

Reef Study Guide

Reef by Romesh Gunsekera

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

[Reef Study Guide..... 1](#)

[Contents..... 2](#)

[Plot Summary..... 3](#)

[The Breach..... 5](#)

[Part I Kolla..... 6](#)

[Part II Cook's Joy..... 9](#)

[Part III A Thousand Fingers..... 13](#)

[Part IV Strandline..... 18](#)

[Characters..... 21](#)

[Objects/Places..... 24](#)

[Themes..... 26](#)

[Style..... 27](#)

[Quotes..... 29](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 31](#)



Plot Summary

Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* begins with the story's narrator, Triton, filling up his tank at a petrol station in England. When he goes to pay, he notices that the cashier is someone who looks like him. In answer to his inquiry, the cashier confirms that he is indeed from Sri Lanka. The cashier is a new refugee, but the narrator has been in the country for twenty years and is the owner of a restaurant. Talking together about their country and the war there makes the narrator start thinking of his life in Sri Lanka and of the events that brought him to England as a refugee.

Triton begins his recollections from 1962, when he was a boy of eleven. That year, he was taken by his uncle to work as a houseboy for Mister Salgado, a marine biologist. His first year at the bay-fronted house was tough because he was under the supervision of Joseph, Mister Salgado's servant. Triton describes Joseph as deceitful, mean-spirited, and jealous of him. One weekend, after Mister Salgado had gone away for a short stay on a tea-estate, Triton found Joseph in Mister Salgado's room rubbing his employer's cologne on his chest. In anger, Joseph assaulted the boy, then left the house and stayed out all night. Mister Salgado returned to find Joseph still out. When the servant returned drunk, Mister Salgado fired him immediately and gave Triton full responsibility for the housekeeping.

Triton grew and learned to be a good housekeeper. He also educated himself by reading a neighbor's schoolbooks whenever he had the chance. When old Lucy-amma, the cook-woman, retired, Triton took over all the cooking as well, and became an accomplished chef.

One day, a woman came to the house to have tea with Mister Salgado. It was the first of many visits, and the beginning of a romance between the two. Triton liked Miss Nili and felt that she made their house better with her presence. Mister Salgado, who had never celebrated any festivals or holidays before, had a Christmas Eve dinner party for Nili and their friends (mostly her crowd). Triton's turkey was a great success, as was the party. A few days later, Nili moved into the house with Mister Salgado, much to Triton's joy. The arrival of Miss Nili was, for them, "the beginning of a new era." She brought out profound changes in Mister Salgado, who now smiled more and grew both softer and stronger. The big changes in the house coincided with even bigger changes in their nation: "The rest of the country, sliding into unparalleled debt, girded itself for change of a completely different order: a savage brutalizing whereby our chandiyas-our braggarts-would become thugs, our dissolutes turn into mercenaries and our leaders excel as small-time megalomaniacs" (pg. 118).

On a visit with to the bungalow ocean observatory, with Nili and Mister Salgado, Triton learned that even Mister Salgado's once mild assistant, Wijetunga, had been directly influenced by what was happening: "You know brother," he told Triton, "our country really needs to be cleansed, radically. There is no alternative. We have to destroy in order to create" (pg. 121).



Wijetunga was expressing a sentiment that was spreading rapidly among the dissatisfied masses. Mister Salgado, Nili and their friends were not a part of that group. They were well-educated, wealthy socialites, and were often cynical of the revolutionaries-criticizing them as thugs and misguided Marxists. It wasn't until a popular millionaire was killed that shockwaves went through the whole society.

The relationship between Mister Salgado and Nili eventually ended when Mister Salgado went into a jealous rage over Nili's liaison with an American friend. She, in turn, insulted him and walked out of his life. As Mister Salgado's life fell into turmoil, so did the island nation. The revolutionaries won the General Election by a landslide, and the socialites' way of life changed drastically. Many of them began to leave the country.

Mister Salgado and Triton soon moved to London. There, they moved from place to place until, five years after their arrival, Mister Salgado decided it was time to buy a permanent home; the chaos was only getting worse in Sri Lanka as the years went by. Triton thought they should open a restaurant, and Mister Salgado eventually bought him an old snack-bar to start him on the path to making his dream come true.

In 1983, there was another major uprising, but news of Nili's mental breakdown sent Mister Salgado back to find her. Triton stayed in London, realizing that deep down he had always wanted to be on his own. Without Mister Salgado by his side, he was finally free to pursue success as a restaurateur and find his own place in the world.



The Breach

The Breach Summary

The narrator fills up the tank of his old red Volkswagen-the one that used to belong to Mister Salgado. Then he writes down the mileage, the volume, and the date in a logbook. When he goes to pay, he notices that the cashier is someone who looks like him. In answer to his inquiry, the cashier confirms that he is indeed from Sri Lanka.

The cashier has trouble getting the electronic till to work and considers making a phone call to ask for help. The narrator, speaking Sinhala, offers a suggestion, but the cashier doesn't understand. He says he speaks only Tamil and a little English. It is his first night on the job. He invites his customer into the office, and asks him to speak to the boss on the phone. He turns off the outside lights to keep other customers away in the meantime.

The narrator asks the cashier how long he has been in the country. The cashier responds that there is a very bad war there now, near his home by Silavatturai. Mention of the place makes the narrator think of pearls. The region had once been a diver's paradise, but it is now a battle zone.

The cashier asks the man if he lives close by and is impressed to hear that he owns a restaurant and has lived in the country for more than twenty years. The cashier too, has a dream. A drunk man stumbles towards the two, and starts hammering at the window. The cashier turns out the cubicle light and the narrator begins to remember a bay-fronted house, six thousand miles away.

The Breach Analysis

This prologue to *Reef* introduces the reader to Triton-the narrator of the story-who has been out of Sri Lanka for more than twenty years. "A long time protected from the past," he muses (pg. 12), sparking the reader's interest in the events that have brought him to where he is. We get a glimpse into the kind of person that he is when he meticulously records the car data in a logbook, and we learn that he has been strongly influenced by a man he calls Mister Salgado.

The cashier, a new refugee, speaks of the ongoing war in Sri Lanka. This gives us the context of the story and leads to an important question: is the narrator also a refugee from the war, or is he in England for another reason?



Part I Kolla

Part I Kolla Summary

Triton begins his recollections from 1962-the year when there was an attempted overthrow of the government in his country; in that year, Triton, then eleven years old, was taken by his uncle to meet Mister Salgado for the first time. They entered the house through a side entrance to wait somewhere in the back, and sat on the floor until the sun was setting before they were called.

Mister Salgado asked the boy if he had been to school and Triton answered yes: he had reached Fifth Standard, could read and write, and had even learned some English. However, he could no longer live at home because his father was angry with him for burning a thatched roof of a hut at school. He ran away to his uncle's place, and his uncle took him to Mister Salgado's for his deceased mother's sake. As Mister Salgado spoke, Triton was captivated by his gentle voice-as he would be for many years to come.

