

# TRAVERSING WITH THE SPECTRE OF ETHNIC CONFLICT IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA: A STUDY OF ROMESH GUNESEKERA'S *NOONTIDE TOLL*

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## Abstract

A decade after the cessation of the bloody Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009), the island remains haunted by the perils of the conflict in myriad manifestations. This article examines the enduring presence of the Sri Lankan ethnic divide as the spectre that haunts the post-civil war Sri Lankan lives by problematizing the paradigms of memory and space. Considering a spectral approach to feature the post-war epoch in Sri Lanka, the study draws significantly from the theoretical concept of Hauntology from Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993). For the study, the research examines Romesh Gunasekera's short story collection *Noontide Toll* (2014) to demonstrate how the spectre of the civil war continues to haunt Sri Lankans from all spheres of life. The study is significant because it adds to the discourse of the disputed notions and critical challenges posed in the Sri Lankan post-conflict situation, such as Tamil reconciliation programs, policy, and reforms in the restoration of peace, rehabilitation of ex-combatants of the LTTE, and to prevent the recurrence of the conflict.

**Keywords:** Hauntology, post-civil war Sri Lanka, Romesh Gunasekera, travel narrative, *Noontide Toll*

'A specter is haunting Sri Lanka- the specter of ethnic conflict.' This line alludes to the famous opening line of Marx and Engels' seminal work *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), which says, "A specter is haunting Europe--the specter of communism" (qt. in Derrida 4; qt. in Coverley 8). Here, Marx and Engels signify the enduring influence of Marxism on Western society. Similarly, contemporary Sri Lanka stands on the graves of the island's nearly three-decades-long deadliest civil war that erupted from 1983 to 2009. This deadly protracted battle between

the militant organization of LTTE and the Sri Lankan military over the devolution of power ended with the comprehensive defeat of LTTE. Many believed that with the guerrilla movement's ultimate defeat and the state's victory, a new era of prosperity, security, stability, and equality was near. However, the reality was different. The island remains troubled with the ethno political crisis, ethno religious reconciliation, and prominently the fear of the bygone ethnic conflict resuscitation.

Derrida states, "to haunt does not mean to be present" (161). Understandably, the literal meaning of haunting pertains to supernatural events, the presence of a ghost, or the presence of the past in the present. However, cultural critics or writers use the terms such as ghost, specter, apparition, phantasm, and more, to convey the concept of the presence of the returned. However, with time, the concept of hauntology evolved and entered the cultural mainstream, as Coverley suggests, becoming the "shorthand for how the past returns to haunt the present" (Coverley 7). Merlin Coverley, well known for his seminal work *Hauntology: Ghosts of Future Past* (2020), implies the manifestation of the concept of hauntology in a political realm. He says that applying the concept of hauntology in politics "highlights the shortcomings of the former" political entity, identify "the political failings of the present," thereby analysing those failed moments and suggesting different paths that could have been taken, "turning points whose promise remains unfulfilled and which continue to offer us hope for the future" (10).

Given such standpoints, this paper employs the concept of hauntology, as propounded by Derrida,

in conversation with Sri Lankan diasporic writer Romesh Guneseekara's short story collection *Noontide Toll* (2014) to examine the main objective of how the hauntology of ethnic divide resonate through the lives in post-civil war Sri Lanka. Guneseekera embarks on a quest to unveil not only the plight of citizens but also the trepidation of tourists, and the predicaments of immigrants in contemporary Sri Lanka who visit conflict zones and artefacts, indicating the existence of the past. For many decades, division and discrimination have become the hallmark of Sri Lankan history. History demonstrates that the ethnic divide occurred primarily due to denying rights to its Tamil residents. Though the country propagates the notion of restored peace, democracy, and unification of Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war, the island still vibrates the ethnic tension in new forms. The selected fiction of Romesh Guneseekera's *Noontide Toll* (2014) explores the scars of the civil war, and the problematizes Tamil reconciliation in post-conflict Sri Lanka. It is a collection of 14 interconnected stories set in post-civil war Sri Lanka, each meticulously written to present a sublime complexity of violence poised to explode. The stories in *Noontide Toll* address an intriguing quandary: how do we reconcile with the past to avoid repeating previous mistakes yet uphold the desire to forget the past to transcend and move on?

