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Articulations of Memory-Making and Memory- Mapping in Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*

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Keywords: *memory, roma tearne, sri lanka, civil war, diaspora.*

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I. Introduction

Roma Tearne is a Sri Lankan diasporic writer presently settled in the UK. She was a Leverhulme resident artist at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum in 2002 and also a fellow at Oxford Brookes University. Her first novel, *Mosquito* (2007), is shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award and the Kiriyama Prize. Her other novels include, *Bone China* (2008), *Brixton Beach* (2009), *The Swimmer* (2010), *The Dark Side of the World* (2012), *The Road to Urbino* (2012) and *The Last Pier* (2015). Roma Tearne is known for poignantly capturing the socio-political unrest of her country in her fictions. Sri Lanka has always remained a volatile hotbed of Civil War between the Tamils and the Singhalese. The Tamils were the minority in Sri Lanka while the Singhalese dominated the nation. After the independence in 1948, the Singhalese Government passed certain discriminatory laws which deprived the Tamils of their rights in the country. Singhala was made the official language and the Tamils could not find suitable jobs or avail good education. In the process, most of the Tamil families started taking refuge in foreign countries. Partly, the emergence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE, also known as the Tamil Tigers) gave a violent turn to the events. Right from its inception on 23rd July 1983 to 2009, LTTE fought for twenty six (26) years to create an independent Tamil state called Tamil Eelam in the North and East of the island and resorted to certain nefarious activities, like assassination, mass killing, and genocide and so on. After long years of rigorous military campaigning, the Sri Lankan military succeeded in defeating the Tamil Tigers in May 2009, bringing the Civil War to an end.

Roma Tearne depicts a true picture of the Sri Lankan Civil War in her first novel *Mosquito* (2007). The novel tells the story of Theo Samarajeeva, the reputed author in London. He returns to his native place, i.e. Sri Lanka, after the death of his Italian wife Anna in a pathetic accident in London. Theo wants to write his next novel in his homeland. *Mosquito* shifts relentlessly amidst memory, love and war. In between Roma Tearne portrays a vivid intensified world of darkness and terror, massacre, kidnapping and brutality with much clarity and boldness. All the characters of the novel have been passing through a difficult time which never seems to change. The mixed ethnic population of Sri Lanka is the root cause of the hostility and distrust being reflected in the novel.

The entire novel is a tightly knitted framework of memory. Memory makes, destroys, recreates and evaporates. The way the mosquitoes are present everywhere, memory is Omni-present in the entire novel. When it comes to the notions of memory-mapping and memory-making, Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* carries various strands throughout. *Mosquito* annihilates the reader with its every possible bounce of memory jerks, through its various characters and incidents. The narrative moves in between constant flashbacks from the past, often at clash with the present. In the "Introduction" to his work *Memory, Nationalism, and Narrative in Contemporary South Asia*, J. Edward Mallot exclusively talks about the problematic connections between memory, narrative and nationalism in South Asian countries. Different kinds of memory become the 'site' "only to return to the same, seemingly unanswerable quandaries of remembering the past" (2-3). Thus, Mallot further observes,

> Indeed, part of what makes this era of looking back so complex is the sheer variety of reasons for doing so; as this study will indicate, memory can serve to articulate or consolidate identity, validate or deny

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> the identity of others, celebrate or mourn past events, or establish claims to agency, justice, or nationhood—serving both "good" an d "bad" causes, resulting in triumphant and tragic outcomes. By the late twentieth century, however, "memory studies" seemed to become a byword for the interrogation of oppression, the search for silenced voices marginalized and traumatized (3-4).

Theo settles down in a quiet Beach House, looked after by his man servant Sugi. Theo intends to write his fourth novel. His second book was being made into film. After his arrival, Theo was invited to give two peace talks at the boys' school and at the convent. Though Theo is Singhalese, he shows sympathy towards Tamil children, significantly in his book *Tiger Lily*. The book gets acclamation in the West regarding the ongoing Civil War. Theo's peach talk in the schools, supporting the pathetic condition of the Tamils, fuels hatred amidst his own people. So, Sugi keeps on warning him, "These were troubled times. Envy and poverty went hand in hand with the ravaged land..." (17). One such secret enemy, out of superstitious belief throws a plucked chicken into his garden. Theo, being modern and western educated, finds it difficult to connect any logical outcome of such incident. Because of such unruly practices of his place he "remembered, in a rush of forgotten irritation, the reasons he had never made this country his home" (39).

