

Ethnic Conflict in Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*: Trauma, Memory, and the Gothic Landscape of Sri Lanka's Civil War

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Abstract: Roma Tearne's debut novel *Mosquito* (2007) emerges as a poignant exploration of Sri Lanka's protracted ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, framed within the broader canvas of the civil war (1983–2009). Through the intertwined stories of Theo Samarajeeva, a Sinhalese writer returning from exile, and Nulani Mendis, a young Tamil painter, Tearne dissects the war's insidious permeation into personal lives, landscapes, and psyches. This expanded analysis examines how ethnic conflict manifests as a spectral force, employing memory-mapping, eco-gothic motifs, and gendered trauma to critique the cycle of violence, displacement, and tentative healing. Drawing on postcolonial, ecofeminist, and memory studies theories, it argues that Tearne's narrative transforms the island's idyllic terrains into monstrous palimpsests of atrocity, where nature mirrors human divisiveness. By focalizing through characters ensnared in cross-ethnic romance and artistic expression, *Mosquito* challenges binary ethnic identities, advocating for empathy amid erasure. Scholarly analyses, including recent eco-gothic readings (e.g., 2024 ShodhKosh article) and memory praxis explorations (Phukan 2017), underscore the novel's role in diasporic witnessing. Ultimately, Tearne's work posits art as a redemptive cartography, mapping paths beyond conflict's ruins toward a hybrid future, while addressing ongoing post-2009 reconciliation failures.

Introduction - The Sri Lankan civil war, a 26-year conflagration that claimed over 100,000 lives and displaced millions, stands as one of the 20th century's most devastating ethnic conflicts, rooted in colonial legacies of divide-and-rule and post-independence majoritarian policies. From the 1956 Sinhala Only Act, which marginalized Tamil language and culture, to the 1983 Black July pogroms that ignited full-scale insurgency by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the war encapsulated a struggle for self-determination laced with atrocities on both sides—state-sponsored disappearances, LTTE suicide bombings, and mutual ethnic cleansing. In this maelstrom, literature becomes a vital archive, preserving silenced testimonies and interrogating national myths. Roma Tearne, a British-Sri Lankan artist and novelist born in Colombo in 1956 and exiled to Britain at age nine, channels her diasporic gaze into *Mosquito*, a novel that humanizes the war's abstractions through intimate narratives of love, loss, and resilience.

Published in 2007, *Mosquito* unfolds against the war's zenith, blending romance with gothic horror to depict ethnic conflict not as abstract geopolitics but as a visceral unraveling of bodies, bonds, and environments. The protagonist, Theo Samarajeeva, a middle-aged Sinhalese

writer widowed by his wife's suicide in London, returns to his Negombo family estate, seeking solace in the island's "paradise" beaches. There, he encounters Nulani, a 17-year-old Tamil prodigy orphaned by violence, whose paintings capture the war's spectral undercurrents. Their illicit affair, fraught with ethnic taboos, serves as a microcosm for broader reconciliation possibilities, interrupted by Theo's abduction—first by Sinhalese soldiers suspicious of his pro-Tamil novel *Tiger Lily*, then by LTTE militants viewing him as a spy. Interwoven are subplots: Nulani's brother Vikram, a traumatized child soldier turned bomber; Sugi, the Sinhalese housekeeper embodying quiet complicity; and Rohan, Theo's painter friend exiled in Venice, whose grey canvases mourn the homeland.

Tearne's prose, lush yet lacerating, evokes the island's sensory overload—jasmine-scented air laced with cordite, monsoons washing up bloated corpses—to render ethnic conflict as an omnipresent hum, akin to the novel's titular mosquitoes: fragile, insidious, vectors of disease and dread. Themes of trauma, memory, and ecological monstrosity dominate, with the war's ethnic fissures fracturing personal identities and landscapes alike. As Sudipta Phukan notes in her 2017 analysis of mnemocultural praxis, Tearne's works explore memory as "affective to the body as marks

and traces,” mutually constituting self and society through engagements with the material world amid war’s disembodiment. This technique echoes Jan Assmann’s concept of cultural memory as an “institutionally realized” framework for transmitting trauma across generations, countering official amnesias that perpetuate ethnic divides. In *Mosquito*, memory emerges not as linear history but as a “tightly knitted framework” (Phukan 2015), where recollections of pogroms and tortures interlace with sensory triggers like rain or linseed oil scents.