Romesh Guneseekera, born in Sri Lanka in 1954 and currently lives in London, is both a poet and writer of fiction. His literature predominantly depicts the schisms of desolated Sri Lanka, devastated by the historical occurrences of several colonialisms and the 26-year civil war. His critically acclaimed works include *Monkfish Moon* (1992), *Reef* (1994), *The Sandglass* (1998), *Heaven's Edge* (2002), *The Prisoner of Paradise* (2012), and his latest novel, *Sun Catcher* (2019). In an interview, Guneseekera states the urgency of writing in capturing the realization of the island's predicament through fiction. He says, "there is urgency in fiction, even though the writing is in itself an act against the corrosiveness of time... but this moment—post-war Sri Lanka—has an urgency that will not wait much longer" (*New Yorker* 2013). The fiction of Guneseekera has generated considerable debate among critics. Some criticize him for promoting an ethnocentric agenda to becoming a native informant; others, particularly critics from the west, have praised him for accurately portraying the socio-political milieu in Sri Lanka. In most of his works, he has

effectively depicted Sri Lanka as a dystopia scarred by the flames of ethnic tension, civil war, and terrorism, with self-exile as the only option felt for the victimized civilians of the country.

Unlike his prior writing about Sri Lanka, which was narrowly orchestrated to demonstrate a specific scenario, *Noontide Toll* encompasses the entire dynamic of contemporary Sri Lanka. The book is divided into two sections, titled 'North' and the corresponding second section, 'South.' Each section follows the narrator's tribulations and experience with the customers in six self-contained stories. The 'North' section is introduced by a prologue entitled 'Full Tank' while 'Running on an Empty Tank,' and afterward to the 'South' section, is its mirror image. The novel's craft is designed so that the stories under the section 'North' must be read against the section 'South.' As mentioned earlier, the fiction provides a holistic approach to the ethnopolitical crisis in contemporary Sri Lanka. Here, by placing a taxi driver, Vasantha, as the protagonist and narrator of the fiction, Guneseekera gained the freedom, as he says in an interview, "to go where I needed to go and to meet the range of characters that I wanted to people the pages" (*New Yorker* 2013). The fiction is written in the mode of a travel narrative, where Vasantha meets individual from many walks of life, with each tale chronicling a different journey. It is notable that, Guneseekera has placed both the taxi driver and the drive itself as the main characters of the fiction because the taxi ride is analogous to a man's life. Such as, like a drive, life moves forward, but the past, like the road left behind, is always in front of the driver's eyes in the rear-view mirror.

It is undeniable that the immediate problem with the conclusion of the civil war is to restore peace over the island. As Brown pointed out, "conflict does not terminate immediately after the cessation of armed hostilities. On the contrary, they can often continue for a long period, which may leave underlying tensions and causes unresolved" (Brown, 2005). Although in post-civil war Sri Lanka, there is no more visible remnant of the civil war such as weapons, bombings, war, displacement camps, killings, and more, the ethnic conflict haunts like a ghost, invisible to senses yet visible in every aspect of life. As Merlin Coverley puts it, "the former haunts the present from the past" and "the latter haunts the present from the future" (11). The common denominator in both the equation is the

present. Thus, one can say the past resonates in the present, and neither belonging to the past nor the present, it tampers the progression of linear time. Gunesekera problematizes this concept through Vasantha's opinion on becoming a driver. He says that while driving, "you are never stuck...you do not have to feel trapped. If you are on the move, there is always hope" (Gunesekera 5). This phrase implies that becoming a driver allows one to escape the conventional timeline progression of the hauntology of the past and future, enabling a space to live in the present with optimism for the future. However, in manifesting a 'normal' nation state devoid of disputes, analyzing the memory paradigms in constructing the nation with the constraints of the past is significant.