Triton remembers Mister Salgado's habits and behavior-how he would sit and stare sometimes as if waiting to grow old, and what he liked to eat. He also remembers his duties in the house: serving tea, sweeping with an enormous broom, and eventually, cooking. He was there to help Joseph, Mister Salgado's servant, but Joseph resented him. The beginning of his trouble with Joseph began when Triton cut the handle of the broom short; Joseph complained bitterly, but Mister Salgado agreed that the broom needed to be shorter.

Joseph gave orders in the house, and each night, Triton dreamed of revenge. One night he woke up in a sweat, paralyzed with fear and sure there was a demon in the house. He eventually fell asleep again, but overslept the next morning until a furious Joseph woke him up, calling him a stupid bastard and a lazy cow. That morning, when he took the tea in to his still-sleeping master, he felt the need to protect himself from the criticisms he was sure Joseph would make later. To do so, he told Mister Salgado that someone tried to break into the house and that he had chased them away.

Back outside, Triton did not answer when Joseph asked if Mister Salgado was still asleep. He ducked into the kitchen, where Lucy-amma, the old cook-woman, was cutting onions. Joseph could not stand the smell of onions and would always flee when onions were being cut or fried. Lucy-amma was seventy-something years old and had witnessed many changes in the country. Triton took a small red onion from her and cut it into quarters. He wanted to use them to hurt Joseph in some way, but didn't yet know how.

As a boy, Triton had thought Mister Salgado's house was the center of the universe. He recalls the birds in the garden, the frogs by the gate, and the vendors who came by on certain days. Among the vendors was a haberdasher who came on Thursdays at mid-



morning, and only because he was a friend of Joseph's. Triton planned to go into Joseph's room (on a Thursday, while Joseph was occupied with his friend) and do something devilish with the raw onion. The haberdasher came on time, complaining that no one had answered his call at house number eight even though the nona (the lady) there had placed an order. Just as Triton was about to sneak into Joseph's room, however, they all heard a terrible howl coming from house number eight. All the neighbors ran to see, but it was only the haberdasher who managed to get into the house with the police. He came back to report that Pando-nona and her servant had tied Mr. Pando up in the bathtub and rubbed hot chilies all over him as punishment for frolicking with a girl from the Hothouse Bodega. Hearing the story made Triton put away his onion quarters; they seemed too tame, but he didn't know if he was bold enough to try chilies.

More than a year after Triton's arrival, Mister Salgado planned a weekend trip to his cousin's tea-estate and put Joseph in charge of the house. Triton was not happy. After a year, he was afraid that he too would become mean and corrupted if he remained under Joseph's rule much longer. Mister Salgado gave Triton many new tasks to do in preparation for his absence-most involving taking inventories. Triton kept a list of the things he had to do, as he had learned from Mister Salgado. Besides lists, Mister Salgado wrote long articles about things of the beach and the ocean, and considered himself self-educated although he had been to the best schools in Colombo.

When Triton served breakfast on the morning of the trip, Mister Salgado asked him to look after the place. He wanted to respond, but Joseph interrupted to say that everything was ready. Before Lucy-amma left that morning for her own annual vacation, she told Triton that Joseph would give him food while they were away. Triton was sure Joseph would let him starve.

To protect himself from Joseph, Triton rubbed a raw onion all over his hands and put it in his shirt for protection. When it started to rain outside, Triton hoped Joseph would get pneumonia or something deadly. But Joseph came in, gave him some food to eat, and announced that he would be going out when the rain stopped. Triton began to pray for the rain to stop. When it finally did, Joseph left and Triton ate at last. He was starving but had not wanted to give Joseph the satisfaction of seeing him eat.

That night, alone in the house for the first time, Triton felt at peace and safer than he had ever felt before. Instead of doing his tasks, he sat imagining life in the house without Joseph. At the time, Triton did not know anything about the world beyond their lane and had no idea where Joseph could have gone. The next morning he happily performed his tasks outdoors and wished he could see Joseph's corpse. He had never seen a corpse before: "...there were no death squads then, no thugs so callous in their killing that they felt no pleasure until they saw someone twitch against a succession of bullets. In my childhood no one dreamed of leaving a body to rot where it had been butchered, as people have had to learn to do more recently" (pg. 42).

In the afternoon, Triton returned to the house and thought about his simple childhood by the reservoir. He missed being close to water and once convinced Mister Salgado to



build a pond in their garden. Even though it didn't work out as planned, Mister Salgado found it an interesting study and wrote papers about the fruit bats and the mosquitoes that ruined the pond.

Triton fell asleep but was awakened by a sound in the house. Thinking it might be a stray cat, he checked all the rooms and discovered Joseph in Mister Salgado's room rubbing cologne on his chest. Joseph attacked him and pushed him onto the bed: "His fist digging in between my legs and punching a hole in me. The more I struggled, the stronger he became. I bit his arm, and he nearly broke my back. In the end I gave up and died. I let the life out of my body and he froze. Then with one hand he undid his sarong and pulled at his dribbling warped prick" (pg. 46). Triton managed to escape while Joseph was distracted. He waited at the gate until Joseph came outside, then followed him to the main road until he lost sight of him. He stayed awake that night, listening to every sound and dreading Joseph's return.

When Mister Salgado returned from his trip, he was surprised to find Joseph absent. Triton wanted to tell him what had happened but in the end decided not to say anything. Joseph returned late in the afternoon with a small parcel. He was drunk and couldn't tell Mister Salgado what was in his parcel. Mister Salgado gave him a month's severance pay and told him not to come back. Triton felt a little sorry for Joseph but knew that there would be a major change in the house after his departure. Later that night, Mister Salgado gave Triton responsibility for the whole house. Triton vowed to watch and learn from Mister Salgado. His dream of a Joseph-free house had come true.

Part I Kolla Analysis

The first part of the novel is entitled Kolla, which means 'boy' in Sinhala. It presents the narrator's childhood and his beginning as a houseboy with Mister Salgado, who is a marine biologist. Part I also introduces major characters with detailed descriptions from Triton's point of view.

The description of the 70-something-year-old Lucy-amma here is important because it is through her that the author paints a picture of the changing landscape of Sri Lanka: "She had seen politicians with handlebar moustaches and tortoiseshell topknots, morning coats and gold-thread sarongs, barefoot and church-shod. She had seen monkey-suits give way to Nehru shirts; Sheffield silver replaced by coconut spoons" (pg. 25). In other words, the country had gone through changing ideologies, and different types of leaders-each with different values.

The conflict between the adolescent Triton and Joseph plays a central role in this part of the novel. Joseph's deceitfulness, pilfering, and meanness disgusts Triton and turns him strongly away from (rather than towards) such behavior. Joseph's eventual firing is a turning point for Triton; it is the catalyst that turns his life in a new direction and takes him from houseboy to housekeeper and, eventually, chef.



