

(Re) Creating Eden: Ecology and War in Romesh Gunsekera's *Heaven's Edge*

Somjeeta Pandey

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur

Abstract: Romesh Gunsekera's third novel, *Heaven's Edge*, which was published in 2002 is set on an anonymous, apocalyptic and dystopic island that has been completely devastated by war and nuclear missiles. In this dystopian world he places Marc, who returns to the island, which is his ancestral homeland and where he hopes to create his Eden but soon he meets Uva, a self-proclaimed ecowarrior and falls in love with her. By keeping the island unnamed, Gunsekera suggests that the island could be any colonized and war-stricken island like Sri Lanka or Mauritius or Fiji or Papua New Guinea. Civil wars and nuclear warfare have ripped off these islands of their original identities, natural ecosystems and biodiversities leaving behind a shadow of the original paradisiacal surroundings. The novel is interspersed with images of utopian longings and settings. Although Marc, at the end of the novel, builds a sanctuary, he kills Uva in the process of safeguarding it. My paper originates from the text's incessant engagement with violence and the need to destroy in order to preserve. My paper will attempt to focus on whether Eden can be regained or innocence achieved after the apocalypse or whether utopia can only be achieved at the cost of violence and bloodshed. My paper will also address the issues of environmental degradation that are inextricably ingrained in the narrative and the novelist's longing for a world that would be devoid of violence.

Keywords: Anonymous, Apocalypse, Utopia, Dystopia, Eden, Environmental Degradation

In this article I deal with Romesh Gunsekera's third novel, *Heaven's Edge*, which was published in 2002. This novel is set in an anonymous island that has been completely devastated by war. I will try to examine Gunsekera's engagement with ecological issues in the context of war and, in so doing, will also critically examine the validity of the solution offered to ecological problems by one of the major characters at the end of the novel.

Heaven's Edge shows the narrator Marc's desire for an imaginary homeland that is now totally steeped in violence and wars. In this novel the novelist, preferring anonymity has set the novel in an unnamed, apocalyptic island in the Indian Ocean and presents a dystopic fantasy. In this dystopian world he places Marc, who returns to get connected with (the

memories of his father who had died here), and, instead, finds Uva, an eco-warrior, who he falls in love with.

By keeping the island unnamed, Gunsekera suggests that the island could be any colonized and war-stricken island like Sri Lanka or Mauritius or Fiji or Papua New Guinea. Civil wars and nuclear warfare have ripped off these islands of their original identities, natural ecosystems and biodiversities leaving behind a shadow of the original paradisiacal surroundings. Marc, at the end of the novel, builds a sanctuary which meets with imminent destruction. This could be interpreted as showing the despair of the novelist for the lack of any kind of paradisiacal redemption. But this sense of despair does not stop the writer from producing a resistance against the forces that work to destroy nature. Gunsekera, throughout the novel, drops hints on creating a utopic world again which would be devoid of any wars and bloodshed and would be respectful towards the natural surroundings. Marc and Uva are also very critical of the environmental policies of the political parties which are working for the benefit of the multinationals. But although Uva is the daughter of the soil, Marc is more of an exotic tourist rather than a sensitive environmentalist who fails to respect nature for itself initially. At the end of the novel, however, Marc too learns to respect nature and there is a considerable change in his attitude towards nature.

Initially though, Marc's gaze on the island is a typical tourist's gaze. He says:

I was keen to explore it, imagining that perhaps there I might discover the hidden charm of a long-suffering but colorful land. (9)

Marc wants to experience the island as an "exotic spectacle" (Huggan xi) and the island comes as a relief from the monotonous din and bustle of London, to which he was accustomed. Marc soon finds an erotic object against the backdrop of the exotic island with the appearance of Uva. Marc meets Uva while she is releasing a few emerald doves into the wild. Uva, a self-proclaimed eco-warrior, is devotedly committed towards saving her farm and the island from any further ecological destruction. In fact, in the very first conversation between Marc and Uva, the readers find a glimpse of the environmental destruction caused by the war. When Marc exclaims that he has heard that there were birds all over the island, Uva replies:

That was before war changed our nature here . . . Now you have to search hard to find anything beautiful. (14)

The exotic exploits of Marc end up in his meeting Uva and falling in love with her. But from the onset, as said already, there is a stark difference between Marc's perspectives on nature and those of Uva's. For Marc, exoticism culminates in eroticism and he is found busy in satiating his physical desires being quite oblivious of the fact that Uva is more engrossed in saving her island rather than dreaming of a happy conjugal life with Marc:

Then, unable to stop, I kissed her. I could only think of touching her lips. Supplanting that air warmed by her breath with the lightest brush of my thinnest skin. Nothing else. (28)

Marc was actually smitten by the dream of finding heaven on the island as his grandfather had described and, therefore, according to him "Anything was possible. . .about an island of dreams" (12). However, his convictions and beliefs that he would find the paradisiacal Eden he had been searching for are challenged by the actual realities of the war-torn island.

