



Reflections of Urban Existence: Analyzing Mental Life in Gunasekera's *The Sandglass*

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Abstract

Background: Romesh Gunasekera's *The Sandglass* (1998) presents the story of the Ducal family who moved to London from Sri Lanka. The narrative builds on the retrospection of the narrator, a lodger at Ducals' house in London. It demonstrates the strong role of urban space in constructing the psychology and social life of the characters.

Methods: Employing Georg Simmel's idea of mental life in the metropolis, this paper examines the interplay of urban environment and cognitive life in *The Sandglass*. The novel depicts urban life that reflects Simmel's notion of the blasé attitude. The reserved nature of the characters serves as a coping mechanism in the city, where they navigate the overwhelming stimuli and emotional complexities of their surroundings.

Result: Through an analysis of key concepts, such as the commodification of relationships and the tension between individuality and social integration, this study reveals how Gunasekera reflects urbanites' mental lives. The emphasis on the objective spirit of city dwellers leads to a loss of emotional intimacy and indifference among the residents of urban space. The characters struggle with isolation while seeking meaningful connections in a fragmented society. Their inner lives explicate the challenges of maintaining authenticity in an impersonal urban landscape.

Conclusion:

The Sandglass weaves themes of modernity and mental health, enriching the discussion on the psychological dimensions of urban existence. The setting and the characters represent the features of the metropolitan mental life discussed by Simmel.

Novelty: This study concludes that cities are physical spaces that embody cultural values, social norms, political tensions, and historical narratives, all of which influence how people perceive themselves and their relationships with others.

Keywords: blasé attitude, city, identity, mental life, psychology, urban space



Introduction

Romesh Gunasekera is a Sri Lankan-born author who settled in London. He writes about the sociopolitical and cultural context of Sri Lanka. *The Sandglass* (1998) is set primarily in Colombo, a city undergoing significant transformation. It offers a compelling exploration of the human psyche navigating the complexities of urban existence. It resonates with the lives of Sri Lankan expatriates living in London. It projects the scenario of growing capitalism and industrialization in Sri Lanka in the middle of the twentieth century and political tensions in the country. Newer international brands of alcohol are marketed in the city, which displaces the local alcohol. Tension rose among the native entrepreneurs after they gained independence from British colonization. This research paper examines the intricate mental lives of the novel's characters, employing Simmel's essay, "*The Metropolis and Mental Life*" (1964) as a theoretical framework.

This study explores the impact of urbanization on individual consciousness and social interaction in Colombo and London, as presented in the novel. It examines how Gunasekera's characters embody the psychological and social consequences of living in a modern urban environment. It focuses on the prominent issues raised by Simmel, such as a blasé attitude, a reserved mentality, an objective spirit, and the paradox of autonomy and anonymity in urban space. Constant exposure to stimuli in the city necessitates the development of a "blasé attitude," which refers to a psychological defense mechanism characterized by emotional detachment and a sense of indifference. While serving as a protective shield against the overwhelming demands of urban life, this attitude can also lead to feelings of alienation, isolation, and a diminished capacity for genuine human connection. Money, another source of blasé attitude, reduces unique individual characteristics to exchange value. The study further explores how urbanites construct their sense of self in an urban environment.

Critical Reception of *The Sandglass*

Romesh Gunasekera's The Sandglass (1998) has been widely discussed by critics inside and outside Sri Lanka from various perspectives. He is appreciated for his creative reconstruction of Sri Lanka. Critics praise his skillful weaving of personal perception and experiences with broader historical and political contexts and his insightful exploration of memory, loss, identity, and reconciliation. Meanwhile, few also condemn him for the stereotypical representation of the island and its people.

Firstly, the critics view Gunasekera as a writer of the diaspora community. He was born in Sri Lanka, migrated to the Philippines, and settled in London. The settings of his stories and novels are in Sri Lanka. He writes about the island's people, illustrating twentieth-century Sri Lanka's sociopolitical aspects. As *Murrey* (2009) mentions, "Gunasekera now lives in London; his novels focus on both locations but essentially can be considered diasporic" (2009, p. 429). He further adds that *The Sandglass* focuses on fragmentation, indicating scattered, diasporic lives, and also shows via its narrative strategy that the attempt to find order and stability is elusive (2009, p. 439). The protagonist's mother, Pearl, shifts from Sri Lanka to Britain to escape her bitter past. Her family gets fragmented, and her children cannot find stability there.