Part II Cook's Joy

Part II Cook's Joy Summary

During a time of revolution around the world, Triton learned to be a good housekeeper. He also educated himself by reading the schoolbooks of the neighbor's son, Ravi. Lucy-amma retired, and Triton grew up. Mister Salgado, in the meantime, was lobbied by his closest friend Mr. Dias Liyanage to take a job with a foundation interested in the coral business. Mister Salgado looked at the large file Dias had brought and pointed out that the Fisheries department had done surveys since the 1880s but didn't understand what was happening. They knew how fast the coral grew, he saw, but had no idea how fast it was disappearing. He told Dias that he was reluctant to work for the government, though, because if the project made news, corrupt politicians would want a piece of it, and he would have to play the game of asking for favors and being a patron himself. He knew, though, that no one knew the reef better than he did, so he agreed to think about it some more.

Mister Salgado eventually accepted the job despite his misgivings. He began to spend more time out of the house, and Triton enjoyed spending his alone time reading. He wanted to see the outside world too, and finally got his chance when Dias' fall into an open sewage hole prompted Mister Salgado to take them out and away to his observatory. Triton packed everything he would need to cook for the men, and Mister Salgado himself arranged the things for a perfect fit in the Land-Rover.

On the way to the observatory, Mister Salgado began to recite poetry and narrowly missed hitting a cow. Triton was worried about the incident and glad when they came upon the opportunity to put some money in a roadside blessing box by the temple. "They were both indulging my unenlightened habits, they thought, but I was not a believer. In my own way I am a rationalist, same as Mister Salgado, but perhaps less of a gambler; I believe in tactical obeisance, that's all. If there is a possibility that the temple exerts some influence, that there is some force or creature or deity or whatever that is appeased by ten cents in a tin box, why take a chance?" (pg. 65).

Dias, Triton recalls, used to tell stories about his early memories of the time the Japanese had attacked Colombo. Dias had just been a toddler then, and a sudden noise he had made had caused a colonel to shoot himself in the foot. Mister Salgado, a "prodigy of science," was always interested in the motion that occurred throughout that incident.

The three drove quickly through towns and villages, past churches and temples, shacks and mansions. The only time Mister Salgado slowed down was when they drove by large piles of petrified coral. At the bungalow observatory Triton did the housework and cooked. He was both mesmerized and terrified by the nearby sea. He was also skeptical that Mister Salgado could do anything to save their country from the watery grave he predicted, and suspected that Dias felt the same way. Triton asked Wijetunga-



Mister Salgado's assistant-about their work at the observatory, but the man seemed not to want to talk to him. At dinner, Mister Salgado shared an idea that they had been working on-that they hoped to someday be able to create an instrument that could measure sound waves and even possibly reveal conversations from the past.

*

In April of 1969, a woman named Nili began coming to visit Mister Salgado. She loved the food Triton prepared, and he loved to hear Mister Salgado say "Triton made it": "His voice at those moments would be a channel cut from heaven to earth right through the petrified morass of all our lives, releasing a blessing like water springing from a river-head, from a god's head. It was my bliss. My coming of age" (pg. 75).

Mister Salgado was always happy when Nili was there, and always preoccupied with her when she was not. Triton liked Nili's effect on Mister Salgado, and wished she would visit more often. Once, she came when Mister Salgado was out and borrowed his blue shirt as a sample so she could have another made for him. That evening, Mister Salgado brought home a Christmas tree for the first time and asked Triton to decorate it. After his bath, Mister Salgado wanted to wear his blue shirt and Triton had to tell him the button had fallen off and the shirt needed washing. The next day, Triton told Nili about the incident and showed her their new tree. She suggested more decorations for it, and Triton was determined to comply.

On Christmas Eve, Mister Salgado had a dinner party for Nili and several other friends: Professor Dunstable, Dr. Perera, Mohan Wickremesinghe and his wife Kushi, an American named Robert, and a woman named Melanie. Triton baked his first turkey for the occasion, with Mister Salgado fretting about how it would turn out. The guests arrived and Triton was surprised to see Dias there because Mister Salgado had not mentioned him. He quickly set another place at the table, though, and avoided an awkward situation. Triton enjoyed listening to their dinner conversation. Mister Salgado was speaking of the ocean's thermodynamics and telling the story of an ark. Triton was happy then, and felt happy for Mister Salgado too. Mister Salgado's pleasure was "a foretaste of the months to come when he would enjoy a life of true romance, social intercourse and effervescent parties" (pg. 93). At the same time, though, talk on the streets was about the need for revolution; Mister Salgado's new world had no place in that future.

Mr. Salgado went on talking about the ark and his theory that the story of Noah had actually taken place right in their region of the world. The other guests joined in with their own observations to support the theory, and Mister Salgado continued to talk about other great water-related stories of their civilization.

Mister Salgado was pleased with the way the turkey looked, and all of the guests were impressed too as Triton brought it to the table. Mister Salgado carved the bird while Triton served the vegetables and the wine that Miss Nili had brought. The others-Robert most intently-all watched her as she spoke. When a piece of turkey fell from her fork, she picked it up and said 'Jesus!' Everyone else said it too, and raised their glasses for



a toast. Dias asked for some chili, which Triton thought would ruin his turkey sauce. He promised to bring some but moved on to serve the others. The dentist's wife asked Mister Salgado where he had gotten the turkey, considering all of the import restrictions. When he answered that it came from a turkey farm called Peacock House, Dr. Perera said he had met the enterprising owner.

When Triton finished serving, he moved to the doorway and watched the guests eat and talk. Dias seemed to have forgotten the chili. As he stood there, Triton wondered about the significance of the holiday they were celebrating-noting that no one had mentioned Jesus since the first "toast." He served everyone except Mister Salgado a second helping of turkey, and then Christmas pudding for dessert. The friends all went to the sitting room for coffee while Triton cleared the dining room. The foreigners left soon afterwards, and the others began discussing politics. They spoke with contempt about a Doctor Tissa who had recently returned from Moscow and diagnosed discontent among the people. Someone said Doctor Tissa wanted to be a People's Hero and a revolutionary. When Nili said jobseekers went every day to the hotel where she worked, Mohan argued that those so-called jobseekers just wanted to destroy them all.

The guests began to leave, and Mister Salgado sent Triton to go and have some turkey. Back in the kitchen, Triton was overwhelmed by the amount of work he had to do. He started with the boning of the turkey but was soon interrupted by Miss Nili bringing in a Christmas present for him. He could tell it was a book, and she encouraged him to open it. He very carefully peeled the wrapping off to reveal a cookbook. Triton was very moved by her gesture. She complimented his cooking again and then encouraged him to go ahead and eat. He felt that he couldn't, though, since he had so much work to do.

By the time Triton discovered the one hundred rupee note inside the cookbook, Nili was gone. Triton returned to his task of de-boning the turkey with the feeling that he should have made more of the time when Nili was in the kitchen with him. As he worked, he heard her laugh at something Dias said and thought her laugh had an insane quality to it. Triton thought that perhaps Dias and Nili were so happy because they were both Christians. Shortly after Dias left, Triton went to close up the main house and found Mister Salgado and Nili together on the sofa. They did not see him, and he left them alone.