The diasporic protagonist's search for an Eden is challenged by the realities of the disintegrated island and his search for a utopic paradise meets with failure. Huggan in his *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) says that the majority of tourists cannot bear with an excess of otherness:

They [the tourists] need to travel in an environment 'bubble' [Cohen], which gives them a vicarious encounter with the Other, yet at a safe distance, with all the security of the familiar around them. So, it is the task of the industry image-makers to create a place which is exotic but not alien, exciting yet not frightening, different but where they speak your language, so that fun and relaxation, untroubled by the concerns of the real world, are possible. Such a space, of course, requires sweeping most of social reality under the carpet.

In the novel too, the Western gaze that is quite apparent in Marc's attitude towards the island is contested and challenged by Uva's commitment towards her island. Marc feels that his search for his Eden is complete since he has found Uva but Uva is in no mood to allow his romantic dreams to overshadow her environmental concerns. Even when she is locked in a romantic situation with Marc, she does not forget her commitment of turning her dream into reality and says:

There will be birds everywhere—my mother’s emerald doves at least—and clouds of butterflies like flowers in the air. We will each have a garden of our own.” (39)

Marc, however, fails to understand the urgency of the situation Uva is trapped in. Although he keeps getting flashbacks of how his father and grandfather had described the island as an Eden, as a paradise, yet he fails to reconcile the present war-despoiled scenes of the same island with the descriptions of it that he had heard. He is vehemently chided by Uva when he says that he has found his Eden, implying that he is satisfied with the woman beside him and less bothered about the ravages of war on the island. Uva tells him:

“What? You think that just because we can jiggle our hips together everything is all right? . . . Just think about my muddy little hut you like so much to wallow in. . . If we think this is the best we can do then we will have become just like them: forgetting pain and remembering nothing.” (39)

However Marc seems disinterested in getting practically involved with Uva’s problems. Although he is aware of the surroundings around him, he prefers to remain quite unconcerned about it. He keeps himself at a safe distance both from Uva’s dreams and the destruction on the island :

I know how bad it is. I wanted to say I was sorry that I could not feel her pain, or anybody else’s. (27)

Gunsekera, thus, constantly draws the readers’ attention to the clash of superfluous interests between Marc and Uva and Uva’s consistent contestations of Marc’s romanticism. By this, Gunsekera questions the stereotypical Western exotic gaze on nature. The dystopic colour of the novel definitely provides Gunsekera the opportunity to construct a dilapidated and threatened Eden as well as offer a counter argument that critiques the Western tourist’s gaze.

Marc’s inability to understand or react to the horrors of environmental destruction that the island is subjected to and his inability to comprehend his own lend an exoticized and eroticised colour to the narrative and the island. There is an instance in the narrative where Marc informs Uva that Nirali has been appointed as the new night guard for the hotel. While Uva becomes anxious hearing this and expresses her fear that Nirali might not be able to save himself from the military inscription, Marc seems unconcerned about this development. All

he can think of is “. . .what would happen if I kissed her?” (28). Thus, it can be safely foreseen that Marc’s energies will be dissipated in the end.

After Uva is taken away by the guerilla forces, Marc embarks on a quest to find her. There are moments when Marc thinks that Uva is dead and he has lost her forever. At these moments, his grief is driven by the regret that he can no more unite with her, he can no more possess her, “I felt sure Uva was dead. I wanted to plunge into her darkest, thickest jungle to die too and rot; to fertilise her wretched earth if nothing else” (185). Then, as if in a desperate attempt to obtain her, he decides to create a garden for her:

A garden husbanded for her: full of flowering bushes, arboreal vines, thick yellow-bordered, succulent leaves. (193)

Although by the end of the novel, Marc has developed a will to conserve nature and grow his own garden, yet it is not purely a conservationist strategy that instigates him to take up such noble deeds. Rather, his sense of despair, his sense of the loss of Uva and of her touch, act as the driving force behind this:

I wanted space and order, light and colour. I wanted the place teeming with a hundred different types of birds, of bees, of squirrels. I wanted them all to come, drawn by a lodge stone of passion and the heady, overpowering scent of a garden in the middle of a jungle; to bring Uva with them, and if she could not come here, I wanted the garden to become her. (193)

