set in Marco's pre-dictatorship Philippines where the author spent his teenage years, his stories straddle or are set in Sri Lanka and are often narrated by expatriates settled in Britain, or by those who have recently returned or consider returning to the homeland Sri Lanka. The Match (2006) is centered on a teenager's craze for cricket, the plot grows in unison with the protagonist, to encompass a broad view of life and love-match. The novel brings in diverse facets of diasporic life replete with themes of home-homeland, repeat migration and such notions.

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, Pico. “The Empire Strikes Back.” *The New York Review of Books*, vol.42, no.11, Jun.1995, pp. 30-31). The author writes from experience about the dislocations of living “away.” Like the protagonist Sunny Fernando, he grew up in the Philippines and lives in London. Sri Lankan writers living elsewhere have produced some remarkable novels on the theme of the migrant and the lost homeland. Sunny’s biography follows the expatriate author’s closely, the failed photographer taking the place of the successful writer. As a diasporic person, Gunesequera feels the loss of the motherland deep within. Sunny stays with his father with whom he cherishes a love-hate relationship. This relationship is the East’s relationship with the West. The once colonized subject has found a new home in Britain. It can also be said that England represents the father who had led the mother/motherland into committing suicide. On the other hand, the son suffers from the dual enigma. He is at amity with his father for he stands in proximity with him; but at the same time he fails to forgive him because he considers his father/ the imperialist responsible for his mother’s plight. He stands in a state of aporia. The real enigma lies undeciphered till he reaches Sri Lanka, his land of origin. Having quitted his land at a very young age, the protagonist Sunny, in the same vein of the author, fails to locate himself. Being neither here nor there, and having no place to align with as one’s own, Sunny suffers from the worst crisis of his life. The life of Sunny has been portrayed and rendered as pathetic by this enigma. He has no proper notion about his mother/motherland, his relationship with his father too remains vague. He treads beyond the narrow compass of any one land and by the end gets over his bias about motherland and fatherland and makes a home for himself wherever he is placed:

The gulf was growing in front of him as well as behind him. He didn’t even know how to cross it. He only knew he wanted to do something soon. If nothing else, to see the place of his birth, the country he had lost sight of for more than a quarter of a century, and make it his again. Possibly produce some pictures that would show something more than ruined monuments and moral debasement (Gunesequera, *The Match*, 193).

The novel is all about expatriate life, were Sunny Fernando, the protagonist visits Sri Lanka for the first time since childhood. An expatriate is one residing in a country other than one’s native country. Sunny goes to look at the house he grew up in and finds it gone “None of the things had made up his early world, imprinted as images on his brain, existed any more. Everything had been violated. There was no past – no place, no people – except what he remembered. It frightened him” (Gunesequera, *The Match*, 214).

Memory plays a dominant role in expatriate writing. Memory is simply the ability to remember happenings in the past. Diasporic writing could be studied in terms of location, dislocation and relocation. Migration is the process of relocation and when migrants settle down in the foreign land they become the diaspora. It also becomes very clear that the migrants are frequently caught between a space where they live negotiating between the past and their present selves. Caught between a dichotomy between the past and the present the migrants think about their past lives in their adapted host lands. As a social phenomenon, migration gets potent when seen through the perspectives of time, nostalgia, and memory.

Temporality hence, is closely connected to the understanding of the process of migration. In order to understand the concept of time, one needs to examine it from the perspectives of past, present, and future. The writings of exiled/immigrant writers undertakes two moves, one temporal, and one spatial. The temporal move is looking back at the past (analepsis) and looking forward at the future (prolepsis). Analepsis produces nostalgia, memory and reclamation. Prolepsis produces themes of the ethics of work, survival, and cultural assimilation (Nayar 188).

This research article tries to analyze the conditions and situations that the migrants face when aspects of time and remembrance are brought together on a temporal scale of past and present in Gunesequera’s *The Match*.

