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Cultural Memory and Mnemocultural Praxis in Roma Tearne's Fictions

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Abstract:

The writings of Roma Tearne, the Sri Lankan diasporic writer, make a sustained inquiry into the mnemocultural formations and the retentive systems of memory. Memory plays a pivotal role in storytelling. It is a sieve through which the segments of the stories are filtered. Moreover, studies of memory and memory-making have got caught up in the world of materiality or material agency. The act of mapping memory is intricately connected to the constitution of the self and society through their engagements with the material world. Memory making, no doubt, constitutes distinct configurations of knowledge. Also the 'culture' of memory, being a socio-semiotic act essentially involves not only the notion of the self and community but it also penetrates into other fields of enquiry, like, anthropology, architecture and art. In Tearne, cultural memory is composed, mediated and transformed through the medium of the body. Such embodied and enacted cultural forms make an entry into her fictions exclusively. This paper tries to analyse how cultural memory and mnemocultural praxis augment and accentuate the acts of inheritances in her fictions.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Mnemocultural Praxis, Sri Lanka, Diaspora.

For a diasporic writer like Roma Tearne, memory is the most potential tool for her works, be it fiction, painting or film-making. Separation from the motherland and settlement in a foreign country always paves way to innumerable instances of memory-making, memory-mapping and memory-traces. This paper attempts to discuss the role of 'cultural memory' in the fictions penned down by Roma Tearne, a Sri Lankan diasporic writer settled in the UK. The family of Roma Tearne left Colombo in the early 1960s, since the country already turned out to be a hotspot of violent uprisings that left many civilians dead. She became a Leverhulme resident artist at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum in 2002 and was a fellow at Oxford Brookes University. Her first novel, *Mosquito* (2007), was shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award and the Kiriya Prize. Her other novels include, *Bone China* (2008), *Brixton Beach* (2009), *The Swimmer* (2010), *The Road to Urbino* (2012), *The Dark Side of the World* (2012) and *The Last Pier* (2015). However, this present paper would exclude the last two fictions from the discussion.

Roma Tearne is known for 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 Sinhalese. The Tamils are the minority in Sri Lanka while the Sinhalese dominates the nation. After independence in 1948, the Sinhalese Govt. passed certain discriminatory laws and acts which deprived the Tamils of their rights in the country. A whole lot of Tamils were deported back to India while the others stayed back, of course without the tag of citizenship being attached to them. Sinhala was made the official language for which the Tamils could not find suitable jobs or avail good education. The Tamils were indirectly barred from being entitled to higher education or any dignified job. In the process, most of the Tamil families started migrating and taking refuge in foreign countries. Partly, the emergence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE, also known as the Tamil Tigers), was instrumental in giving a violent turn to the events. Right from its inception on 23rd July 1983 to 2009, LTTE fought for long twenty six (26) years to create an independent Tamil state called Tamil Eelam in the North and East of the island and resorted to nefarious activities, like assassinating, mass killing or genocide and so on. After twenty six years (26) 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.

Contemporary diasporic writings in Sri Lanka, be it English, Sinhalese or Tamil, is laced with a reflexive overtone of belonging and alienation, which seamlessly carry the rafts of memory, history and imagination at the core. Diasporic writers like Rienzi Crusz, Romesh Gunsekera, Shehan Karunatilaka, Mary Anne Mohanraj, and Chandni Lokuge have been forging new linkages with a shared past and in the process showcasing the fragmented and disjointed facets of history. The entry on Sri Lankan Literature in *The Encyclopaedia of the Sri Lankan Diaspora* (2013) edited by Peter Reeves mentions the 'multivalent positionings' of the diasporic writers. To quote from it,

While writers may share a point of origin in Sri Lanka, this is staggered historically and spatially and then refracted according to the varied diasporic locations in which they live and write (66).

Similarly, Roma Tearne's writings present the "beauty and brutality of Sri Lanka as indivisible, in an unsettling conjunction that is a quality of much diasporic writing" (ibid: 68). Her personal stories of displacement, loss and memory, are powerfully infused in novels that register the intensely personal privations of an inescapable war... (ibid: 67).