Part II Cook's Joy Analysis

Part II introduces two significant characters who influenced the life of Mister Salgado: Dias Liyanage and Miss Nili. Dias, a government official, is described as Mister Salgado's closest friend. Miss Nili is the first woman to come into Mister Salgado's life since Triton's arrival at the house. Both Mister Salgado and Triton love her.

Mister Salgado's story of Noah's Ark emphasizes the importance and sacredness of the life-giving (and life-taking) water around them: "That is why we in this country, despite the monsoon, love water," he explains. "It is a symbol of regeneration reflecting the time when all evil, all the dissonance of birth, was swept away in divine rain leaving the gods

to spawn a new world" (pg. 94). The reef that Mister Salgado studies so closely is a symbol of this loss and rebirth-immortal and self-renewing.

It is interesting to note that the narrator, Triton, is named here for the first time since the beginning of this novel. In Greek mythology, Triton is the half man, half fish son of the sea god Poseidon and his queen Amphitrite. Like Poseidon, the mythical Triton had power over the waves.

This second part of the novel includes quite a bit of foreshadowing of the political trouble to come, and of the personal trouble as well.



Part III A Thousand Fingers

Part III A Thousand Fingers Summary

Nili moved in with Mister Salgado a few days after the Christmas Eve party. Triton had not been told in advance, but he was happy about it. Mister Salgado told him that Nili would have his room and he would move into the spare room. Triton felt lucky that he had had a chance to clean the sitting room and all the bedrooms that morning. He was only worried about having to move all of Mister Salgado's shoes to the spare room, where there was no space for them. He unpacked Nili's suitcases and was fascinated by the materials of her clothes and underwear.

Nili's presence brought great changes in Mister Salgado. He was radiant and it felt to Triton "as though he were really there, in front of [him] for the first time: not dreaming in some other place" (pg. 118). With Nili's arrival also came many changes in the house. She ordered repairs, painting, new curtains, and the rearrangement of furniture. In the meantime, there were also changes in the country, as it slid deep into debt. Triton, for his part, began cooking to impress Nili.

During Nili's first visit to the beach house, there was no one else around but Wijetunga, Mister Salgado's assistant. He had grown a beard and this time was more open with Triton. He explained that he had sent his kolla to school because children need to have an education if they are to become something. When Triton told him that Nili ran a hotel for tourists, Wijetunga was dismayed. Tourists, he said, would ruin the country and make them all servants. He had a solution to the country's problems though: "You know, brother, our country really needs to be cleansed, radically," he told Triton. "There is no alternative. We have to destroy in order to create" (pg. 121). He asked Triton if he had heard the Five Lessons: the basic teachings about capitalism, social movements around the world, and the plans for a revolution in Sri Lanka. When Triton replied that he was just a cook, Wijetunga promised him that one day they would both be able to live for themselves.

That night, Triton made some special dishes but Mister Salgado and Nili were too entranced with each other to notice. As the two of them walked on the beach, Triton imagined the ocean "rushing up the sloping beach, snatching at their ankles with a thousand fingers and clawing the sand from under their feet" (pg. 122).

The next morning, Triton went for a walk on the beach and bought a blue-striped parrot fish from some fishermen. Back at the bungalow, Nili was impressed, but Mister Salgado warned him that the fish was an acquired taste. To Triton's great relief though, they both liked the way he prepared it. Nili wanted to see the fish catch the next day, and Triton said he would take her.



In the morning, Triton and Nili went to the fish market. She was sickened when a fishmonger killed a reef shark in front of them and begged to leave when the crowd got excited about a dolphin that was to be killed next.

*

Back in town, Nili stopped working at The Sea Hopper Hotel and started thinking of building her own. Both she and Mister Salgado put their dreams on hold, though, and spent all their time with each other and out with friends. Mister Salgado became a socialite and even began to ignore marine-related projects that once would have captivated him. He and Nili did attend the inauguration of the Mahaweli Scheme, however-an inland irrigation project. It was the biggest party since the government had limited the size of social gatherings. Nili was indecisive about what to wear and worried that she wasn't invited since she was not a wife. Mister Salgado went out to buy new shoes while Nili tried on outfit after outfit. As they left that evening, Triton had a feeling that things were "sliding away, out of reach, into some other world" (pg. 133). While Mister Salgado and Nili were out, Triton wondered what his life would have been like had he worked in a restaurant or gone to hotel school as Mister Salgado had once suggested.

Sometime after midnight, Nili and Mister Salgado returned home with Nili driving. They were both a little unsteady on their feet as they went toward the house, talking about an attack on a friend and about the sudden proliferation of Che Guevara-like beards everywhere. Inside, Nili turned on some sultry music, and Triton, wanting to see what was going on, took some towels to their room. Mister Salgado was asleep, but Nili was not with him. Triton opened the bathroom door and saw her there, completely naked. She looked up and he ran to his room, half expecting something to happen. But Nili neither did nor said anything about the incident.

One morning, Robert-the American who had attended the Christmas Eve dinner-brought a journalist to see Mister Salgado. Nili met them still dressed only in her kimono and got a disapproving look from Mister Salgado. Robert and the journalist wanted to know how the lifestyle in coastal villages was changing as a result of the sea-erosion Mister Salgado had once warned of. The question annoyed Mister Salgado, and his curt answer implied that many factors could cause changes in the environment.

*

Mister Salgado's house was always full of Nili's friends during this period. They loved Triton's food and were curious to see how long the couple's relationship would last. In April, the assassination of a popular and wealthy businessman-Palitha Aluthgoda-was a hot conversation topic among them. Palitha Aluthgoda had been an intelligent man who had risen in status from a poor garage-worker to Sri Lanka's "most flamboyant millionaire," and there were all kinds of rumors about what had led to his death.

One evening, Mister Salgado and Nili argued about what to do for entertainment. Nili wanted to go out, and Mister Salgado wanted to stay home and have a poker party with



his friends Tippy and Dias. They compromised: dinner that evening and a poker party on the weekend. On the morning of the poker party, Nili was in a bad mood and wouldn't eat. She wandered around the garden for a bit, then returned to the house and instructed Triton to prepare a sauna for her. On his way to the veranda with the last bucketful of boiling hot water, Mister Salgado stopped him and wanted to know what he was doing. Mister Salgado himself took the bucket out to Nili and asked her, with shoulders stiffened, where she had learned to do saunas.

A good crowd arrived for the poker party-including the neighbor, Mr. Pando. While the men chatted over drinks, Triton cleaned up the kitchen and made a fascinating discovery: when he poured left-over milk into the oily washing water, the mixture took a surprising shape. Triton assumed that it was the fat that made this possible. "I thought this was significant. I wanted to tell someone. It struck me that if a fluid could be so controlled in its apparent free fall, then why not our lives?" (pg. 156).