Theo Samarajeeva had a beautiful past with his Italian wife Anna in London. His misfortune starts once he steps into his homeland. He befriends with Nulani Mendis, a school going teenager from a neighbour family and a passionate painter. Nulani asked many questions to Theo at school, which was surprising for everyone. Later she started visiting his house, first hiding in his garden and later openly to draw Theo in her notebooks.

Theo finds signs of intelligence in Nulani and encourages her to continue her drawing. However Nulani has a sad past, as she lost her father in a pathetic incident. Her father was burnt alive amidst public, who could foresee the uselessness of the ongoing civil war. Nulani's mother afterwards dedicates her whole life towards her son Jim, whom she tenderly mentions as Lucky Jim. She is determined to send Jim away from the hopeless country to the UK, at any cost. Jim wins a scholarship and is thus destined for the foreign country.

Nulani remains a neglected child for her mother and finally leaves her studies. She rather continues to visit the beach house where she finds solace and a ray of hope to fulfil her dreams. Theo provides her a room to paint, convincing her mother with a commission for painting his portrait. Though she is twenty eight years younger than him, Theo starts admiring her and longs for her company.

In *Mosquito* the characters live in their memories, rather than in their present. Memory becomes personalised history in the novel. "For history", as Philip Gardner observes, "distance between present and past has to be bridged; for memory, the two are always already connected" (89). Each character has a story to tell but mostly remains unspoken. All of them try to retain the golden past, which heals their suffering souls. Sri Lanka, for Sugi, still remains an "ancient land" which cannot "be hurried" (39).

Roma Tearne introduces Vikram, an orphan boy living in the Sumaner House. The issue of child soldier is being highlighted through Vikram's character. He belonged to a Tamil family. His mother and sister were raped and brutally killed by the Singhalese army as he was a child soldier for the Tamil Tigers. Unable to bear this, his father swallowed poison. The Singhalese army placed him in an orphanage known as Waterlily House. Later he was adopted by Mr Gunadeen, a kind hearted rich Singhalese who brought him to the Sumaner House. Tamils were deprived of entering into any decent educational institute at that time. So, Vikram's guardian managed the school authority to send him to school, in the hope of giving a secure and safe future ahead.

However, Vikram remains totally indifferent to his changing fortune, unable to forget his bloody past. When his guardian is away for business purpose, he behaves in the most indecent way, kicking the walls of the house as if it were a person or breaking the fine-coloured glasses. In a way, he seems to be "torturing the house" (45). Thercy, the maid looks after Vikram and bears the entire nuisance created by him. As time passes, Vikram becomes quietened and introvert. Vikram's memory flashes here and there when he becomes absent minded, lost in his bygone days.

> Vikram was three years old and he had been frightened. His aunt or his sister, he could not remember which, held him up in the water, someone else bathed him. Vikram had cried out. They told him the water was pure and clean. Later, sitting on the steps of a now forgotten house, the same girl, whoever she was, taught him to knit. Knit one, purl one (69).

Vikram cannot get rid of his past and always remains disturbed. In absence of a family and relatives, Vikram looses all connections with human affection, emotion, love and feelings. Unaware of what should be done, he abuses a girl from the nearby shop and gets dark pleasure. At other times, he is mostly haunted by his childhood memories.

> They called him baby; it was the only word of English they knew and they were proud they could speak English, even though they had not been to school. Vikram knew they had loved him. Their excited voices had encircled him, round and round,

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picking him up and kissing him until he laughed with pleasure. He supposed it was pleasure (69).

Vikram's rather painful and unpleasant memory, in a way, is "intentionally hold on to the remembrance of the pain of a trauma and try to work out individual or cultural mechanisms for its keeping, transmitting, and expressing" (Nikulin 20).

Vikram is discovered by Gerard, an owner of a gem store and a Tamil undercover agent. He becomes a puppet at the hands of Gerard, his unscrupulous controller, who exploits the traumatized, damaged Tamils by preaching vengeance but carries secret political ambitions of his own. He gradually succeeds in influencing Vikram to take avenge of his dead family by killing other innocent people. As time passes, Vikram joins Gerard in many destructive bomb blasts, genocides and mass killing.

Vikram is the classmate of Jim Mendis, Nulani's brother. He grows a deep likeness towards Nulani, but feels nervous in her presence. Vikram finds a striking resemblance between Nulani and his dead sister and starts admiring her. He follows her unnoticed and finds it difficult regarding her friendship with Theo, whom he considers as an 'old man'.

> Her smile gave him the oddest of feelings. It made him remember things best forgotten, things that were no longer his to remember....she was absorbed in knitting... (99).

In his work *Déjà Vu*: *Aberrations of Cultural Memory*, Peter Krapp mentions how Freud talks about the repression of childhood memory which later gives birth to trauma, another form of memory, full of suffering and pain. Later on, it appears as a screen memory in the form of "displacement, repression, secondary revision", as Krapp observes.