They keep moving from one place to another for a better life. Although Pearl left Sri Lanka many years ago, she consistently talks about her home there. Her son, Prins, returns to Sri Lanka to uncover the buried past of his father's death and claim his belongingness to the country. The characters in his novels live outside Sri Lanka but are culturally and emotionally connected to their past homeland.

Sri Lanka has a remarkable presence in Gunasekera's fiction. In an interview with [Nasta \(2019\)](#), he mentioned that when he started writing in London, he became more conscious of his "island heritage" (2019, p. 75). [Daimari \(2017\)](#) identifies the role of place in Gunasekera's writings as she states, "landscape provides not just the backdrop for the narrative but the very ingredient with which the tale is woven" (2017, p. 50). *The Sandglass* is filled with descriptions of the topography of Sri Lanka. Land is the major cause of resentment between Vatunases and Ducals. The sea, a colonial house in the middle of the area with dense trees and peaceful hills, portrays the Landscape of Sri Lanka. Daimari asserts that "the elements in his narrative serve his greater purpose of constructing Sri Lanka in a certain manner, according to his perception and imagination" (2017, p. 53).

The theme of memory has also been a central focus of critical analysis. *The Sandglass* is often interpreted as a narrative of exile's traumatic memories. The exiled people always long to connect with their former country and culture. The portrayal of expatriates' longing for home is evident in Gunasekera's fiction. He uses his memory of Sri Lanka to show his belongingness. "The fiction of Romesh Gunasekara, a Sri Lankan writer now living in London, weaves together themes of memory, exile, and postcolonial upheavals" ([Mathur, 2012, p. 25](#)). His writings depict the sociopolitical and cultural scenario of Sri Lanka, which reflects his continuous engagement with the events taking place there. [Mathur \(2012\)](#) further adds that his novels resonate with the histories, fleeting memories, shattered dreams, and moments of hope that are intertwined with the lives experienced in Sri Lanka (2012, p. 27). Although he lives away, he closely observes Sri Lanka and expresses his concern through his fictional representations. He tries to recover the physical distance from his homeland through his memory and imagination. Significant sociopolitical changes occurred in postcolonial Sri Lanka, bringing tensions and problems. It was grappling with political instability and rising ethnic tensions, as well as economic and social issues. The Sandglass artistically recreates these scenarios in imaginative form. Similarly, [Meher \(2019\)](#) aligns with [Mathur \(2012\)](#) as she mentions that Gunasekera attempts to "recreate and reconfigure the inner landscape of belonging once uprooted from his original homeland" (2019, p. 21). [Cynthia \(2019\)](#) finds "the flavors of his country of birth, and of belonging in Gunasekera's writings" (2019, p. 151). He tries to navigate his relationship with his abandoned homeland through his fiction.

On the other hand, some critics assert that Gunasekera's writings are exoticism of Sri Lanka. They question the novel's engagement with Sri Lanka's troubled past. An expatriate author often interprets his novels as an exotic representation of Sri Lanka. A resident Sri Lankan author attacks him with "Eurocentric attitudes" ([Ranasinha, 2013, p. 30](#)). He states that Western stereotypical representation is still persistent in Gunasekera's writings. [Perera \(2000\)](#) comments that Gunasekera's writing explicitly highlights the negative representation of



Sri Lanka. He views the representation of Sri Lanka in *The Sandglass* as problematic because it suggests that “Sri Lanka contributed little in the past, can provide even less at present, and will offer nothing whatsoever in the future” (2000, p. 94), which leads the readers to believe that this land is useless. He is accused of portraying “Sri Lanka with a version of hell, rather than paradise” and the people as “intrinsically evil” (Perera, 2000, p. 104). While Gunasekera is awarded prestigious literary awards and gaining worldwide recognition for his writings, Ranasinha (2013) critiques “this acclaim serve to legitimize and maintain the authority of stereotyped, unchanging ideas of Sri Lanka as a spoiled paradise and the West as haven” (2013, p. 35). She fears that including Gunasekera in the international canon validates Orientalist views on Sri Lanka. It intensifies the exotic image of Sri Lanka. However, Salgado (2007) critiques Perera and Ranasinha’s comment on Gunasekera as “reductive and misleading” (2007, p. 149). She advocates an inclusive and careful understanding of Gunasekera’s narrative intricacies to avoid such exotic readings.

While previous research has explored the themes of diaspora’s memory of homeland, trauma of exile, home, and sense of belongingness in Gunasekera’s *The Sandglass*, the psychological aspect of city people remains unexplored. Previous studies have not sufficiently explained the impacts of urban experience on city people in this novel. Therefore, in this research paper, I analyze the representation of the urban psyche in *The Sandglass* using Simmel’s theory of the metropolis and mental life.