While Marc tries to develop and cultivate ways which might take him closer to the either missing or dead Uva, he has this peculiar desire of “taming” the plot of land (192). He even alludes to the “ambitious agriculturalists” who have inspired him to tame the “wild.” Gunesequera takes a sly dig at what the scientific revolution has done to the world. Here we find a reductionist characteristic at play. In this connection, I quote Vandana Shiva, an eminent ecofeminist who in her book *Staying Alive* explains this “reductionist” trait:

I characterise modern western patriarchy’s special epistemological tradition of the “scientific revolution” as “reductionist” because it reduced the capacity of humans to know nature both by excluding other knowers and other ways of knowing, and it reduced the capacity of nature to creatively regenerate and renew itself by manipulating it as inert and fragmented matter. (21)

Marc, who arrived as almost a quasi-tourist, at the end of the novel, decides to take the responsibility of taming the land and domesticating the wild. He starts tampering with nature's own regenerative capacity by behaving as one who is driven by his desire to possess the wild, the untamed.

Marc's desire of possessing Uva is also not free from the gender bias. Uva is named probably after the Uva province of Sri Lanka, which is home to the Gal Oya National Park and the Yala National Park. The etymological meaning of the name is associated with a grape, and is also linked with the remains of a seed. Uva here is the symbol of creation and growth. She is, to argue after Shiva, the saviour of "Prakriti" (Shiva 37). Shiva alludes to Maria Mies and says that women "not only collected and consumed what grew in nature but *they made things grow*" (38). Uva is a perfect example of this. Uva, who proclaims herself to be an eco-warrior, is the daughter of an ornithologist, or simply a person who "looked everywhere for the bird of paradise" (30). She has experienced the havoc wrecked by nuclear warfare and civil wars. She has seen people and nature suffering. Just like a mother who always nourishes her child back to a healthy life after prolonged illness, Uva is bent on cultivating and protecting her farm, concealed away from the eyes of the military diktats, and on producing her own garden. Marc, who has arrived on the island to find his own Eden, on the contrary, becomes a colonizer. Colonizers, all over the world, have penetrated nature with violence and have subjugated the native population. Marc, too, does the same. Instead of building a better Eden or understanding Uva's desires of saving her environment, he becomes a colonizer with his typical exotic Western tourist gaze and dreams of taming the wild and building a garden (which would become Uva, according to him) so that he could possess Uva. Thus Marc is the "Purusha" (Shiva 37) or the masculine principle who wants to disrupt "Prakriti's" uninterrupted or spontaneous free play or "lila" (Shiva 38). Although ontologically, no dichotomy exists between man and nature and since growth is the trait of "Prakriti", nature has been conceived of as an inviolable entity. But the difference lies in the Cartesian concept where nature and man are treated as separate entities thus allowing man to subjugate and violate nature according to his free will. When Marc dreams of making a garden full of flowers, butterflies and birds, he knows that he can control the growth of the flowers and the plants and be in possession of them. Ironically, though Marc is well aware of the island's colonial history and the ecological devastation caused due to the short-sighted conservational policies of the political parties, he seems to be unaware of the reductionist attitude which he himself is showing. Gunsekera could have shown the development of an environmental

consciousness in Marc by bringing him in touch with the female eco-warrior. Instead Gunesequera never fails to show how Marc keeps himself attached and yet detached from the environmental concerns of Uva by only emphasizing how Marc's erotic impulses increase with each passing day. Therefore, nature or "Prakriti" remains a gendered entity, exoticized, eroticized, but never quite respected the way it should be. In fact, the very idea of taming the plot of land is replete with Marc's imperial drive.

There is, however, a moment, rather an epiphanic moment, for Marc that deserves a special mention. A meeting with a wounded monkey awakens in him the latent compassion that Uva had tried to arouse in him much earlier in the novel. Quite abruptly and unpredictably he "felt a bond" (186) with the monkey and, emphatically rejecting the Darwinian theory, states:

Evolution was not the survival of the fittest. Our evolution must come from the survival of the weak, retrieved against the odds, I realised. It must matter, otherwise why would I care anymore? (186)

Although Marc recalls that "it is sometimes kinder to kill" (186) yet he "couldn't" (186). He knows he has to help the wounded and helpless animal. He realizes that he has to "value life over death" (186). This episode marks the beginning of a new attitude in Marc: he suddenly realizes the deep love and affection he has for Uva and it is not just the "random firing of some scattered neurons" (186). The wounded monkey exposes Marc to the inner and the spiritual realm. Marc understands the interrelationships between humans and its natural surroundings. After this, his love for Uva finds a new direction and a new meaning.