Memory has always remained a scope for varied utilization, depending on the place and space the writer/reader/encoder occupies. Here comes the necessity of a "culture" of memory which truly reflects on the multifarious experiences of the people and the world. The act of mapping memory is intricately connected to the constitution of the self and society by means of the engagements with the material world. Memory making, no doubt, constitutes distinctively different configurations of knowledge and it also lays emphasis on discursive practices that refer to the complex and largely hidden interrelations between institutions, techniques, social groups, and perceptual modes. It is, in fact, woven to the fabric of material culture as it "links both to the radical ideas of mimesis, simulacra, and agency and to the more mundane notions of goods, services, and economic structures" as observed by Lynn

Meskill (Preucel 5). This stance further reveals that the ‘culture’ of memory being a social semiotic act essentially involves not only the notion of community but it also penetrates into other fields of enquiry, like, anthropology, architecture, and art.

The concept of Mnemonics originally stems from the Greek mythology. The Greeks worshipped Mnemosyne, as the goddess of Memory and mother of all the Muses. Mnemonics are the memory techniques which help in making memory effective and interesting. Memory works like a continuous system operator which starts right after our birth. It is however, extremely difficult or impossible to memorise every particular incident, situation or event related to our lives. Remembering and forgetting are in fact ceaseless processes of the art of memory. The study of Mnemonics can help in organising memory in a systematic way.

Mnemocultural praxis is a recent development which gets underway, keeping in mind the South Asian colonial past. So, Dr. Venkat Rao takes up a non-Western stance while dissecting Derrida in his thought-provoking essay “Derrida Elsewhere: A Mnemocultural Dispersal” (2009). He opines,

Mnemocultures are cultures of memory. Memory in Indic or Sanskrit mnemocultures, unlike in Plato, is neither figured as a malleable inscriptional substrate nor personified by any archon (Mnemon). Nor does memory here have a presiding deity like Mnemosyne- the mother of all Muse. In effect, memory does not seem to sublimate in any narrative line here. There is no mythology of memory to be valorised as in Plato’s Phaedrus (2003) or Theatetus (1977) in the Sanskrit tradition (314).

In Roma Tearne cultural memory is composed, mediated and transformed through the medium of the body. Tearne maintains that the body is a locus of articulated inheritances. Such embodied and enacted cultural forms make an entry into her novels like *Mosquito* (2007), *Bone China* (2008), *Brixton Beach* (2009), *The Swimmer* (2010) and *The Road to Urbino* (2012). Memories are affective to the body as marks and traces. “When memories are articulated”, Dr. Rao observes, “the bodies that give them form in turn affect them; they mutually constitute each other” (59).

Memory has been variedly contextualised in the novels of Roma Tearne. There are significant assessments of modes of memorising and forgetting, identifying and locating oneself amidst the rafts of struggle, trauma, displacement, dislocation, and disembodiment. As Rodriguez and Chawla put it, “the task of memory is to guard stories and keep them safe, until the time is right for the plots to struggle out. But then, one may ask, how do these plots struggle out? What keeps them alive? And what eventually pries them free from memory and history?” (15-16).

In Sri Lanka the colonial era mostly erased or ignored the prevalent socio-cultural realities, practices and memories, both singular and collective. At the wake of new alignments in a post globalized era, vast emphasis has been given on marginalized territorial locations, unheard voices and discovery of lost routes. Colonial intervention in the region

added a new chapter in the making and unmaking of the nation's history and has obliquely redrawn geographical boundaries, shaped and re-shaped cultures with wider significances. The different pretexts and strategies meant for ruling the natives with a smooth agenda and thus, for subverting all possible ways of any local resistance act as vital catalysts for the colonialists to "write" the place off. In Sri Lanka, this in return produced a veritable archive of knowledge. In the whole process, a dominating power strategy was at work. It can be maintained that under the colonial dispensation the natives were silent and are being constructed and reconstructed within the monolingualism of the colonizers. As a consequence, not only the pre-colonial cultural geography was reconstructed but in the process, a whole chunk of cultural memory was reconfigured. Thus, Minoli Salgado observes,

In determining the boundaries of what constitutes 'Sri Lankan literature in English' there is therefore a need to engage with the contexts of cultural contestation in which postcolonial canonisation meets the legitimating strategies of national affirmation – a context of social and cultural instability whereby a resident writer may well be rendered an outsider, and 'Sri Lankan' writers abroad may find themselves deemed foreigners in their native land (9).