### Specter of memories

After the civil war, a horde of Tamil ethnicity was displaced, exiled, migrated, or executed, leaving the nation in the hands of the dominant Sinhalese extremist governing the nation. With the dread of Tamil ethnicity, the government of Sri Lanka regulates laws such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) of 1978, under which a person can be detained for 18 months under suspicion, and more reforms in a similar fashion. After Iraq, the United Nations reported Sri Lanka with the highest number of enforced disappearances. As a result, citizens, mainly Tamils, must exercise prudence in their performance and behaviour. Despite the state's assurances of a new paradise for these Tamils and the promotion of rehabilitation programs for ex-Tamil Tigers, the reality was to live in fear while pretending to lead an everyday life in post-conflict Sri Lanka.

In 'Folly' from Gunesekera's *Noontide Tool*, a veteran soldier, Dilshan, shares his ordeal from the battlefield. He has shot several LTTE cadres, but the episode in which he killed a Tamil Tigress haunts him. He recounts how he had to wait until a female Tiger singing lullaby were nursing and burping her child before he had to pull the trigger. Dilshan remembers how her lullaby touched him. Her tune was similar to that sung to their toddlers by Sinhala mothers, albeit the lyrics differed. However, that 'compassionate' gesture of waiting till she nursed her child does not alleviate his post-war trauma. He says, "Only now after it is all done, I feel I am the enemy of myself. I have wounded myself, no? I cannot ever look at my mother again. Not without always seeing that face behind her.... I do not know what that baby will think of us when he grows up. However, I had to

do it, no?" (Gunesekera 20- 21). This episode represents thousands of Sri Lankan army officials who are constantly haunted and tormented by the heinous war crimes they perpetrated during the ethnic conflict.

In contrast to Dilshan's story, 'Mess' from Gunesekera's *Noontide Tool* includes the story of a Major. In the story, Vasantha chaperoned Father Perera and a foreigner, who were on "soul-rectifying missions" (Gunesekera 48) to an Army Mess in the North. The Major was accused of beating a woman and leaving her to die in his homeland, and Vasantha's clients had journeyed to gather evidence and have him arrested for the crime. They speculate that if the Major perpetrated such atrocities in his hometown, what degree of violence he would perform if he had been unfettered in the North during the civil war. However, the Major's mannerisms toward his guests are sophisticated, eloquent, good-natured, and hospitable, yet the visitors notice the menace masked by his extraversion. Amid the conversation, Major reflects on the reconciliation programs in post-conflict Sri Lanka. He says, "The people are with us now, you know. We have done a lot for them. I do not mean the fighting. In these last few months, my boys have built a dozen houses for the people around here. This is not army policy, you know" (Gunesekera 43). The Major's disdain for the violence underlying the fighting is noticeable here, as it was a dutiful action. Gunesekera has efficiently structured the diverse perspectives on the disputed concept of whether the humanitarian catastrophe was a war crime or not through Dilshan and Major's attitude toward the violence they committed in the past. If the violence committed in the past haunts Dilshan, the Major finds it as the rightful deed done by a soldier for his country.

Another instance is Saraswathi, who presently works as an Assistant manager in the Spice Garden Inn. She rightly claims in 'Roadkill' from Gunesekera's *Noontide Toll* that "after a war, it is best not to ask about the past" (Gunesekera 102). On the other hand, Vasantha notices a wound on her neck, a calloused trigger finger, and deadly accuracy in killing a rat by throwing a beer bottle at it. These physical mannerisms point to her background as an LTTE soldier, which she has fiercely suppressed while masquerading as a professional outlook. In a profound sense, through Saraswathi, Gunesekera attempts to equate her to the contemporary Sri Lanka

that outwardly projects as a country void of violence, free from terrorism, and emancipated for ethnic assimilation. However, like Saraswathi's scar on her neck, which she continuously strives to conceal, the country goes onward by ignoring the wounds of war. In Vasantha's view, the past haunts her, 'There are things we do not speak of, things we not only do not remember but carefully forget, places we do not stray into, memories we bury or reshape. That is how we all live nowadays: driving along a road between hallucination and amnesia' (Gunasekara 105). The quandary these characters put forwards to the world is how they can move forward without adequately confronting and resolving the scars of the past.