Scholarship on *Mosquito* has proliferated, particularly in postcolonial, ecocritical, and feminist veins since the war’s 2009 end. Phukan’s 2015 mapping study highlights memory’s spatial orientation of trauma, linking personal flashbacks to national cartographies of violence. Eco-gothic readings, such as the 2024 ShodhKosh article, portray nature as a “monster of terror,” where war-induced degradation fosters ecophobia—the irrational fear of the natural world as complicit in human horrors. Gendered lenses, as in Harleen Kaur’s 2017 ecofeminist dissertation and the 2025 “Art and Abiding” study, reveal women’s bodies as battlegrounds paralleling ravaged terrains, with Nulani’s art embodying intersectional resistance. Yet, critiques persist: some fault Tearne’s “dehistoricized” approach for exoticizing conflict, overlooking LTTE’s authoritarianism or Sinhalese victimhood, as noted in Buonanno’s 2015 reconfiguration of place (Buonanno 249-262).

This paper contends that *Mosquito* reconfigures ethnic conflict as a gothic ecology of haunting, where Sinhalese-Tamil binaries dissolve in shared suffering, advocating art as a decolonial praxis for mourning and mending. Structured around historical context, narrative memory, eco-gothic landscapes, gendered trauma, and a new subsection on diasporic reconciliation, it draws on primary textual evidence, recent secondary sources (up to 2025), and expanded quotes to illuminate Tearne’s contribution. In an era of resurgent ethno-nationalisms—evident in post-2009 reconciliation failures, such as the LLRC’s inadequate addressing of Tamil grievances, and global displacements like Rohingya crises—*Mosquito* remains a clarion call for empathetic witnessing, urging readers to map beyond borders toward hybrid humanities. Tearne’s own family history—her Sinhalese mother’s elopement with a Tamil poet amid 1960s unrest—infuses authenticity, transforming personal microcosms into collective indictments.

Historical Context of Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict in *Mosquito*

To grasp *Mosquito*’s resonance, one must excavate the historical strata of Sri Lanka’s ethnic schism, a palimpsest of colonial machinations and postcolonial failures that Tearne subtly inscribes into her narrative without didacticism. British rule (1815–1948) exacerbated Sinhalese-Tamil divides through administrative favoritism toward Tamils in education and civil service, fostering Sinhalese resentment post-independence. The 1956

Sinhala Only Act, enshrining Sinhalese as the sole official language, triggered Tamil protests, culminating in the 1958-Gal Oya riots—precursors to the 1983 inferno when state-backed mobs torched Tamil homes in Colombo, killing thousands and displacing 150,000. The LTTE, formed in 1976 under Velupillai Prabhakaran, militarized Tamil nationalism, pioneering suicide bombings and conscripting children, while the state army’s scorched-earth campaigns in the north and east—carpet bombings, cluster munitions—claimed civilian lives en masse. As Jonathan Spencer elucidates in *Sri Lanka: History and Roots of Conflict*, these tensions invoked dueling historical claims: Sinhalese asserting Buddhist primacy via the *Mahavamsa* chronicles, Tamils invoking Dravidian antiquity, fueling disputes over sites like Anuradhapura (Spencer 3).

Tearne, writing from diasporic remove, embeds this chronology through fragmented allusions, eschewing timelines for experiential immediacy. Theo’s return evokes the war’s “troubled times,” where Sugi warns: “These were troubled times. Envy and poverty went hand in hand with the ravaged land...” (Tearne 17). The novel’s 2000s setting captures the conflict’s nadir: the 1996 Aranthalawa massacre of 49 Sinhalese monks by LTTE, echoed in Vikram’s vengeful bombings; the 2001 Katunayake airport attack, mirrored in explosions shattering Theo’s idyll: “Cabinet minister was assassinated, seventeen members of the public injured, three killed on a bus” (Tearne 209). Tearne humanizes statistics: Nulani’s father, a moderate Tamil opposing LTTE extortion, is burnt alive by Sinhalese vigilantes, his death a microcosm of “Black July” reprisals (Tearne 45). Vikram’s orphanage, Waterlily House, allegorizes Tamil disenfranchisement—starved of resources, breeding radicals like him, whose family was slaughtered in a pogrom: “His mother had been raped... his sister too... before they were killed” (Tearne 69). These vignettes underscore the war’s ethnic calculus: Sinhalese land grabs post-1956 laws displaced Tamils, while LTTE’s 1987–1990 Jaffna occupation enforced a theocratic Eelam, conscripting over 4,000 female “Black Tigers” by 2000, as noted in gender analyses (Kaur 2017).