Robert, the American, called on the telephone for Nili just before lunch was served to the poker crowd, and Nili left the house soon after the call. During the meal, one of the men asked for Nili, and Triton explained to Mister Salgado what had happened. Tippy heard and started talking about Robert and his reputation for fornicating with the local girls. Mister Salgado could not eat like the others, but kept on drinking more and more beer. He was quiet during the game but joined in the conversation about the new Marxists and their talk of revolution. Mister Salgado talked about the changes in Wijetunga, and Triton remembered their last conversation, when Wijetunga had mentioned the Five Lessons. One of the members of the poker party commented that all that the revolutionaries wanted was a chance to dip into the nation's wealth themselves.

Toward evening, Triton served tea and then left the men-among them a morose Mister Salgado-to go outside to the front gate by the lane. He looked back at the house with its "enormous eyes of yellow light staring out" and ignored the calls for him to come with more beer. He began to envy Wijetunga's new attitude and cursed himself for not finishing his school certificate.

The poker party soon ended, but by the time Nili came back Mister Salgado was slumped over on the card table. Triton stayed outside, and felt that the ocean was pressing around them. The next morning, neither Mister Salgado nor Nili wanted tea. Mister Salgado accused Nili of sleeping with Robert, and Nili, in anger, threw a torrent of insults at him and stormed out of the house.

Later, Triton saw an oriole come closer to the house than ever before. The bird sang without anguish or fear of the eagle that would one day attack it and damage its tangerine yellow feathers. Mister Salgado had once admonished the young Triton for killing a bird, telling him that it is easy to destroy, but not so easy to make life. On this day, though, when Triton pointed out the bird, his employer showed no emotion.

Triton cleaned up the poker party mess and felt guilty over not having served the hungry guests at the end. He remembered the time Nili had watched him make a lasagna and



had told him he didn't belong there. He hadn't felt that this was true and hadn't known what she had meant.

Mister Salgado sat still and Triton cleaned up the house, both trying to pretend that nothing was wrong. Nili had indeed gone out of their lives, though. As the days passed, Mister Salgado remained still and seemed to be under a spell.

*

Not long after Nili left, Triton made lanterns for the Vesak festival, in order to celebrate the birth and the enlightenment of Buddha. That night, he found Mister Salgado staring at the moon. Mister Salgado told him of his dream for a sea sanctuary and lamented that there were too many people who didn't care about the future. Troubled, he told Triton that he had to learn to let matters take their course without struggling for anything.

A week later, the General Election took place, and the opposition won by a landslide. Dias was transferred to a new post in the Southern part of the country but was unsure about where he fit within the new system. Mister Salgado didn't know what he was going to do with his life in light of the new government and was still pining for Nili. He thought she might have gone away, but Dias assured him that only people with money were leaving.

During the two months that followed the election, there was violence in several different spots on the globe as well as within Sri Lanka. Mr. Pando put barbed wire up on the wall surrounding his house, and Triton could see that someday even their bay-fronted house would be obscured by other structures.

One evening, Mister Salgado asked Triton to clarify something about the Anguli-maala story-the story of Prince Ahimsaka. Mister Salgado wanted to know whether the Prince was insane. In the story, Prince Ahimsaka was a studious young man, and the envy of all the other princes, who spread rumors that he was having an affair with the wife of the headmaster. The angry headmaster punished him by requiring him to collect a thousand little fingers in order to finish his studies. He was reluctant to do this at first but soon began to enjoy maiming or killing people for their little fingers. No one spoke out about the mass murders, but Buddha heard the people's whispers and came down to see the prince. When the prince recognized Buddha, he repented.

Before Triton could finish the rest of the Anguli-maala story, Mister Salgado turned away and went to his room. It wasn't until much later that night that Mister Salgado told Triton Dias had disappeared-drowned, the report said, in a bad sea. Triton had never once seen Dias go into the sea, even when it was calm.

At year's end, Mister Salgado moved around the house restlessly. No one came to visit anymore, and Triton felt like they were treading water. Mister Salgado soon announced that they would be going to England, where he would be working at an institute. "He meant we were leaving our house forever. It seemed the only way for him to be free of the gloom that had settled over him; over both of us" (pg. 179). Triton spent a good part



of the rest of the day in the garden, but he eventually packed their things, wondering who would come to live in the house after them.

Part III A Thousand Fingers Analysis

This part of the book describes the events of 'a new era' in the lives of the main characters and in the country. It also covers the growth and demise of the relationship between Mister Salgado and Nili, which takes place during the same time that young revolutionaries rise to gain political control of Sri Lanka.

The ocean/water is a prominent symbol throughout Part III of *Reef*. In times of trouble, it feels to Triton as if the ocean is pressing around them. His description of the ocean as "snatching at their ankles with a thousand fingers and clawing the sand from under their feet" is symbolic of what actually happens to Mister Salgado and Nili-and to all of them-in the end. The love that they have is washed away and the solid ground that they stand on is shaken by the changes in their relationships and in their country. Later, Dias dies in 'a bad sea,' and Triton is sickened by the thought of him being unraveled and tossed about in the murky water. News of Dias' death prompts Mister Salgado to ask Triton about the story of Anguli-maala. In the well-known legend, the ocean washes victims of mass murder to shore and unearths the ones that are buried by the village fishermen. In the story, the sea, along with the earth, sand, sun, and sky, are accused of hiding the past and the future from the world as the killing continues. Triton also sees the water as a symbol of the tensions that rise all around them, within the house and without; he likens the feeling to treading water.

The oriole that appears in the garden after Nili's departure seems to be symbolic of Mister Salgado. The bird had "no fear of the eagle (Nili) that would swoop down on it one day and rip its yellow feathers. In blissful ignorance it is completely beautiful; unruffled until its last moment, until it is too late" (pg. 166).



Part IV Strandline

Part IV Strandline Summary

Mister Salgado and Triton settled in a London apartment. During their first few months there, Mister Salgado was busy with his new job, and Triton stayed indoors most of the time because of the constant rain. In the spring, they went to Wales, where a pebble beach near their cottage showed them a marine life different from the one they had left behind in Sri Lanka. Triton asked Mister Salgado if the sea by Wales faced the same problems as the one back home. Mister Salgado said that it might be, and made a sad prediction: "Now as the coral disappears, there will be nothing but sea and we will all return to it" (pg. 182).

The uprisings in Sri Lanka began that April, in 1971. Thousands were , and there were reports of beheadings. The brutality got worse in the decades to come, and very often the sea was used as a dumping ground for the bodies that would then be washed in by the tide. In London, Mister Salgado sometimes worried about Nili, who had stayed in Sri Lanka.

When Mister Salgado's job at the institute ended, he found a more modest one. Triton remembered that Wijetunga, upon hearing that Mister Salgado was suspending their marine project, had angrily threatened to blow up their beloved Bungalow observatory. "It's not what you do every day, but the thoughts that you live with that matter, [Mister Salgado] would tell [Triton]" (pg.183) regarding his willingness to take the modest job.

Once, when a woman at a pub asked Triton if he had come from Africa, away from the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, he replied that he was just an explorer, and was there on a journey of discovery. He imagined Mister Salgado would have answered that way.