The body remains an exemplar site of the confluence of memory via the memory of history. As Martin Hagglund writes, "To inscribe something is, first of all, an act of memory. Regardless of what, to whom, or why I write, my words become traces of the past at the very moment when they are imprinted" (50). Considering these three cases from the fiction *Noontide Toll*, it is deducible that Father Perera visited the island hoping to find justice for the beaten-up girl by the Major. However, the Major regards it as a regular civilized military conduct committed by a soldier to preserve their nation; hence, they are not held accountable to anybody. On the other hand, Dilshan feels guilt and remorse and is haunted by the war crime he committed during the civil war. He feels the soldiers have compromised their humanity during the heat of the battle. Moreover, as for Saraswathi, she constantly conceals the scars of the past yet finds it difficult to forego the training she achieved as a Tamil Tiger. At one point, this militant skill and fearless actions she conducted as a Tamil Tiger was considered part of women's empowerment. However, with the cessation of the war, she has to hide these embellishments to live fearlessly in the present.

All these characters travel in post-conflict Sri Lanka in search of self-reconciliation to accept their history and hope for a better future. The unsettled reconciliation with the past is a fundamental issue that Gunasekera emphasizes through these individuals. The importance of reconciliation with the past is essential because it aids in rejuvenation, relieving people of the burdens of the past, restoring peace, and restraining future insurgencies from resuscitation. Maryse Jayasuriya, in her study, "Terror, Trauma, Transitions: Representing Violence

in Sri Lankan Literature," shares this similar opinion when she says, "The issue at hand seems to be whether to allow witting or unwitting participants in violence to forget the past, reinvent themselves and live their lives, or to remember past atrocities in order to prevent their recurrence" (205).

### Spectre of Spaces

The second dimension of the ghostly characteristics of hauntology reflects the features of places or topological spaces. The construction of memorials such as graveyards to commemorate the dead in battle is an effective and significant form of propaganda in a post-war nation. In the case of Sri Lanka, there was a local cemetery in Kopay where Tamil comrades were buried. However, "the Sri Lankan army had erased the cemetery once the war was won. In its place, an army base had been constructed, right on top of the bones of bygone Tigers" (Subramanian235). Such reconstruction of the past attempts to erase the spectre of history by constructing a new one. The Sri Lankan civil war has incorporated religion, politics, history, geography, fact, and mythology into its service. In a post-conflict nation, similar to problematized reconciliation in the people's psyche, there lies a profound affiliation to monuments and places. 'To be is to be haunted,' as Merlin Coverley puts it, Gunasekera has effectively characterized this feature through various stories in *Noontide Toll*.

For instance, in the story, 'Humbug,' Gunasekera introduces the character of Miss Susilo, a Leonard Woolf fanatic. She was an English bibliophile tourist who travelled enthusiastically to visit Sri Lanka, as described in Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*. However, the eagerness was short-lived. The hotel employee in Hambantota Rest House informed Miss Susili that the iconic building associated with Woolf during his time in Hambantota is to be torn down in the name of development. Through the episode, Gunasekera makes the readers aware of such frequent occurrences of destruction and construction in an immediate post-conflict Sri Lanka. The conversation between the hotel manager and Miss Susili is very significant. For instance, Miss Susili emphasizes the significance of the building as a "historic building...it is an important place" (216). On the other hand, the hotel manager responds nonchalantly, "It is ancient, madam. It is not fit for purpose anymore. It belongs to the British times...but madam, that is a novel. All made up" (216).