> In short, a screen memory is genuine to the extent that it presents not its own content as valuable, but the relation between it and some other memory that exists in repression. The screen memory is thus no mere counterfeit, but the temporal folding of two "memories": it represents as the memory of an earlier time data that in fact are connected to a later time, yet are transported back by virtue of a symbolic link (5).

Nulani always carries the memory of her dead father, who was a true inspiration in her life. Theo comes to learn about Nulani from his man servant Sugi. She also starts sharing her past life with Theo and particularly mentions an incident of stealing a box of Venus B pencils from their English neighbour. She wanted to draw her sleeping brother but got discovered. Her family members felt very ashamed and scolded her for her mischief. Her mother describes her as "obstinate and odd" (11).

Though a minor character, Sugi plays a crucial role in the lives of Theo and Nulani. Sugi always acts responsibly, who is more than a servant to Theo. He takes care of every little and minute things of his master. Sugi fondly remembers "the first time he met Sir, on that afternoon as he walked from the station, carrying his smart leather bags" (81). Theo starts sharing each and every details of his personal life along with pain, suffering and emotion to Sugi, whom he trusts more than anyone else in the entire world. Though he initially dislikes Nulani's visit to Theo's home forbidding him to mix up with the girl. However, he starts showing affection towards the girl, as she is neglected at her home. He cooks food for them and often squeezes lemon juice particularly for Nulani. When Theo goes to London for the premier of the film made on his book, Nulani becomes melancholic and lonely. She also suffers due to her mother's illness, caused by malaria. She finds it difficult to tackle with the situations. Sugi then offers her mental support and help. So she keeps on visiting Theo's place even after his absence. To console and lighten her, Sugi tells her own stories of his youth and his love affair with a foreign girl. He mentions his service life at the Mount Lavinia Hotel in Colombo where he met a woman called Sandy Fleming.

Theo's life can be divided into three parts in the entire novel. Firstly, in the beach house and his friendship with Nulani, secondly as a hostage of the Singhalese soldiers and then of the LTTE and lastly his escape from hostage life till he meets Nulani again. Through these different phases, Theo encounters various associations with memory and forgetting. During the first phase, Theo finds solace in the company of Nulani, who gradually fills in the empty place of his heart. Nulani keeps on drawing him from 'memory', even after his physical presence.

Theo starts longing for Nulani all the time. She once went to a festival with her mother held deep inside the jungle for several days. It is the festival of a "god with many hands" which sat "inside the dagoba" (63). Theo could not even bear her absence and longs for her early return.

> For days after Nulani had left for the festival, the smells of linseed oil and colours had hovered around the house but then it had grown fainter. Theo, remembering once more the loss of other smells, other memories, had buried himself in his work (73).

Theo's life appears like a void, which Nulani fills in gradually. Nulani's company helps Theo to overcome the grief of his dead wife. Nulani becomes a threshold for his second innings of life. Past no longer disturbs him and he looks forward to be absorbed in the love and care of the girl. Nulani becomes a perfect artist gradually, drawing three different portraits of Theo, whom she always draws from her 'memory'. So, Theo

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decides to take her to his painter friend Rohan Fernando who lives in Colombo, along with his Italian wife Guilia. Theo takes Nulani to Colombo through deserted, bomb-shelled places, amidst tight security. However they arrive safe at Rohan's place. Guilia's presence reminds Theo of Anna, as both were Italian.

> For a second Theo was struck by the returning past. In this way had she come towards him when he had gone before, so that the memory of Anna returned him again. The cuttlefish pasta, the wine, the clove-scented cigarettes...In this way he remembered it, with a sudden rush, sweetly, and without bitterness. Somewhere nearby were the faint cries of seagulls, and he heard these too, coming back to him hauntingly, as though from another, different, Adriatic sky (90).

Nulani's paintings get much appraisal from Rohan who wishes to arrange an art exhibition for her in Colombo as well as in abroad. Later, Theo prepares to leave for London for a period of six weeks, as one of his books is made into film. However, Nulani's uncle restricts her to visit Theo's house. Falling in love, Theo finally decides to marry Nulani, once he is back from London. He is also worried regarding her safety and thus arranges money and a passport for her in advance, in case she is in any trouble. He explains everything to Sugi how to take good care of the girl in his absence and send her immediately to Colombo if any emergency occurs. Sugi has always remained a faithful servant to his master, performing every duty Theo imposes upon him.