Recollection can be a potent tool for enlivening and retrieving what is being lost in history, culture, and religion; there is a search for the root while re-capturing and re-tracing the lost tradition. Thus, "memory and fictional creation", as Dennis Walder upholds, "appear to be inextricably entwined; and somewhere in there lies nostalgia, with all the ambiguities and contradictions it brings in its wake (7). Tearne treats memory as a starting point and springboard for a series of inter-related and diffuse cultural, social and political experiences stemming from an association with both real and imagined spaces. The process itself is generative and enabling, and is inevitably bound up with what we do with a land; how we shape, construct, imagine, transform and destroy it.

In Tearne's fiction, there is a pattern of revisiting the places again and again. *Mosquito* (2007), her debut novel, was shortlisted for Kiriyama Prize for fiction. Theo Samarajeeva, the protagonist of the novel is a reputed writer cum filmmaker in London who finally returns to his home after the death of his Italian wife Anna during childbirth. He falls in love with Nulani Mendis, younger than him and almost half of his age. Tearne links her love story to current national politics, the ongoing civil war and an atmosphere of terror and insecurity. Theo's return leads to his kidnap, brutal and inhuman torture, first by the Sinhalese army and then by the Tamil Tigers. Theo undergoes severe tortures, being beaten up, electrified, blindfolded in the small cell and left to die. It never matters whether he is a Sinhalese or Tamil after being captivated. Theo no longer is able to differentiate his present with his past, suffering from rapid memory loss. His thoughts start rushing "careering against each other in a confusion of past events. What was the past, he wondered, shivering, but only the substance of present memory? Time had lost all meaning" (182). However his memory returns in bits and pieces when a "few nights previously he had remembered the post-mortem after Anna's death. She had been pregnant, he remembered. His memory had come with the

rain” (229). Roma Tearne brings in an amazing end to the breathtaking story of violence and terror with the union of the lovers Theo and Nulani, quite surprisingly in Venice. The lush green landscapes, the sea, the tropical weather, rain and summer of Sri Lanka pave the way to oscillating orbits of memory, remembrance, loss and nostalgia in the novel.

Brixton Beach (2009) portrays the dynamics of an inter-caste marriage and the struggle, pain and suffering which follows later. Sita, a Sinhalese born into the Fonseka family falls in love with Stanley, a Tamil and eventually gets married to him. Their daughter Alice is the protagonist of the novel who becomes an eye-witness to her family disputes, her father’s decision to settle in the UK and life after that. While Alice was ten years old, her father decided to move to London in the hope of better luck and fortune. Alice came back with her mother Sita to the Sea House up on the Mount Lavinia Hill which belonged to her maternal grandparents.

Brixton is the name of the house where Roma Tearne and her parents lived in Britain, after leaving Sri Lanka. Her parents have died in that house and after that she moves to some other place. But later she revisits the house as she wants “to write about a woman who searches for her lost past” (412). There is a sepia painting of the Mt Lavinia beach in the house and she talked about it in the novel. Slightly altered, the Mount Lavinia Hill in the novel is linked with the place where Sita’s parents have lived. The act of visiting an old, deserted house brings back to her mind a flood of memories bordering on a sense of loss and alienation. In her words,

How often does one see, on entering a foreign house in some corner of Britain, a place where two worlds meet and a sense of place overlaps? (412-13).

When Alice’s grandparents died, the Sea House where they have lived is sold, as nobody is there to look after it. It remains deserted for many years until Janake, Alice’s childhood friend starts revisiting it. He loves to “listen to the sounds in the house, the murmuring and whispering that went on it; like a shell echoing the waves. There was no one but Janake to listen to these unresolved voices. Alice, they called, Alice!” (306). The complex practices and means by which the past invests in the present are noteworthy: memory is the ‘present past’ here. *Brixton Beach* and *Mosquito* show us how the act of remembering is always in and of the present, while its referent is the past and thus absent. Inevitably, every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting and absence.