Marc is finally able to set his "priorities clear" (187). He feels the need to help the victims of war and also save nature from further degradation. He dreams of building a sanctuary at Samandia for such victims. Just as Mister Salgado dreams of building a sea sanctuary in *Reef*, Marc wishes to convert his dreams into reality and he starts working on it. However, this epiphanic realization that transforms him into an eco-warrior from just a detached tourist who cannot feel anybody's pains meets with failure at the end of the novel. The sanctuary he has built out of compassion for the war-torn victims and for bleeding nature, leads him to the final horror of his life when he kills Uva while safeguarding it:

I gripped the gun hard. . . I squeezed the trigger instead and worked the bolt again and again. She leapt on the last man with her butterfly knife opening in

one hand and a sun-stained machete in the other, swinging low and unremitting between the hail of my bullets. She slew him as she fell. (234)

The garden full of flowers that had been created for her now stands marked by her death, her tragic end. In the concluding lines, as Marc finds Uva dead, he acknowledges that they had created a futile as well as frail and a vulnerable world:

Then the whole sky darkened as a legion of trident bats, disturbed from their brooding trees by the gunshots, took to the newly burnt air, drawing a broken eclipse over another fragile world for ever altered; riven. (234)

Just as the natural world around Marc lies defeated and destroyed by the forces of war, his little Eden which he had created with Uva stands destroyed. It is ironic, however, since the sanctuary had been created in a desperate attempt to get closer to the then missing Uva. But even after Marc successfully reunites with his lost love, the same sanctuary becomes the cause of her death.

Although Gunsekera leaves the island unnamed, yet it has similarities with Sri Lanka. Minoli Salgado writes in *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*:

The unnamed island of the novel both is and not Sri Lanka, its allegorical connection to the nation disturbed by the social and cultural disembedding that situates it as an imagined territory of desire ruptured by the anonymous forces of guerrilla warfare and the state control that have divided the land into zones of surveillance, resistance and subversion. (161)

Gunsekera, actually, shows how we always remain connected with our pasts and cannot shirk them off. Here the tale is that of a fallen Eden that has to be restored and cared for. The novel sometimes, though, inclines towards the use of preachy lines echoing deep ecological and wilderness rhetorics. The imagined conversation between Marc and his father, Eldon, attests to this view. While Marc accuses his father of being a destroyer as he was associated with the military forces, his father defies and refutes his son's accusations and teaches him the importance of saving this Eden from becoming a fallen paradise and says:

"I came to save what I found here, before it was all squandered away . . . No they must not flood the valleys . . . No, they must not destroy the forests, these animals must live too. No, no more plantations of tea. Go for bio-diversity.

No, no more history. No more insane blood foolery. No more war to end war.”
(originally in italics) (177)

Thus, after this conversation and after his desperate attempts to find Uva fail, Marc decides to embark on the journey of making his own Eden, the Eden he had come in search of. After he finally finds Uva, both of them lovingly build a world to call their own. But ultimately, this world too appears to be too fragile to endure the violent forces of war. Gunesequera's tragic view of love and life breaks the vision of a perfect utopia by bringing about a tragic end to Uva's life. He reminds us, tragically enough, that there is no way in which today's generation can escape the violence inflicted on them by the military diktats or the political parties.

With the tragic end imposed on both Uva and Marc's fragile world, Gunesequera upholds his sense of loss and the impossibility of creating a utopia. But there is another interesting point that needs to be noted. Throughout the novel we find brute force being exercised by those in power to curb any voice of resistance. But Marc, who, by the end of the novel, becomes a sensitive eco-warrior, resorts to violence to save his garden too. Is it a call for eco-terrorism at the edge? Well, I believe it to be so. Eco-terrorism can be defined as the use of violence by radical environmentalists to protect nature or animals from physical attacks or harassment. Before Marc finally shoots the captain (and also Uva in the process), he had seen the violence that had been inflicted by the uniformed diktats on the monkey. The monkey's head had been severed and it had been brutally butchered. Donald R. Liddick in his book *Eco-Terrorism: Radical Environmental and Animal Rights Movement* claims:

Unfortunately, the position that environmental and animal rights activists should be “kind, compassionate, and caring with other people” has ostensibly fallen out of favor with some radicals. Animal rights terrorists in particular have become more radical and violent in recent years, targeting people for harassment and physical attacks. (2)

But what is eco-terrorism and how did the word even come into being? I quote from Daniel M Schwatz's article “Environmental Terrorism: Analyzing the Concept”:

Following the launch of the Gulf War Coalition air campaign in January 1991, Iraqi forces intentionally caused two enormous oil spills in the Gulf waters. Two weeks later Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein ordered the detonation of an estimated 1250 oil wells. Nearly 600 oil wells were engulfed in flames,

spewing out thick billows of smoke that “turned midday into midnight in Kuwait” (Popkin 23). These events spawned international outrage and prompted the Administration of US President George Bush to accuse Iraq of “environmental terrorism” (Newsweek, 4 February 1991: 36; New York Times, 26 January 1991a: 1-4). Subsequently, the term “environmental terrorism” has been adopted into North American society.