Triton and Mister Salgado moved often, until 1976 when Mister Salgado decided it was time to buy a permanent place. At their little house in Earls Court, Triton read all of Mister Salgado's books. He believed that Mister Salgado had a reading plan for him and deliberately left certain books in places where he knew he would discover them.

In London, Triton took various classes and felt that he freed himself from the demons of his past. He asked Mister Salgado why things were much less frightening there than at home. Mister Salgado replied that his imagination had not yet been poisoned in London. To Triton, that answer sounded as if they each had "an inner threshold that had to be breached before [their] surroundings could torment [them]" (pg. 186).

One day, Triton showed Mister Salgado a newspaper story about a symposium on Man and Coral. He told Mister Salgado that it was something he should have presided over, but Mister Salgado claimed that all of his work in that field was merely an obsession. He said that the kinds of people at that symposium would only be concerned with how the reefs were changing, and not why; he added that he belonged to another world.



Triton remembered the one time he had swum out to Mister Salgado's reef and realized that all of the creatures were forever devouring their surroundings. Mister Salgado had planned to turn the bay into a marine park, with glass-bottomed boats and a floating restaurant where Triton could have showcased his fine cooking skills. When Triton suggested that they open a restaurant in London, Mister Salgado replied that that would be for him to do someday for himself.

Mister Salgado bought a Volkswagen and taught Triton how to drive it. After a drive one day, they found that the snack bar at the end of their road was up for sale. Mister Salgado bought it, and Triton painted it in the colors of their tropical Sri Lankan sea.

In the summer of 1983, riots began in Colombo. The violence was televised nightly for weeks, unlike the violence of 1971, which had seemed a little more distant as a result of its infrequent coverage. Triton remembered how long ago, before he had come to Mister Salgado's house as a young houseboy, he had found his schoolmaster in a ditch by the rice field with both of his legs broken by some of the older boys who had already begun to be influenced by the slogans of the coming revolution.

As the summer was ending, Mister Salgado got a call from his old friend Tippy. Tippy was in the Heathrow airport and had found their number in the Directory. He spoke of the war at home, of the big money to be made there because of the trouble, and, at the end, of Nili. He said she had started a guest house for tourists but that it had been burned down after a mob heard she had hidden two fleeing Tamil families there. Nili, he said, had gone to pieces and was now in a sanatorium and all alone.

Immediately after Tippy's phone call, Mister Salgado made the decision to go back home to see Nili. Triton tried to tell him that too many years had gone by, but that did not stop Mister Salgado, and Triton saw then that he would have to learn to make it on his own. He realized that it was what he had always wanted deep down inside and that without Mister Salgado at his side, he would find his place in the world at last.

Triton drove Mister Salgado to the airport on a Sunday morning. Mister Salgado gave him the spare keys and then flew out, pursuing "a glimmer of hope in a far-away house of sorrow" (pg. 190).

Part IV Strandline Analysis

The last part of the novel brings us full circle. We are back in London, where Triton had begun recalling his memories of his childhood and coming of age on the island of Sri Lanka and in the house of Mister Ranjan Salgado. In this final part of the novel, Triton chronicles their lives in exile and describes the 1983 riots and the continuing deterioration of the state of politics on the island.

Throughout the novel, there were hints that Triton was not where he belonged. He himself said that he and the servant Joseph were not of the same kind. Nili told him he did not belong there, in that house. Mister Salgado too, often encouraged him to leave and pursue further studies. Even Wijetunga promised him that someday he would live

his own life. At the end of the novel, Triton finally realizes that deep inside he had always wanted to live on his own; when Mister Salgado leaves, Triton finally sees the way to success.



Characters

Mister Ranjan Salgado

When we first meet him, Ranjan Salgado is a thin bachelor with a gentle voice and a sad expression. He is very intelligent and considers himself self-educated despite having gone to all the best schools in Colombo. Mister Salgado, described once as "a prodigy of science," is obsessed with the ocean, the coral reefs, and marine life. While others are concerned about the how, he is concerned about the why. He is very meticulous-writing lists of things he has to do, and keeping records of what has been done.

It isn't until a woman named Nili comes into his life that Ranjan Salgado becomes more relaxed and begins to smile all the time. Triton, his servant, describes him as radiant and finally "there" in front of him rather than off in a dreamland somewhere. Nili brings out the urban socialite in Ranjan Salgado, and he begins to neglect his studies and his lofty dreams of developing new marine equipment and of preserving the bay. He is in love with Nili, tolerant of her younger crowd, and admired by them all.

When Nili leaves him after he has a fit of jealous anger, Mister Salgado becomes sad and morose. When his closest friend Dias dies mysteriously, he becomes even more depressed and restless. He decides to leave his house and his country and move to England to get away from the gloom that has settled on his life. The war in Sri Lanka erupts while they are abroad, but Mister Salgado, hoping that things will change, does not settle permanently for several years. Finally, after more than a decade away, sad news of Nili, the love of his life, sends him back home to find her.

Triton

Triton is the narrator of the novel. He comes to Mister Salgado's house as a kolla, a boy, of eleven. His uncle brings him to work there as a houseboy after he has caused some trouble in the schoolyard and run away from his angry father. As young as he is then, Triton has principles and does not want to be anything like Mister Salgado's deceitful servant Joseph. Triton says his head was "like a balloon that had only a few puffs of air in it." For him, Mister Salgado's house was the center of the universe. He didn't know about anything beyond the lane where they lived, and nothing about the city or the world except bits and pieces he got from newspapers. By twelve though, Triton is mature enough to be able to take full responsibility for the household after Joseph-the bane of his existence-is fired. Triton educates himself by watching Mister Salgado closely and by reading a neighbor boy's schoolbooks whenever he has the chance. He also learns to cook from Mister Salgado's elderly cook-woman and from one of the neighbors.

Triton takes his responsibility very seriously and learns to organize his time so that he gets the housework done and still has time for simple pleasures like reading. But he



also wants to see more of the real world and is happy for the chance to drive with Mister Salgado to his bungalow observatory by the sea. There, he meets Wijetunga, Mister Salgado's assistant, who will later tell him about the Five Lessons and plant in his head a dream of freedom and a life of his own.

Triton is a loyal servant and becomes indispensable to his Mister Salgado. He loves his master's lover for the way she makes him (Mister Salgado) feel, and when she leaves, his impression of her changes accordingly. Triton follows Mister Salgado to England and continues to take care of him in his mature years, but he also continues to educate himself and to dream big. He finally gets his chance to make it on his own when Mister Salgado returns home for his lost love.

Miss Nili

Nili brings a welcome change to the house of Mister Salgado. She is a skinny young woman in her twenties—a socialite with many friends and an infectious laugh. Nili is also hardworking and ambitious. She runs the front office at the Sea Hopper Hotel and has plans to open her own hotel someday. Triton describes her as someone with no airs. When she moves into the house with them, she takes charge of the overall decisions for the household but respectfully allows Triton to remain in charge of his kitchen and of implementing the day to day tasks. She is sensitive and caring, and both Mister Salgado and Triton love her.