In his thought-provoking essay ‘Memory and Personal Identity’, Mrinal Miri examines how memory helps in the construction of personal identity, citing examples of S. Shoemaker and D. Wiggins with their respective observations. While S. Shoemaker believes memory as “constitutive of personal identity”; D. Wiggins prefers memory as a “criterion of personal identity”. However, there are numerous difficulties in arriving at one particular theory of memory and identity, as observed by Miri. In his words,

This difficulty of the memory theorist could, it might be thought, be avoided by admitting the essentially causal nature of the concept of memory. Memory involves the notion of a special type of causal chain beginning at the time of the experience whose memory is in question (4).

At the launch of *Bone China* (2010), Tearne projects how she weaves the issues of autobiographical elements in her novel as the "story of the De Silva family evolved from traces of real incidents and real events" (Wheelwright). The fiction, in fact, grew from a painting and now she recreates her themes through a different medium, i.e., words. In the novel, Tearne introduces three generations of the De Silva family, who had tragically lost the ownership of tea plantation after independence. They could not withstand the language law imposed by the Singhalese government and the three sons fled to London, a dream destination. However, they only experienced resentments and disappointments in London in the 1960s. They were the displaced, helpless, and alienated "others" in the foreign land. The only grandchild of the family, Anna-Meeka, finally succeeded in coping with the changing environment and grew to make a home of her own in that foreign land. She got married to Henry Middleton, an Englishman who was in love with her deeply and honestly. Still, she craved for her distant homeland,

She needed to see her home once more. She needed to see that long-forgotten place, with its sweet, soft sound of the ocean, its wide sweep of beaches, and its clear tropical skies...she saw that the things that had been mislaid, the history that had been buried and the memories no longer spoken of, all these things, were somehow being given back to her (399-400).

The act of shaping up memory in a narrative invokes strategies of remembering, forgetting, nostalgia, hysteria and pain. Memory, at times, also becomes selective. In the Introduction to his book, *Postcolonial Nostalgias, Writing, Representation, and Memory* (2011), Dennis Walder observes that "situating ourselves in time and space involves us in constructing a thread of meaning that enables us to know, or think we know, who and what we are in the present: in other words, by narrative" (6).

The 'loss of history' is in fact the central theme of the novel *Bone China*. Roma Tearne reflects on the devastating sense of 'loss' experienced by the De Silva family that migrates to England, and the aftermath; especially how the family suffers culturally. The family realises that its sense of history is interlinked with the present 'identity', which it must discard to move ahead. The time lines are tangled and they fold back on themselves.

The plots of *The Swimmer* and *The Road to Urbino* evolve in foreign lands, instead of Sri Lanka. While the story of *The Swimmer* unfolds in an archetypal English village, *The Road to Urbino* describes the Italian countryside. *The Swimmer* (2010) is the story of Maria Robinson or Ria who constantly revisits her past, appearing as flashbacks. She is a solitary middle-aged poet who lives in a small Suffolk village of Orford who gradually falls in love with Ben, a young Sri Lankan doctor who is also an illegal immigrant. Ria particularly

becomes nostalgic remembering her childhood days in East Anglia. It was a “place of both love and betrayal, of far-away summers and family fictions. A place where my beloved father had walked with me in the matchstick woods, and the place where, after his death, I returned to briefly in despair” (11). She pens down a collection of poetry which is about “water and the way memory travels through it” (34).

The Swimmer, however, coincides two parallel strands of memory- the first one is of Ria and her nostalgic past in Suffolk and the other is of Ben, the illegal young migrant from Sri Lanka and his traumatic past. Ben is always afraid to be sent back as he foresees his death in his own country, which no more sympathises with him. So he often declares himself as a person “lost in transit” (89). The novel presents a series of crimes often committed by people of different colour and race which create a chain of disasters and eventual repercussions. Tearne in between succeeds in painting a breath-taking view of the Suffolk skies with her imagination.