In the narrative present, we find that 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 his halfway house, between the Colombo he had been born in and the London he now lived in, the forgotten city of his unexpected upbringing, and find the hidden heart of his life” (Gunesekera, *The Match*, 4), “hoping it is not too late” (Gunesekera, *The Match*, 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 ‘there,’ the ‘now,’ and the ‘then,’ so intrinsic to migrant identities (Pichler, Susanne. “Diaspora conditions in *The Match*.” *Maringa*, vol.31, no.1, 2009, pp.103-104). 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 Penny’s suicide. The novel is a kind of a bildungsroman, as the narrative unfolds chronologically, describing 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’s haunting life about his past is found to be leaky and full of holes. In the middle of all this, an event occurs when he was sixteen and living in the affluent, gated suburb of Makati in Manila stands out as an abiding ‘moment of being’ – a cricket match organized by his father, Lester, in an effort to recreate a little bit of home, Ceylon. Which he has left behind him. The book is punctuated by cricket matches and political flash points.

In fact, his later life will be given over to seeking out the wholeness of that day in an effort to shore up his frangible exile’s life in London. He goes to London to study engineering but drifts in and out of careers and friendships, nursing but never curing the emotional wounds of childhood loss. He takes off to England in 1973, the year noted for power cuts and the three-day week, a bad year to be a foreign student in London cooped up in bedsit. From time to time he thinks of making visit to Sri Lanka, but the island seems so unhappy, with bombs, massacres and civil war.

The Match explores how the conflict between memory and melancholy triggers psychological turmoil in Sunny’s mind and feels him up with sheer distress. The author also writes from experience about the dislocations of living “away.” The diasporic characters recollect all their memories and nostalgic events in order to reclaim and connect to the homeland. Likewise, the protagonist Sunny recollects his childhood game of cricket memories in order to connect to his native Sri Lankan home.

Cricket was introduced in Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, following the colonisation of the island by the British. The earliest reference for the game of cricket in Sri Lanka is reported in the “Colombo Journal” on 5th September 1832 mentioning the formation of a cricket club. Shehan Karunatilaka has stated that “metaphorically, state of literature in Sri Lanka is similar to the state of cricket during the 1980’s” (3). *The Match* can be interpreted as a novel of both Sri Lankan national consciousness and Sri Lankan English, with their multitude of political concerns coalescing in and into the metaphor of cricket.

Gunesekera’s *The Match*, is a ‘cricket book,’ which provides a different outlook on the metaphorical link between cricket and nationalism. Unlike Chinaman, *The Match* looks at the sport from a cosmopolitan diasporic location; from the point of view of “a spectator who is both inside and outside the space of ‘the nation’” (Perara 15). Here, the game of cricket becomes both a colonial legacy and a nostalgic link with the “home” left behind – “a root’s thing” (Gunesekera, *The Match*, 296). It also juxtaposes cricket victories, defeats and the ethnic solidarity among the diasporic spectators against the ethnic turmoil of the “homeland” in order to portray the sport as a promise of reconciliation (Hettiarachchi, Aparna. “The Metaphor of Cricket in Shehan Karunatilaka’s *Chinaman*: Sri Lankan English and Sri Lankan National Consciousness.” *Journal of Asian Review Of Public Affairs And Policy*, vol.4, no.2, 20 Aug 2019, pp.1-15). As mentioned above the novel is diasporic in form, as the story leaps from one phase of Sunny’s life, it continues to connect the lead character Sunny to his place of residence with his home country Sri Lanka, through cricket. Sunny is an ardent admirer of cricket. This slowly gets into the other level which leads Sunny to spend his vacation playing cricket. He finds his interest in cricket.

Cricket is an identity marker by means of which Sunny tries to understand his homeland. The protagonist Sunny, is born and brought up in Sri Lankan ambience right from his childhood. Gradually, his love for the game makes him spend his vacation playing cricket. He develops an incredible interest towards the cricket game. Sunny goes into a nostalgic mood when suddenly his friend Robby asks him whether he knew the game of cricket. Sunny broke into an impressive cough. This is because he hadn’t heard the word cricket since he had come to the Philippines. He was once very much fond of the game. He even tells Robby about the requirements

for the game of cricket. “We need a bat, a ball, and a wicket -stumps and bails” (Gunesekera, *The Match*, 12), and also teaches him. There is also a description about the memories of Sunny’s cricket items and his regrets which his homeland had offered him. “Back in Ceylon, Sunny had had all the paraphernalia of a minor enthusiast, but he’d never played in a proper team. He’d consoled himself with the smell of linseed oil and crotch boxes like the other outcasts at his Colombo school” (Gunesekera, *The Match*, 12). Sunny was encouraged to play cricket to forget the absence of his mother in his life and thus cricket had become intimate in his life? (Ghosal 68). When Robby mentions the game of cricket he goes into a reverie. He is reminded of his childhood memories where his father Lester had made all arrangements to play cricket in their garden:

There had been a time when Sunny and his father had played garden cricket on a strip of lawn barely wide enough to swing a bat. Lester favoured the leg-spin; Sunny wanted to be a fast bowler. He’d aim for the body, while Lester tried his best to get his little boy to learn to go for the wicket instead. Nut golf was Lester’s sport in their new world. Big broad fairways and luscious, well-watered greens were where the word was for a lapsed journalist of his inclinations, the real news: Manila moolah. Sunny wanted to get it back, that closeness they’d once contained on a makeshift pitch (Gunesekera, *The Match*, 16-17).

Another illustration to be drawn from the text in order to exhibit Sunny’s enthusiasm and passion for cricket is that when he visits Herbie’s house, he finds a cricket ball snared inside an empty pickle jar. Sunny feels astonished and surprised and even asks Herbie whether he knew to play the game because he had an idea of setting up a cricket team, and that Robby and himself were looking for people who knew it. Sunny feels delighted when Herbie admitted that he knew it:

After a while Herbie admitted that he had played cricket in junior school when he lived in Hong Kong and that he was pretty good with the googly. Sunny yelped, thrilled, when he heard the word: googly. ‘Fantastic.’ It was a kind of bowling he wished he could perfect, alongside the bouncers and bodyliners he’d spent so long practising (Gunesekera, *The Match*, 23).

From the above explanations, it becomes clear that the game of cricket provided Sunny the utmost comfort and relaxation. Cricket had always a source of pleasure and thus, he was reminded of cricket. He immediately recounts memories related to his homeland where he used to play cricket. Therefore, memories associated with cricket are always fresh and ever green in his mind and make him feel that he is close to his homeland although he lives away from it in reality. When the Sri Lankan cricket team visits England to play the Test match at the Lord’s, he feels excited and decides to come to watch his national cricket team play against the host England. Once when he starts to watch the game he says “if this was the most fun batting team in the world, then the place may be already full – a hundred thousand London Sri Lankans might be there, celebrating the end of the war and the rebirth of Test cricket. It was about time” (Gunesekera, *The Match*, 259). The novel too starts with the letter of Hector where he says that Timing is the thing. This phrase signifies that the perfect time should be captured and treasured before it is too late. It completely suits the protagonist Sunny where he is thrown into a situation to make the best use of the time in preserving the sweet and comforting memories before it too late which will sooth his displaced identity. Being an ardent follower and once a passionate lover for the game of cricket during his childhood he observes, describes and comments on the performance of the native Sri Lankan players while he watches the game at the English Lord’s:

The famous Sri Lankan batsman Aravinda, de Silva was hopping like a bird, patting the earth with his bat, casting quick furtive glances around the field, getting ready to fly. Watch out, Sunny wanted to yell. The bowler, England’s Caddick, was already on

his run-up. Only when the ball was released, after a forlorn grunt, did de Silva seem to notice what was happening. Startled, he left fly – another boundary. The two men in front giggled and touched plastic. ‘Cheers.’ When de Silva got to 48 there was an announcement that he had reached a career record of six thousand Test runs. ‘Bloody good show,’ the Englishman on the left said, and poured out the last of the champagne. The stadium wasn’t full, there weren’t many brown faces in the crowd – not the thousands Sunny had expected – but the cheer was loud. Then Atapattu fell for a smart trap and played the hook he’d resisted all morning. Suddenly the knocking back and forth of the ball, the minutes ticking by for no reason, stopped. Everything stopped except the ball, falling. On the field all the players tensed up as one. The trap had been sprung. Trescothick made the catch. The man was given out. The wind changed. Sunny stood with the rest of the stadium to give the batsman his standing ovation as he took off his gloves and shuffled into the pavilion and a page in sporting history (Gunasekera, *The Match*, 263).

Sri Lanka’s passionate interest in cricket is partly due to the island’s sorry state. The country’s cricket team is portrayed as a source of pride. It’s a “Paradise Isle” enjoyed by foreign visitors and wealthy locals while the majority endure the consequence of ethnic conflict (the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983), poverty, crime and corruption that had penetrated even the citizen’s last bastions: the police and the judiciary. While the title refers to a cricket match, the book’s real action is played out against a volatile background of political revolution in Sri Lanka. Thus, the novel opens with the reference to the ethnic conflict. “Sunny’s morning paper in London reported that a ceasefire, brokered by Norwegian mediators, had been signed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and the Government of Sri Lanka. A Memorandum of Understanding to erase the maiming and killing of nineteen years” (Gunasekera, *The Match*, 3).