Simmel (1964) explores how the urban atmosphere fundamentally alters individual psychology and social interactions. Simmel’s insights into the psychological effects of urban environments provide a lens to explore the characters’ experiences and their struggles with identity, connection, and alienation in a rapidly changing world. He argues that the fast-paced, diverse environment of the city results in a sense of alienation and anonymity. City exposes individuals to so many stimulating factors that the individuals start to develop new coping mechanisms, such as a blasé attitude and a focus on intellectual over emotional connections. In cities, geographical closeness means emotional distance. Individuals with a reserved attitude seem distant or self-contained, but they keep their feelings and opinions private rather than share them freely. Simmel’s key concepts consist of the blasé attitude, reserve mentality, and objective, calculative spirit of city people. The people in the city face a continuous conflict between individuality and social integration. The setting and characters in *The Sandglass* represent typical characteristics of the urban psyche, as suggested by Simmel. This study focuses on the mental space of the city.

Inner Experiences in a Metropolis

The city is an integral element in Gunasekera’s *The Sandglass*. A city is a geographical and mental space of thoughts, cultures, and social interactions. Hubbard’s definition of the city reveals the complexity of a city that lies under the surficial appearance, “the city is many things: a spatial location, a political entity, an administrative unit, a place of work and play, a collection of dreams and nightmares, a mesh of social relations, an agglomeration of economic activity, and so forth” (2006, p. 1). Babul (2006) supports Hubbard’s opinion as he asserts, “place as ‘native land’ or ‘national territory’ appears as something more than merely a geographical



location, or a background, and is itself defined through social/political acts of meaning attribution in line with the formation of the imaginary of belonging” (2006, p. 50). The characters’ lives are intricately woven with the city. Their perception of self, social interactions, and psychological state are remarkably influenced by the cities they live in. It depicts how urban space shapes human psychology. It is the story of Sri Lankan-born immigrants who live in London. Their experience of a growing city, Colombo, and the global metropolis, London, largely shapes their psychological and social life. City elements play a vital role in their lives. They represent modern metropolis people with a blasé attitude guided by an intellectual spirit.

The characters in *The Sandglass* experience disillusionment in the city. The narrative opens with a bleak description of the modern metropolis, which seems to the narrator, Chip, to be “the cadaverous city that rose on a tide of rubble” (1998, p. 9). He perceives the city as a lifeless place, which makes him feel uneasy and restless. He travels to London “determined to live out what was perhaps a misplaced but youthful dream,” but cannot find a job and place of his own, so he ends up living at Pearl’s small old-fashioned house at Almeida Avenue. He feels lost in the city, living with an “uncertain identity” (1998, p. 16). After her husband, Jason’s death, Pearl moved to London with her two children, Anoja and Ravi, later joined by her son, Prins. Pearl’s decision to settle in London is based on her two-month-long trip to Europe with her husband, which, according to her, are the happiest days of her life. Charu Mathur (2012) observes Pearl’s shifting to London as “a way of disowning a troubled past and reclaiming a cherished one” (2012, p. 29). The narrator says she recounts the story of those early days with such “candour” (1998, p. 17). She loves describing her exotic past to him as “the ordinary precursor to any immigrant life” (1998, p. 23). She preserved her memories of Sri Lanka until her death in a biscuit tin as letters, journals, and photographs. She desires a happy family with her husband and children after marriage, but that remains a dream. Her family is not united and happy in Colombo or London.

Furthermore, Jason’s dream to own a house in the city and live a life as a member of the affluent society takes away his family from him and eventually his life. Pearl’s younger son, Ravi, goes to America thinking he will find a place he will recognize and feel like his own. When continuously exposed to rapid city changes, individuals become incapable of responding to new sensations with the appropriate energy. In Simmel’s words, such a psychological state is “a blasé attitude” (1964, p. 413). Milgram (1969) strengthens Simmel’s observation as he claims,

City life, as we experience it, constitutes a continuous set of encounters with overload, and as a result and adaptations. Overload characteristically deforms daily life on several levels, impinging on role performance, the evolution of social norms, cognitive functioning, and the use of facilities. (1969, p. 1462)

Diverse cultures, fast-paced lifestyles, and varying social dynamics make city people indifferent towards each other.