Memory often tends to be objectified when situational changelings occur. Human mind stores piled up memories which later becomes transmittable with any sound, gesture, attachment with things and the like. This is also the process how cultural memory grows. Cultural memory, a kind institution is thus “exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. External objects as carriers of memory play a role already on the level of personal memory” (Assmann 110-111).

A sense of displacement can also be traced in the novel *The Road to Urbino* (2012). It is the story of Lynton Rasanagium or popularly known as Ras who spends his life in the prison after committing the thievery of a priceless, mysterious fresco. The novel appears in the form of a conversation between Ras and his barrister Elizabeth. Ras unfurls his past full of unspeakable tragedy unfolding in Sri Lanka, London and finally in Italy which spurred him to commit the thievery. It was actually a revolt or a platform to raise the voice, to draw the attention of the world towards the helpless immigrants’ miseries and loss. His beloved mother, whom he mentions as a ‘small woman,’ used to haunt him repeatedly,

With no warning, I am back in Jaffna, age five, sitting on the step while she prepares our food. Three red chillies strung against an uncut lime dangle from the door handle, she had hung them there to ward off evil (16).

Ras confesses nonchalantly that he is “cursed with a photographic memory” (19), in front of his barrister, Elizabeth in the prison. Roma Tearne presents a series of lyrical prose that accentuate her narrative skill. Throughout all her novels, Tearne offers scopes for the explorations of memory, shifting terrains and the inexpressible trauma of wars and their impact upon human lives. The opening lines of *The Road to Urbino*, thus, offer a dreamlike presence of a long lost place thus,

Last night I dreamt I was in Talaimannar again. With the ancient lighthouse casting yellow stripes across the water and the rock rising steeply against the sky. The sea was calm and Adam's Bridge was clearly visible in the dusk. In my dream Good triumphed over the demon Ravana and I saw once again the rutted lane that led, through a thicket of trees, to the old beloved place (3).

Mnemocultural praxis thus offers a crucial link in the formation of identical trajectories in diasporic literature. The theoretical articulation further helps in forging and manufacturing the lost past. Being an invincible segment of culture, how memory is retrieved and preserved is an interesting arena. In Sri Lanka the act of remembering hinges on a plethora of shared cultures and histories. The memory of a colonized past and its repercussion afterwards gives rise to the growth of a collective memory. A country like Sri Lanka experienced the colonial erasure of its ethnic culture, tradition, religion, language which further led to a loss of a sense of originality and later, identity. What it retrieved back from its past is a bunch of collective memory, which appears in ruptures and fragments. Similarly, in the novels of Roma Tearne the role of cultural memory is foregrounded. When considered in the light of memory, her writing appears as a mnemonic art par excellence. This act is akin to writing culture's memory, not as a simple recording device but as a body of commemorative actions that include the knowledge stored by a culture, what culture has produced and by which a culture is constituted. The act of writing is both an evocation of chunks of memory and begetting new interpretations, by which every new text is etched into new spatial parameters.

Tearne's novels carry at their hearts an amalgamation of lost identities, cultures, race, diverse ideologies and an admixture of old and new social, political and national conceptualisations. A decisive articulation of the changes occurring in and around Sri Lanka, her writing is marked as a site of historical, material and cultural production. The question of identity as embodied in these writings is situational, not merely unidirectional, like what culture or tradition attributes. So, there are inherent possibilities of thematic variations in the line of cultural flux, multiple identities, acculturation, displacement, and rootlessness in the evocation of life-worlds.

Narratives produced in Sri Lanka offer a huge prospect to re-analyze and re-interpret the contours of the land and place. "Fiction flows", observes Lidia Curti, "between life and imagination," and thereby it forges direct links between/among diverse "worlds" (1998: viii). In a way, the fictions of Roma Tearne are situated in an 'in-between' space where myth turns into reality and vice-versa, and is variously reflexive in dense literary articulations. Her novels establish the nodes and internodes of a mnemonic culture that is based on memory-making, memory-mapping and cartographic representations of places that lean on deeper socio-cultural values. Hereby, investing the respective places with new nuances, her novels open up the political imbrications of documentation and archiving at the face of colonial intervention.

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