From his memory Sunny recalls how his father would have felt sorry and worried about the violent attacks in his homeland Sri Lanka at that time in the year 1971 and in 1983. “Sunny watched things slowly fall apart as his father would have done in Manila back in 1971 when his old world – his Ceylon – had exposed its inner brutality and shifted his ideals for ever out of reach. Now, in 1983, decapitations, bomb blasts, mutilations, were being flashed across the world” (Gunasekera, *The Match*, 154).

Sweet memories of his Sri Lankan homeland appears to be bitter for Sunny when these are recalled from a distant land. Sunny cannot stay calm and composed in London because these memories constantly keeps reminding him of his homeland and inciting his cravings for it. From this observation, it becomes very clear that Sunny is pushed by circumstantial compulsions to think of his past, and at one point he decides to comply with them being unable to restrain himself from taking a plunge into the memories of homeland (Ghosal 69).

The Sri Lankan ‘home’ does not bring along its assurance of tenderness and security as it is wrenched by the Civil Wars that work as a ruin in Sunny’s life and love. The rupture in the bond between the mother and son in this novel is an extension of the initial severing of the umbilical cord with the homeland. Though Sunny Fernando, the second - generation diasporic character, gets over his crisis just after a visit to his homeland, he never has any plans of settling there. He even feels unsettled in his host land London. Though the urge remains, a gradual dwindling in the urge for the past land is conspicuous in Gunasekera’s attitude. Sunny suffers gravely from this crisis but he does not run away from his host land as Gunasekera’s protagonists had done in his previous novels. The writer’s fourth novel *The Match* is thus a quiet study of rootlessness and home-making and it is well portrayed through the character of Sunny.

‘*The Match*’ described in the novel also juxtaposes cricket victories, defeats and the ethnic solidarity among the diasporic spectators against the ethnic turmoil of the “homeland” in order to portray the sport as a promise of reconciliation (Hettiarachchi, Aparna. “The Metaphor of Cricket in Shehan Karunatilaka’s *Chinaman*: Sri Lankan

English and Sri Lankan National Consciousness.” *Journal of Asian Review Of Public Affairs And Policy*, vol.4, no.2, 20 Aug 2019, pp.1-15).

Thus, the novel closes with reference to the ethnic conflict, and later Sunny finds temporary refuge and happiness by watching cricket. He craves for the “perfect picture” (Gunasekera, *The Match*, 169) of the motherland which could be derived only in his mind; the picture which was beyond projection from the journalist’s point of view.

Finally, Sunny finds his perfect picture when he witnesses two cricket matches, one between England and Sri Lanka, and the culminating one, a one-day between India and Sri Lanka that provides Sunny his way towards a kind of redemption at the end. His reconciliation with his host land and homeland comes through the death of a bird at the Oval grounds, which Sunny notices and captures the best of it in his camera. The death of the bird teaches Sunny the sign of hope and renewal:

The ball sped into their midst and caused a flurry. The bird in the middle didn’t stand a chance. The ball hit it. The pigeon keeled over. Play stopped. The whole of the Oval was hushed. The nearest fielder walked over and picked the bird up as though it were the dove of peace. He carried it slowly towards the boundary. Sunny knew then this was the picture for him. He kept the lens aperture small, knowing that in his photograph the sky would be a bowl where newspaper confetti floated like circling buzzards, while in the centre a pair of clasped hands prayed to a dying bird. Its feathers trembled just enough to blur, in and out of perfect focus, like life itself. There was something significant happening here, he knew, no matter what the outcome of the game would be. Perhaps it was the power to silence that comes with death, however small the life, and our need to overcome it. To find some brief moment of care. Hope. The 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. Sunny saw it all. And in that moment he understood something about himself. The life he had and how far it could take him (Gunasekera, *The Match*, 303-304).

Thus, cricket in *The Match* performs a paradoxical role as both a way back to one’s national roots and as a way out of the internal tensions that make up the fabric of that very ‘nation.’ Hence, it is also proved that Gunasekera’s diasporic novel *The Match* incorporates the themes of multiple dislocations, the spirit of cricket and temporality.

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