City people adapt their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to the city’s environment. Urbanites live a calculative life in spaces filled with disconnection and alienation, characterizing the urban experience. In Ducal’s family, there is a lack of intimacy between



husband and wife, parents and children. Pearl complains that Jason remains occupied with his work all the time. He does not have time to share his feelings or to listen to his wife and children. He lives in his alienated, individual world, apart from his dearest wife and children. After her children grow, they also do not remain intimate with her. Prins travels to different places while Ravi locks himself inside his gloomy room. The ephemeral nature of relations in the city becomes evident as he says, “I didn’t want to become her helpline, her support system, although she had become mine” (1998, p. 48). They are just superficial relations without deep emotional attachments. Prins returns to Colombo to solve the mystery of his father’s death and reclaim his homeland. He cannot connect with his past and eventually realizes his destiny is not in this place. He fails to find a place where he connects and feels deeply rooted. Prince is constantly seeking a better life. Therefore, he does not spend time with his mother and siblings. Pearl’s sons, Prins and Ravi, do not show affection to their mother as they seem occupied with their matters. His reaction to his mother’s death and dealing with it displays a typical blasé attitude of city people.

City people develop a reserved attitude. In a city, people come in contact with many others every day. Their contact is brief and superficial; therefore, they can neither share their inner feelings nor understand others’ feelings. As the narrator describes, Ravi is “quiet and uncommunicative” (1998, p. 53). After he returns from America, most of the time he “locks himself away in the darkest bedroom of the flat” (1998, p. 16). This detachment results in a sense of isolation, emphasizing the struggle to connect meaningfully in a fragmented world. As Simmel (1964) observes, “one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd” (1964, p. 418). There is no affection between brothers. Prins did not even call on his younger brother's birthday. Ravi seemed relieved as he was also uninterested. “He was never pleased to hear the telephone ring” (1998, p. 54). There is a lack of openness in expressing emotions or thoughts, even among family members and close friends. Ravi kept no letters, no diaries, no evidence of his thoughts. He leaves no trace of his thoughts after his death. Individuals with a reserved attitude seem distant or self-contained, often keeping their feelings and opinions private rather than sharing them freely.

Money plays a determining role in shaping social interactions in cities. Economic relations undermine traditional social bonds. Urban people’s social relations are built based on business or intellectual connections. According to Simmel (1964), “The metropolis has always been the seat of the money economy... money economy and the dominance of intellect are intrinsically connected” (1964, p. 411). In a city, money becomes a determining factor that influences how individuals relate to one another. The focus on rationality and productivity diminishes the emotional depth of relationships because interpersonal interactions are guided by economic considerations rather than personal bonding. The value of everyone and everything is judged based on money. Money reduces individual characteristics into “indifferent” interchangeable units. As Murray (2009) argues, “The rivalry between the two businessmen, Jason and Esra, a struggle over territory and power, becomes a feud which leads to the death of Jason” (2009, p. 445). In the 1930s and 40s, Sri Lanka’s economy grew with the expansion of British firms. The growing economy also influenced Sri Lankan natives. There



grows bitterness between Jason Ducal and Esra Vatunas due to their business rivalry. Jason dies mysteriously amid the chaos spread by false news. The actual story of his death remains a mystery. Reports project his death as “a classic case, psychologically speaking” (1998, p. 110). “Esra Vatunas takes over Ambrose Budego & Son, and Jason Ducal becomes a figure of minor tragedy among his contemporaries” (1998, p. 113). Jason’s tragic end makes no difference to others; instead, it becomes an opportunity for them to grow.

People in cities judge the value and quality of life in terms of money. Money is perceived as the base determining quality of life and happiness. Jason and Pearl get married after months of courtship. Although Pearl marries Jason for her true love for him and does not demand a rich, luxurious life, Jason starts to feel the need to replenish “her world with the accouterments of her late father’s home: a sideboard, bookshelves, a garden, rather than simply with a good doctor’s flair” (1998, p. 18). In 1936, Jason successfully secured an executive position at a new British firm in Colombo named Sanderson Bros. Jason became more occupied by his work daily, distancing himself from his wife and children. Romance disappears from their marriage slowly and gradually. While Jason mostly remains busy with his work and business meetings, Pearl feels lonelier each passing day. He becomes obsessed with owning “a proper house of our own, with a garden” (1998, p. 20). She did not like Arcadia learning that the land they bought symbolized old Buttons Vatunase’s dislike for his son, his only heir, Esra Vatunase. Arcadia was surrounded by Vatunase, which made her feel surrounded by hatred. The house became the reason for an age-long bitterness between the Ducals and the Vatunases. Arcadia was supposed to bring them closer together as a family home. However, things turn out to be exactly the opposite. Jason had become used to running things by himself: managing offices, a company, people. Jason is unable to manage time for his wife and children. Jason thinks a lot of money and luxury are necessary to bring happiness to his family. However, she wants his love, a happy family, and an emotional connection. In his mission to earn more money, he destroys the romance already in his life.