Moreover, he comments on her to Vasantha, "Nona tikka pizza, Neda?" which translates into English as "the lady is slightly mad, is she not?". Here, Gunesequera intends to make the readers understand and empathize with Miss Susili on the destruction of historical monuments in Sri Lanka under the pretence of development—a self-aggrandizing deed. On the other hand, the hotel manager is paradigmatic for those Sri Lankan fundamentalists who lack a sense of history and have a skewed perception of modernity. The hotel manager's comment on the validation of such an act of development is explicit when he says, "We need to modernize for tomorrow's visitors, not yesterday's tiffin-tuckers" (217). In a paradoxical sense, later in the episode, Miss Susili meets Abeysinghe, who operates a library as a community service to raise literary awareness among the people in the neighbourhood. However, she refuses to contribute her books to Abeysinghe. The scene is paradoxical since he attempts to develop the awareness Susili found lacking in her meeting with the obnoxious executive at the Rest House. Here, taking sanctuary in the past through these monuments, the past has become a part of her system that she refuses to let go of.

Similar to the connotation of spaces, various signals, signs, and even colours haunt the Sri Lankan civilians in their reconciliation process. For instance, another significant event in post-conflict Sri Lanka was the white-van abduction. It was a feature of the Sri Lankan civil war since the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurgency of the 1980s, which continued even after the cessation of the war. Leena Manimekalai, the director of Channel 4's *White Vans Stories*, which investigates the phenomenon of enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka, claims that there is "absolutely no news" of people ever returning once they have been "disappeared." (Doyle para 6). In this context, Gunesequera has brilliantly conveyed the enormity of apprehension that the citizens of post-conflict Sri Lanka are experiencing daily. For example, when Vasantha chose to buy a van from Lionel after his retirement, he was intimidated by the van's white colour. The only thing he altered about the vehicle was its colour from white to blue. According to him, the purpose for the colour change is "because white worries too many people, given all our white-van disappearances" (Gunesequera 148).

The burning of the Jaffna public library in 1981 for the Tamils became an icon of the physical and cultural violence perpetrated by the Sinhalese extremists. In the case of Sri Lanka, the burning of the Jaffna Library (1981) marked a turning point in the history of ethnic conflict. As the German Poet Heinrich Heine, in his seminal work, *Almansor* (1821), states, "Where *they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings*" (qt. in Knuth 2; italics in original). The library was a repository for all known Tamil literary source materials. It had nearly a million Tamil books and rare, old manuscripts, some written on dried palm leaves and stored in fragrant sandalwood boxes. However, everything turned into ashes in the 1981 riot. The incident turned "egregious to a group that treasured its literary heritage, shattered Tamil adults and radicalized Tamil youth. Sri Lanka was soon immersed in a civil war" (Knuth 80). However, after the civil war's conclusion, there were attempts to reinstate the prestigious dignity and heritage of the library.

In the section 'Renewals,' Gunesequera exposes the reality of reconstructing Tamil heritage in post-civil war Sri Lanka. Vasantha drives Mr. Desmond and his assistants to the Jaffna library. Mr. Desmond was a representative of western donor organizations who embarked on a vision and purpose to restore the library's status with thousands of essential books. The reality, however, was quite different. Despite the librarian, Mrs. Kumaraswamy's request to bring in more classical and poetry literature, Desmond dropped the issue and brought in agricultural development and microfinance books from the UK. "That will do the trick," Desmond adds (Gunesequera 122). He criticizes the government's reconciliation and rebuilding programs, which are focused primarily on financial and infrastructural development that favours the Sinhalese ethnicity. Through Mr. Desmond, Gunesequera exposes the state's ignorance and apparent contempt for the country's ethno-cultural diversity. According to him, the state, like Mr. Desmond, believes that economic prosperity is a far better prescription for future generations than reconciliation with the past.