Vikram meanwhile gets training at the special Tiger camp called Leopard Brigade and becomes in charge of the next big mission, along with his companion Gopal. Thus just after the landing from the flight, Theo witnesses, and a series of explosions, which set fire seven aircrafts at the Katunayake International airport at Colombo. Everyone dies, except Vikram who is being rescued by Gerard. But the death of his friend Gopal makes Vikram very sentimental and sad. Sensing a drastic change in his behaviour, Gerard offers him a new job in Colombo. When he finally reaches there by train, an explosion occurs at the railway carriage killing many people including Vikram.

Theo manages to come back to the beach house where Nulani impatiently waits for him. She loses her mother one day ago, who suffered from malaria and thus being killed by mosquitoes. She becomes an orphan finally at the age of eighteen. Theo consoles her that night and when she finally sleeps peacefully, Theo hears unusual sounds outside his house. So he goes out to find Nulani's uncle accompanied by several others. They are searching for Nulani. Theo tries to explain that he is willing to marry Nulani but he is hit by the head and kidnapped. It is too late for Sugi to go and find his master in the darkness of the night. Foreseeing the upcoming danger, Sugi awakes Nulani and takes her to the railway crossing, by the night. He manages to push her into a mail truck, attracting the people towards himself. Nulani clearly witnesses how Sugi is being gunned down by bullets, sacrificing his life to save hers. Nulani arrives at Rohan's house bereft and devastated. Both Rohan and Guilia convince Nulani to leave for London, as Theo has arranged. After her departure, they also leave the country to find peace and security in Venice. Theo's return leads to his kidnap, brutal and inhuman torture, first by the Singhalese army and then by the Tamil Tigers. Theo undergoes severe punishments like being beaten up, electrified, blindfolded in the small cell and left to die. It never matters whether he is a Singhalese or Tamil after being captivated.

The narrative of *Mosquito* thus is a reflection of cultural memory. In the "Introduction' to his book *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Jan Assmann deals with the term 'cultural memory' in details. He opines,

> It is "cultural" because it can only be realized institutionally and artificially, and it is "memory" because in relation to social communication it functions in exactly the same way as individual memory does in relation to consciousness (9).

Memory transmits and fuses human situatedness in an uneven way from which one cannot recover. Theo's memory, in a way, leads him to nowhere, when he becomes a hostage. He undergoes severe tortures, relentless beating, being blindfolded and other harsh punishments for which he partially loses his sense of remembering. His memory is drained out because of the brutal acts imposed on him by the warmongers. Theo passes through a phase of nonchalant identity and everybody loses any hope of his return. Theo cannot recall any particular time or event, when he is put in the little cell to die along with other prisoners. The fact he is a Singhalese is of no relevance. He passes his days and nights in the compact cell where the Tamils are kept. "What was the past", Theo wondered, "shivering, but only the substance of present memory? Time had lost all meaning" (182). He met two brothers, who were medical students who could not complete their studies due to the new law of banning Tamil students. Their sister however succeeds in escaping to England where she continues her studies to be a doctor. Life and death become two sides of the same coin. Theo can feel the horrors of death, as every day the Singhalese army picked up some Tamils to kill and again refilling the cell with new ones. He remained in that filthy cell for nearly fourteen months living with the "complete lack of privacy and the stench of the latrine" (188).

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Sri Lanka has turned into a volatile hotbed of violence, extremist activities and militant operations since its independence from the British in 1948. The constant clash between the Singhalese and the Tamils rises from the country's history and its present situations. The Singhalese believe that "Buddha himself entrusted the island's destiny to the Sinhala people as guardians of his teaching" (Spencer 3). The Tamils, being minority face discrimination and negligence in the country. Jonathan Spencer thus observes,

> Both 'official history' and 'opposition history' agree on the basic terms of the argument: present conflicts can only be explained by reference to the past. The war which has been fought between the armed Tamil separatists and the Sinhala-dominated government has been accompanied by rhetorical wars fought over archaeological sites, place-name etymologies, and the interpretation of ancient inscriptions (ibid).

Theo, on the verge of being set free by the Singhalese army, again gets captured by the Tamil Tigers. He was being transferred from the prison cell to an unknown place in a vehicle. But they faced road block followed by a loud explosion. The driver died on spot and Theo was captured by the Tamil militants, who tortured him in the most inhuman, savage manner.

By this time, Nulani settles down in London, to become a painter of repute. She carries the memory of Theo all the years, believing him to be alive. Rohan and Guilia, on the other hand, leave any hope of Theo's survival. They also lose contact of Nulani in London, after many vain attempts to find her out. She initially sent letters while they were in Colombo, but this has also stopped once they moved to Italy. Rohan initially tries to track Theo, enquiring people about him and also visiting his house once. But he fails to find any trace of Theo and finally believes him to be dead.

