Islands of Imagination – A talk by Romesh Gunesekera

By Radhika Vyas

Aptly titled "Islands of Imagination," NTU-NAC Writer-in-Residence and Professor of Creative Writing Romesh Gunesekera gave an insightful talk at the HSS Creative studio on 17 October, sharing with his audience the inspiration behind his works.

The audience was treated to a reading of the opening of Gunesekera's latest novel, The Prisoner of Paradise. His lush descriptions of its setting – Mauritius – brought a bustling and exciting island scene to life.

Published earlier this year, Gunesekera said that he set the novel in Mauritius because it reminded him of the time and people he met there in 1998. Moreover, the book deals with an issue that intrigues him – the British “transportation” of prisoners from India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to Mauritius when they gained control over it.

Set in the 1850’s, the book is about the experiences of the protagonist, Lucy Gladwell, an orphan who goes with her aunt from England to start a new life in Mauritius. Most of Gunesekera's books are set on islands; hence the title of the talk.

Asked how closely bound he felt to history, Gunesekera replied, "I do want to get the facts right, but beyond that, it's important to create an effective visualization of things. The way I see it, the power of fiction relies on itself and it allows the release of imagination for authors. I kind of wanted both things, to be completely free versus refraining from being illogical or completely basing the visuals on imagination."

After reading The Concert – a short story set on the island of Madeira about a general who holds a concert to appease the locals but who is forced to act out of character when a last-minute hitch at the event occurs – Gunesekera revealed that one of his proudest occasions was when he read the same story at Ronnie Scott's Jazz club in London.

He also divulged why servants seem to recur in his stories. "I suppose I'm really interested in relationships, particularly of power – for instance, Employer-employee, Master-servant, Father-son – and I guess the voices got into my head."

He then provided some tips for budding writers who find it difficult to begin writing.

"It happened to me as well. For years and years, I wanted to write and suddenly, I discovered that I had been writing all along. So it's all about just getting on with it. As a writer, you really need to re-invent the world every time you write, but slowly, you begin to get a sense of what a good sentence is."
He shared how he was inspired to be a poet when he was young. “I thought it was easier to begin as a poet, then write short stories and finally venture out into writing a novel. However, I now think it is much more easy to splurge out into a novel. Initially, I could never get a story to run beyond five pages, 1000 words would be the maximum before I would run out of steam,” he confessed.

Things changed one day, however, when he began writing a story (*Reef*) that was set in Sri Lanka and it took off immediately. In a short period, he wrote over 4000 words, and realised that in his short stories he could do everything he wanted to in a poem, that “music and images could also be incorporated into the story”.

“For me, in a good novel, like a poem, every word matters. Even a simple ‘and’ or ‘but’ if it ceased to exist, would create a hole in the story,” he added.

After an inspirational question and answer session, Gunesekera proceeded to read an excerpt from his first book, *Reef*. Set in Colombo, Sri Lanka, *Reef* is the coming-of-age story of Triton, a young servant boy who is a talented chef and lives to please his master’s palate. *Reef* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994 and members of the audience were delighted to hear Gunesekera read from it.

For those in attendance, Gunesekera's reading and explanations were insightful and provocative. The occasion allowed everyone to learn from his passion for his craft, including creative writers who will no doubt hope to carve out their own “success” stories.