Similarly, in 'Scrap,' Gunesequera takes his readers on a journey to Mullaivivu's "No-Fire-Zone or was it the war zone" (90) with Vasantha and an enthusiastic young Chinese interpreter named Chen. Amongst all 14 stories in *Noontide Toll*, 'Scraps' emphasizes the importance of questioning and

challenging the national narrative of Tamil reconciliation, rebuilding, and development projects. For example, on their way to Mullaitivu, Vasantha asks the Sinhala guide, Sepala, about the construction of the road to Mullaitivu. Vasantha inquires, "Who built this road... Did the Tigers build this, or is it a British road?" (82). Sepala, on the other hand, was disappointed at Vasantha for even considering the prospect of the government's arch-enemies contributing productively. The episode demonstrates how modern Sri Lanka, governed and ruled by Sinhalese extremists, presents its history to the outside world. They favourably eliminate the positive doing of the adversaries and promote their ideologies as the legitimized ones to maintain international reputations globally.

As they travelled to see the relics of the Mullaitivu battlefields, they came upon several young Sri Lankans from the South filming a music video. The youngsters were drinking, dancing, and filming "a pop video" (Gunesekera 90). While observing these young Sri Lankans, the Sinhalese extremist Sri Lankan guide, Sepala, became agitated and sought to explain the significance of the location to them. He says, "You cannot do that here?" (90) and "Do you know what this place is?... Don't you know what happened here?" (Gunesekera 91). However, one of the young Sri Lankans replied, "Happened? Are you talking history? We are the future, matching. The fuckin' A future, no?" (91). Through these characters, Gunesekera has skilfully conveyed people's various perspectives on the historical places in Sri Lanka. Here, Sepala demonstrates a section of society that wants to preserve and establish the battlefield as a victorious piece to Sinhalese but also wants future generations to remember the embers of a bygone conflict. At the same time, the youth reflect the current generation's desire to be free of the specter of the past and contest a peaceful life ahead. In contrast to Sepala's ideology, the island's youth try to forget the past and move forward into a *carpe diem* mode. However, contemporary Sri Lanka can only aid this journey to a brighter future if one seeks to remove the history from memory while also derailing the negative ethno-political historical references endorsed to places.

## Conclusion

Pico Iyer is correct when he says that "*Noontide Toll* says more in its 235 short pages,

about Sri Lanka's 'war within' (154). Even after the government's victorious end of the civil war, the Sinhalese extremist continued to construct the Tamil as the other or, in the case of the post-civil war phase, as a threat to the national security in the future. Such attempts resonate with hauntology's characteristics, where the past (ethnic division) haunts the present and the future (threat to national security) haunts the present from the future. In both cases, the impact is felt in the present (Tamil lives), "either through repetition or anticipation" (Coverley 11). Despite government efforts to disguise the notion of a post-civil war Sri Lankan unification, the presence of the 'absent' ethnic divisions persists over the country. The specter/spectre of military presence in contemporary Sri Lanka, the construction of monuments and memorials commemorating exclusively Sinhalese tradition, the use of Sinhala for signboards and signals, Buddhist propaganda in a multi-religious nation, and other issues are manifestations of ethnic division's ghostly presence.

Gunesekera's *Noontide Toll* in one-way echoes and prolongs Subramanian's travel narrative, *This Divided Island*. Subramanian argues that such ethno-political measures in a post-conflict country manifest a multitude in the degree of the ethnic divide. He writes, "Sri Lanka was a country pretending to have been suddenly scrubbed clean of violence. However, it was not, of course... By some fundamental law governing the conversation of violence, it was now erupting outside the battlefield, in strange and unpredictable ways" (10). As Coverley applies Derrida's hauntology to the future recurrence of Marxism, arguing that Marxism, "like all ghosts which have yet to be laid to rest, would return, repeatedly, disrupting the present and continuing to remind us of another possible future" (Coverley 8). From these vantage points, one may deduce that the ethnic divide between Sinhalese and Tamils has remained a spectre in Sri Lanka for generations and continues to disrupt the present from the graves. Since the state-buildings promulgate ethno-political laws and reforms that annex the program of Sinhalization, the only solution to exorcise this spectre of ethnic division is the unification of Sri Lanka across all borders and ethnic lines- a program to be initiated within individuals and society.

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