Commodifying life and relationships drives city people to emptiness and disconnection. When they fail to establish intimate social relations, people prioritize material gain over meaningful human interaction. In this regard, Simmel (1964) states, “The development of modern culture is characterized by the preponderance of what one may call the “objective spirit” over the “subjective spirit” (1964, p. 421). Jason and Prins both emphasize financial progress. Jason, who comes from a family with no property in Colombo, grows ambitious to uplift his status in Colombo by earning more money. His social interactions are determined by calculative benefits rather than emotional influence. Like his father, Prins is appointed General Manager of Gold Sands Enterprises – a group of hotels – and moved into a company bungalow in the hills. “Like father, like son: Prins had become a real business visionary” (1998, p. 66). Their objective side overshadows their subjective side. Like Jason fails to understand his wife’s emotions, Prins fails to see Mira’s feelings for him as he is focused on building his dream life. “Mira was in love with Prins, and Prins was in love with his dreams” (1998, p. 50). Prins was always doing things: getting jobs, quitting jobs. At some point, Prins feels lost, and everything seems meaningless. While the individuals in the city struggle to maintain their individuality by



standing as a distinct self, they simultaneously feel a sense of anonymity and insignificance of their existence.

On the one hand, the city grants individuals autonomy to live free from narrow-mindedness and biases that confine small-town individuals. On the other hand, it isolates people from one another. [Simmel \(1964\)](#) writes, “this reserve seems a general mental phenomenon of the metropolis: it grants to the individual a kind and an amount of personal freedom” (1964, p. 416). Unless they cause inconvenience, people can do anything in the city because nobody cares about what others are doing. City dwellers do not interfere with others’ lives like in small towns, where everyone is caught in a web of established relationships. Pearl, Prins, and Ravi do not interfere with each other’s lives. Despite being a mother, Pearl never tries to control her sons or impose her thoughts upon them. This autonomy can be interpreted as indifference towards each other. Relational bonds do not bind them. Unlike his younger brother, Prins does not like to remain bound in that home or the city. “Prins sailed in and out of the flat all the time. Often he would go away for weeks on end, chasing some dream of a life he wanted” (1998, p. 59). Ravi experiences the paradox of freedom and loneliness in America, “They are easy people to say hello to, but I was feeling very drained, you know. You feel as though something is disappearing out of you all the time” (1998, p. 57). When people fail to connect in a city, they feel dislocated. In this regard, Milgram mentions, “Conditions of complete anonymity, by contrast, provide freedom from routinized social ties, but they may also create feelings of alienation and detachment” (1969, p. 1464). A unique sociality emerges in city space where transient encounters and superficial relationships characterize relationships. Individuals in a metropolis often interact briefly with strangers to liberate their feelings as they are isolated from their close ones. Frequent engagement in superficial interactions also leads to a blasé attitude. The urban environment affects the perception of individual identity and the perception of self. In a metropolis, people come across different cultures and norms. Such diversity of experiences allows them to explore different faces of their personality. However, on the negative side, it creates confusion and fragmentation while they try to navigate conflicting values and cultures.

Conclusion

The unique characteristics of metropolitan environments significantly shape individual behavior, social interactions, and personal identity. The city people develop emotional detachment in response to the overwhelming stimuli of city life, such as noise, visual chaos, and constant social encounters. This blasé attitude allows individuals to deal with the sensory overload but often leads to feelings of alienation and isolation. The rise of monetary relationships in urban settings transforms social interactions, reducing them to transactional exchanges that lack emotional depth. Furthermore, there is tension between individuality and social integration in the city. While the city offers opportunities for self-expression and diversity, it also fosters anonymity, making finding genuine connections more challenging.

The Sandglass depicts how urban environments influence human experience, emphasizing the complexities of navigating relationships and identities in a chaotic metropolis.



The characters' boundless pursuit of pleasure and dream life results in a blasé attitude. They fail to understand the value of individual uniqueness since money becomes a standard for measuring value. Their differences towards others allow them autonomy but result in a lack of bonding and openness, emotional warmth, and intimacy. In a crowded city, they experience alienation due to the predominance of intelligence and the absence of genuine emotional connection. Their matter-of-fact attitude, emphasis on money, and intellectuality reduce qualitative human values to quantitative measurement, lacking emotional depth. City space is projected as a site of opportunity and challenge, where the struggle between individuality and socioeconomic forces shapes identities and behaviors.

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