Terrorism of any kind poses serious threats to the lives of living species and the human society at large. In this context, what Miroslav Mares says in his *Environmental Radicalism and Extremism in Post communist Europe* could be very important:

Extremists often use terrorist methods. Terrorism might be defined as the excessive violent pursuit of interests with the primary goal of seriously threatening the broader public rather than hitting only at primary targets (victims) of attacks . . . Excessive violent pursuit of environmentalist issues with the primary goal of seriously threatening broader groups of people (mostly the enemies of environmentalists, such as owners of various companies, all vivisectionists, and state officials) by means of attacks on property or the health or lives of primary targets, can be called environmental terrorism or eco-terrorism.

Eco-terrorism is thus just another offshoot of violence. Violence is the hallmark of war and destruction and to end violence one cannot possibly impose violence of some other form. I would like to quote from Mares again to explain the tactics used by the eco-terrorists:

The most common tactic of eco-terrorists is monkey wrenching, which threatens mostly the economy, with no damage to the health or lives of human beings or animals. However, some environmentalists carry out terrorist attacks against human beings as well.

It is then quite clear that eco-terrorism cannot be a proper solution to ecological problems since eco-terrorism itself promotes violence and destruction.

Throughout the novel we find a war-despoiled island that has been erased of its natural ornaments due to civil wars and nuclear warfare. But towards the end Gunsekera brings in the frightening aspect of eco-terrorism to end the environmental degradation when Marc finds the monkey (he had saved) murdered:

Only then did I see the other soldiers in the hollow beyond. Their hands were red with the blood of the monkey they had butchered between them. They had stuck its head on a pole and set fire to its tail. They had come to take everything. The captain saw me and began to shout, raising his arms. (234)

The scene undoubtedly is terrifying. But what Marc does next is also terrifying:

I gripped the gun hard. Forgive, forget, I once might have said, flee if we must—but I squeezed the trigger instead and worked the bolt again and again. Gunfire stuttered in my hands killing the captain first and then two more (234)

Marc, who landed on the island as a quasi-tourist and ultimately grew into a sensible environmentalist, at the end, does not hesitate from using violence to save the sanctuary he has created and also to avenge the death of the monkey that had sparked off an epiphanic realization in his soul. But is this a sensible solution? Keeping in mind the loss eco-terrorism has caused in the past years, the solution seems to be brutal. I would quote from another article “Environmental Extremists and the Eco-Terrorism Movement” by Chad Nilson and Tod Burke to support my take:

In the United States, between 1980 and 1999, eco-terrorists committed at least 100 acts of destruction, causing approximately \$42.8 million in damages. In western states alone, between 1995 and 1999, eco-terrorists committed acts totaling \$28.8 million in damages. Eco-terrorist acts, although varying in both degree of risk to human life and total damages, all significantly impact human use of natural resources.

On December 31, 1999, Michigan State University's agriculture building was set ablaze causing \$1 million in damages On July 17, 1997, in Olympia, Washington, an Earth First! protesting the cutting of timber along a roadway, cut hydraulic hoses and threw cement blocks into the blades of a tree cutting machine, causing \$380,000 in damage. On July 21, 1997, the Animal Liberation Front claimed responsibility for the arson of a slaughter plant in Redmond, Oregon, causing \$1 million in damages.

The instances cited above precisely capture the terror that accompanies eco-terrorism and shows why terrorism of any kind is not a desired solution to any kind of problem.

In *Heaven's Edge*, Gunesequera, probably, is hinting at an inevitable apocalypse that is on its way in leading the earth towards absolute destruction. But, again, this could be Gunesequera's ironic take on the present state of the environment as well. With the growing prominence of ecological terrorism in the world, such a portrayal could be a subtle warning about the use of violence as a means of ecological preservation and protection. It perhaps suggests that resorting to violence in order to save the natural environment to maintain the ecological equilibrium could be suicidal. Although Gunesequera ends his novel on a tragic note showing that violence might only beget violence, yet he does not fail to raise the awareness of the readers regarding their responsibility towards environment. The portrayal of the war-torn anonymous island could be the picture of any country two hundred years from now. By portraying such a dystopic image of an island, Gunesequera is definitely appealing to the readers to respect the non-human environment and let it live in peace.

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