Nili does not come from a wealthy background and sometimes worries that she is not good enough for Mister Salgado. She also worries that she does not get the respect from society that she would if she were his wife. When she and Mister Salgado have a disagreement about what to do for entertainment one weekend, she goes out to meet their friend Robert, a good-looking American man. When Mister Salgado accuses her of sleeping with Robert, she throws a torrent of insults at him and walks out of the relationship.

Nili eventually opens a hotel for tourists, as she had always dreamed she would. But during the riots, when a mob hears that she gave refuge to two Tamil families there, they burn down the place. The ensuing mental breakdown drives her to a sanatorium, where she is all alone at the end of the novel.

Wijetunga

Wijetunga is Mister Salgado's assistant at the bungalow observatory. A quiet man at first, and a bit uncomfortable around Mister Salgado and his occasional bungalow guests, he eventually falls under the spell of the revolutionaries. He grows a beard like the rest of them, sends his young servant boy to school, and begins to spread the message of the Five Lessons to other young workers like Triton. In fact, he becomes rather radical and believes there is no alternative to destruction of the current society. In the end, when Mister Salgado closes down his coastal project, Wijetunga goes crazy and threatens to blow up the bungalow.



Joseph

Joseph was a mysterious, frustrated, and disturbed character. He had been Mister Salgado's servant for two years before Triton's arrival. Triton says Joseph "had been born with the moral equivalent of a sweet tooth," and pilfered whenever he had the chance. He was "the type who could dilute the bottle even as he poured the shots." The problem, Triton says, is that Joseph didn't know his limitations: "He thought just because he knew the habits of his superiors he could become one" (pg. 51).

Joseph was harsh with Triton and made life tough for him. Triton felt that it was because they were not of the same kind. When Mister Salgado left him in charge of the house one weekend, Joseph left the house in a fancy pink shirt and didn't return until the next day. When Triton discovered him in Mister Salgado's room rubbing their employers' cologne on his chest, Joseph attacked and assaulted the boy. Joseph then stayed out overnight and returned drunk. After he was fired by Mister Salgado, he spat at Triton's feet and left cursing the house.

Mr. Dias Liyanage

Dias, a government official, was Mister Salgado's closest friend. They had known each other as young boys. He was a Christian, unlike Mister Salgado. Dias was always cheerful, and could be counted on to always be there for a party. He loved to eat, was addicted to hot chilies, and was famous for his tall tales. He also talked, smoked, and burped a lot.

With the change of government, Dias was transferred to a new post in the south. He wasn't sure how he would fit in the new government, and his mysterious death by drowning after his transfer saddened both Mister Salgado and Triton, sinking them even deeper into gloom and contributing to Mister Salgado's decision to leave the country.

Lucy-amma

Lucy-amma was Mister Salgado's cook-woman. She was already in her seventies when Triton arrived at the house. She had worked for Mister Salgado's grandfather, knew his father when they were both children, and knew Mister Salgado when he himself was a child.

Lucy-amma was not, as Mister Salgado was, one "whom history had favored." She worked until she was an elderly woman, then retired to the village that she had seen go through many changes during the course of her lifetime.



Objects/Places

The Bay-fronted House

Mister Salgado's house was the center of Triton's universe. He grew up there, and became the person that he did because of the things that happened to him in the bay-fronted house.

Chilies

Chilies are hot peppers. Mr. Pando's wife punished him by tying him up naked and-with the help of her servant-rubbing hot chili powder all over him. His crime: frolicking with a girl from the Hothouse Bodega.

Onions

Joseph, Mister Salgado's servant, had such an aversion to onions that Triton often sought refuge from him by going to where onions were being cut or cooked, and sometimes by rubbing a raw onion on himself.

Lists

Mister Salgado kept long lists of everything he had to do. Triton also made lists, but much shorter ones.

The Ocean

The ocean is a source of fascination and fear for both Mister Salgado and Triton. Sri Lanka is an island, completely surrounded by the ocean.

The Reef

Mister Salgado studied the coral reef off Sri Lanka's coast and wanted to do something to prevent its further destruction.

The Sea Hopper Hotel

Miss Nili ran the front office at the Sea Hopper Hotel but left her job not long after she moved in with Mister Salgado.



The Five Lessons

The Five Lessons were the basic teachings about the ills of capitalism, the history of social movements around the world, and the plans for a revolution in Sri Lanka.

Mahaweli Scheme

The Mahaweli Scheme was a much-celebrated inland irrigation project. It involved the diversion of Sri Lanka's largest river.

Anguli-maala

Anguli-maala is the story of Prince Ahimsaka-a harmless, studious and intelligent man who was envied by his peers. The jealous princes spread rumors that he was having an affair with the headmaster's wife. The headmaster then punished him by forcing him to kill hundreds of people in order to finish his studies. The idea was to put Prince Ahimsaka into a self-made hell, but in the end he was not the only one punished.



Themes

Reconciling with the Past

Early in the novel, Triton chooses to keep the fact of Joseph's attack a secret. He believes that by not putting it into words, what happened will go away. It is a coping mechanism that works for him for a while, but he eventually learns that what has happened will not go away. When the Sri Lankan cashier puts into words his feelings about the war at home, that is the strandline-the breach-that makes Triton's memories of the past come flooding back ten years after Mister Salgado's return to the island, and twenty years since his own exile.

Mister Salgado, at the end, stressed that it was important "to conserve, to protect, and to care for the past." It was a learned behavior, he said. Triton's detailed recollection of his past, then, is his way of keeping and protecting the experiences of his coming of age and of his country's history. Mister Salgado too, when he returns to Sri Lanka in the middle of the crisis there, is reaching back to the past and hoping to reconcile with his own experiences and, more specifically, with his long lost love.

Coming of Age

This novel tells the story of Triton from his childhood to his adulthood under the care of Mister Ranjan Salgado. Triton, just a boy of eleven when he arrives, grows up learning from the people around him-both in the household and in the neighborhood. For him, his coming of age occurs when Mister Salgado says his name over and over again to Nili as he answers her question about the delicious food: "Triton made it." When Nili moves into the house, it is Mister Salgado's turn for a second coming of age, of sorts. He becomes almost like a different person and surprises Triton with his exuberance and his ability to entertain. During this period in his life he is happy, but begins to neglect his marine studies.

Sri Lanka, too, experiences a coming of age. The country is tumultuous with calls for change, and those who make the call eventually gain political power but plunge the nation into even deeper chaos for decades to come.

Regeneration and Rebirth

The theme of regeneration and rebirth appears throughout the novel in different ways. It is symbolized mainly by the reef and the ocean. In the reef, for example, some of the creatures teeming there feed on each other-as they have for centuries-and continue to survive by adapting and changing forms. Others are lost forever when their delicate lives are disturbed. So too with the people on the island (and indeed, in the world); they experience death and irretrievable loss, but, through the immortality of memory, are able to continue a cycle of regeneration and rebirth.