Rohan and Guilia also were being kept under silent vigilance and suddenly they no more received letters from Nulani. The one they got was already read beforehand by unknown people. It was a troublesome time when a "Cabinet minister was assassinated, seventeen members of the public injured, three killed on a bus" (209). Non-stop curfews, road blocks, bomb-blasts become regular scenarios. Rohan vows never to return to his place where their neighbours also behave in suspicious ways. On the night of their departure, someone sets fire to their house, believing them to be inside.

Gerard keeps Theo as hostage for his own purpose even though the Tamil Chief wants to set him free. Gerard keeps Theo inside the forest and compels him to write for the Tamils. Theo, after recovering slowly from his memory loss, starts writing about his past life, mostly spent with Anna. The Tamils finally discovered Gerard and punished him by beheading for his betrayal.

Theo finally returns to the Beach House after four years of exile, only to discover that everybody left him deserted. Thercy, the maid of Vikram and a past friend of Sugi starts taking care of him, encouraging him to find his lost contacts. So, Theo contacts his agent in London who thought him dead already and sends the manuscript of his new book. The agent gets excited and finds the book to be the best among all. Theo's life by this time has become an admixture of different memories- personal, emotional, traumatic, nostalgic and haunting. His days and nights seem to loss all meaning. What he retrieves back is a bunch of memories, sometimes clear and sometimes foggy and distant. The entire narrative of *Mosquito* thus is a book of memory, experienced and expressed through the medium of memory. Every character plays the role of a carrier of memory. In this regards, Jeanette Rodríguez & Ted Fortier in the chapter entitled "The Concept of Cultural Memory" observe,

> With regard to cultural memory, therefore, we contend that a people carry a memory and that the memory itself is also a carrier. One means by which memory is transmitted is through narrative. Narrative emphasizes the active, self-shaping quality of human thought. Its power resides in its ability to create, form, refashion, and reclaim identity (7).

Rohan and Giulia start their lives anew at Venice, away from the disturbed homeland. They lose all contacts with Nulani after vain searches in London. In her last letters, Nulani mentioned that she was living alone, away from her brother Jim Mendis. In due course, Giulia declares Nulani Mendis a "thing of the past", trying to "learn to live only our memories" (229). Rohan retains his act of painting, after a reasonable break. However, his paintings are now totally different from his previous ones, mostly highlighted in the colour grey. He painted "blocks of flats from which light seeped out and formless human presence, ghosts sitting patiently, waiting for or guarding some unseen treasure" (243). Rohan and Giulia carry the burden of the war wherever they go, unable to get rid of it.

During that time, Rohan is approached by a lady named Alison Fielding from London, inviting him to exhibit his paintings in her place. In her art gallery, Rohan gets the mention of Nulani, whose paintings has become famous by that time. So, it is re-union of old friends, separated by time and space. Alison organises an art exhibition called "Two Sri Lankan Painters" (282). The paintings reflect "similar experiences" as "they've suffered. Lost friends, relatives, become displaced" (ibid). Theo's agent also gets an invitation where one of Theo's portraits has been exhibited. He gets confused and contacts the lady. She further provides the contact details of Rohan. So, he sends him a letter mentioning

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Theo's latest venture, with a new book getting published soon.

In "Cultural Memory: A European Perspective", Vitafortunati And Elena Lamberti observes,

> For an individual, as well as for a nation, cultural memory is a complex and stratified entity strictly connected not only to the history and the experience of either the individual or the nation, but also to the way in which that very history and experience are read in time, individually and collectively. Each time, the past acquires new meanings and the same fact, even though it stays the same, is nevertheless shaped through remembrance; inevitably, it is juxtaposed against new backgrounds, new biographies, and new recollections (128).

Time plays a crucial role creating a flood of memory among the characters of *Mosquito*. Rohan becomes an acclaimed painter in Italy, highly praised by critics. His paintings remind a "shared grief, of dreams vaguely remembered, furniture that served as receptacles of memory. All human life, in fact, reduced to memory" (2007:260). The novel, however, is a celebration of human will-power and love. After all inhuman act, genocides and violence, an individual has the ability to raise voice against such socio-political unrest and bring change to the society.

The novel thus comes to a happy ending. A house can never turn into 'home' in absence of near and dear ones. Theo visits Venice to meet Nulani at Rohan's house, after long ten years. Theo feels a strong sense of homecoming in a foreign land which is "not his home; why then, did he feel he was coming home?" (291). Each person, thus, carries a slice of memory of native place wherever s/he goes and this is powerfully articulated in *Mosquito*.

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