Style

Point of View

Reef is written in the first person, from the point of view of Triton. In the prologue, Triton has an encounter that triggers his memory, and the rest of the novel is the recollection of his journey to where he is. Triton tells of his childhood, his coming of age, and his growth as an individual under the wings of Mister Salgado. Through Triton's eyes, the author describes in detail all the major characters and the political turmoil occurring around them. Triton's memories are a mixture of what he knew at the time, and of what he learned long after the facts he relates.

Language and Meaning

Romesh Guneseckera uses elegant language in *Reef*. The novel is full of beautiful imagery, vivid descriptions, and stark honesty about the world the characters live in. At first it is unbelievable that Triton's voice is so refined-after all, he was only a houseboy and servant. But then the author reveals that Triton learned to be who he was by watching Mister Salgado endlessly and imitating everything about him.

Setting

Reef is set mainly on the island of Sri Lanka, with just the prologue and epilogue set in London, England. The main characters-Mister Salgado and his servant Triton, the novel's narrator-have fled to England for refuge from the civil war in Sri Lanka. In the prologue, Triton has an encounter that makes him think of his life on the island.

The island itself, with its beautiful and endangered coral reef, is where the main action takes place. As the story unfolds, Guneseckera describes the background leading to the political upheaval on the island of Sri Lanka, and describes the two main insurgencies that occurred there in 1971 and in 1983.

The bay-fronted house on the island-which Triton remembers was the center of his universe-is an integral part of the setting. It is there that Triton comes of age and learns to be who he is. It is also in that house that Mister Salgado carries on the love affair that so profoundly affects his life. In the novel's prologue, the house is the first image that comes to Triton's mind when he thinks of home. Throughout the novel, the house is personified. It lightens and darkens according to the mood of its occupants as if it, too, has feelings.

Finally, the ocean which surrounds the island is also an important part of the story's setting. It is the object of Mister Salgado's obsession and is both mesmerizing and fearsome to those who behold it. It is the subject of legends. It is a source of power, of life, and of death to those who are enclosed by it.

Structure

The novel is divided into a prologue and four titled parts. The chance encounter with the Tamil cashier in the prologue is the catalyst that makes the narrator remember his past as told in the four parts of the novel. Each part treats a specific period in the narrator's life. Part I, entitled "Kolla" (which means boy), tells of Triton's childhood as a houseboy in Mister Salgado's house. Part II, entitled "Cook's Joy," tells of Triton's personal and professional growth as Mister Salgado's servant and chef, of political changes and upheavals in Sri Lanka, and of the arrival of Miss Nili into their lives. The last part of the novel, entitled "Strandline," details the life in exile and the eventual separation of Triton and Mister Salgado.



Quotes

"To him, Mister Salgado was probably not much more than a boy, but a boy whom history had favoured - a product of modern feudalism-whereas my uncle was a road-runner, a driver for an oil company." Part I, pg. 16

"He came from a line of people who believed in making their own future. To him, there were no boundaries to knowledge." Part I, pg. 34

"What I disliked most about Joseph was the power he had over me, the power to make me feel powerless." Part I, pg. 35

"I was trapped inside what I could see, what I could hear, what I could walk to without straying from my undefined boundaries, and in what I could remember from what I learned in my mud-walled school." Part I, pg. 40

"It was better, I thought, to leave it untold. That way maybe the event would fade. It would disappear. Without words to sustain it, the past would die. But I was wrong. It does not go away; what has happened has happened. It hangs on the robes of the soul." Part I, pg. 49

"I learned early on that nature takes her course unless you work hard: things go out of control." Part II, pg. 61

"My eager schoolteacher abandoned science to nature, assuming we would absorb the essentials through inquisitive play. Language, he used to say, was what made us different from the apes, and that was what he wanted to teach. But from my Mister Salgado I learned the reverse: language is what you pick up naturally-everyone speaks, no problem-but science has to be learned methodically, by study, if one is ever to emerge out of the swamp of our psychotic superstitions. It is what transforms our lives." Part II, pg. 68

"It is not worth getting someone else to do something when it takes twice as long to explain it as to do it." Part II, pg. 83

"At times of intense pressure I sometimes suddenly feel there is nothing more I can do; everything will take its own course, I can let go. I stay still and become blissfully calm for a moment, and my moment stretches endlessly." Part II, pg. 92

"I was happy for him, even though the politics of the day ruled against such emotions: his new world was one that had no place in the future, as ordinary people saw it then." Part II, pg. 93

"That is why we in this country love water. It is a symbol of regeneration reflecting the time when all evil, all the dissonance of birth, was swept away in divine rain leaving the gods to spawn a new world." Part III, pg. 94



"'We've all been put in the wrong place. We will never really produce anything here,' she said and touched my face with her hand. 'Only our grotesque selves.'" Part III, pg. 168

"If there are gods in the world, or in the next, let them take pity on us and give us strength every day, because we need it every day. Every single day. There is no let-up, ever. Not really." Part III, pg. 168

"The thing you have to learn is to let what will happen, happen, I suppose. Not to struggle, not for anything." Part III, pg. 172

"The General Election that month resulted in a landslide victory for the opposition parties, and uneasy coalition of old-fashioned leftists and new-style nationalists who promised free rice and a new society; we were to be freed from market exploitation and liberated from the doom of a colonial inheritance." Part III, pg. 173

"But are we not all refugees from something? Whether we stay or go or return, we all need refuge from the world beyond our fingertips at some time." Part IV, pg. 184

"I was learning that human history is always a story of somebody's diaspora: a struggle between those who expel, repel or curtail-possess, divide and rule-and those who keep the flame alive from night to night, mouth to mouth, enlarging the world with each flick of a tongue." Part IV, pg. 184

"'It's your imagination,' he said. 'It is not yet poisoned in this place.' As if we each had an inner threshold that had to be breached before our surroundings could torment us." Part IV, pg. 186

"'The urge to build, to transform nature, to make something out of nothing is universal. But to conserve, to protect, to care for the past is something we have to learn,' he would say.'" Part IV, page 188

"'You know, Triton,' he said at the end, 'we are only what we remember, nothing more...all we have is the memory of what we have done or not done; whom we might have touched, even for a moment...'" Part IV, pg. 190



Topics for Discussion

What is the breach that the prologue's title refers to?

Triton's name is not revealed until the second part of the book, when a friend of Mister Salgado's addresses him. Why do you think the author waits so long to reveal the name of his narrator?

Discuss the ways in which the bay-fronted house in *Reef* is like a major character itself.

Discuss the parallels between the destruction of the coral reef and the destruction of life on the island.

Explain what the author means when he says Lucy-amma saw her birthplace turned "from village to jungle and back to village, time and again."

Discuss Wijetunga's transformation from employed assistant to radical revolutionary.

Early in the novel, Mister Salgado is described as "a boy whom history had favored." In your opinion, does he take advantage of or squander his privileged position in society?

At the end of the novel, Triton realizes that deep down inside he always wanted to live on his own. Why was it impossible for him to find his place in the world with Ranjan Salgado by his side?

?? ?? ?? ??