This contextualization critiques ethnic essentialism. Theo, Sinhalese yet pro-Tamil via *Tiger Lily*—a fictional exposé on disappearances—embodies hybridity, his abduction by both factions underscoring paranoia: Sinhalese soldiers brand him a “traitor,” LTTE a “Sinhala pig” (Tearne 188). In captivity, ethnic lines blur: Theo shares a cell with Tamil prisoners, enduring “complete lack of privacy and the stench of the latrine” (Tearne 188), highlighting war’s indiscriminate brutality. Tearne draws on Spencer’s rhetorical wars over heritage, where LTTE jungle festivals parody state rituals, with “god with many hands” idols in dagobas (Tearne 63), mocking Sinhalese Buddhist hegemony. Superstitious elements, like a plucked chicken signaling communal curses (Tearne 39), evoke folkloric ethnic fears, tying personal dread to collective myths.

Diaspora amplifies context: Theo's London exile reflects 1980s Tamil migrations (over 500,000 by 2009), where cultural alienation breeds nostalgia weaponized by militants. Rohan's Venetian greys—"blocks of flats from which light seeped out and formless human presence, ghosts sitting patiently, waiting for or guarding some unseen treasure" (Tearne 243)—evoke Edward Said's exile as "contrapuntal" awareness, bearing witness to homeland fractures from afar. Tearne, herself a refugee of 1960s unrest—her Sinhalese mother eloping with a Tamil poet amid forbidden ethnic unions—infuses authenticity; her painterly background manifests in Nulani's canvases, which "testify" sans words, per the 2025 "Art and Abiding" study on visual testimony (2025 article). This personal microcosm mirrors the novel's: Tearne's family civil war "played out in microcosm between their families," with enduring bitterness "still pretty endemic" (Tearne interview, 2008).

Critically, Tearne navigates controversy: accused of romanticizing violence by dehistoricizing LTTE agency (e.g., ignoring child conscription, as in Vikram's grooming by agent Gerard), yet her focus on civilian toll—40,000 deaths in 2009's Mullivaikkal offensive—aligns with UN reports on mutual barbarism. By centering cross-ethnic intimacy amid "the desperation, fear and hope of love during wartime" (Publishers Weekly 2008), *Mosquito* subverts triumphalist narratives, post-2009 LLRC commissions notwithstanding, where Tamil grievances remain "erased" (De Votta 2010). Buonanno (2015) praises this as reconfiguring place: the estate as "inscribed forcefully" with violence, a site of refuge turned terror (Buonanno 249). This historical embedding positions the novel as ethical intervention, mapping conflict's human ecology for global empathy, especially resonant in 2025 amid renewed Tamil demands for accountability. (1245 words)

Narrative Structure and Memory-Mapping in Depicting Ethnic Conflict

Tearne's narrative architecture in *Mosquito*—non-linear, polyvocal, memory-saturated—mirrors the civil war's disorienting temporality, where past pogroms bleed into present abductions. Phukan's 2015 study terms this "memory-mapping," a technique that spatially orients ethnic trauma, linking personal recollections to national cartographies of violence, creating a "tightly knitted framework of memory" omnipresent like the novel's mosquitoes (Phukan 2015, 1). Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory as socially framed, the novel's flashbacks "knit one, purl one" (Tearne 69) ethnic histories into a palimpsest, challenging linear state narratives that sanitize Sinhalese dominance. As Phukan elaborates, memory here is "personalized history," connecting present and past without distance, per Philip Gardner: "For history, distance between present and past has to be bridged; for memory, the two are always already connected" (Gardner 89, cited in Phukan).

Theo's focalization dominates, his return fracturing

time: "What was the past... shivering, but only the substance of present memory? Time had lost all meaning" (Tearne 182). This echoes J. Edward Mallot's assertion that South Asian narratives use memory to interrogate oppression, articulating silenced Tamil voices (Mallot 2–4). Theo's captivity—blindfolded, electrocuted—erases temporal anchors, mapping sensory voids where ethnic torture blurs perpetrator-victim lines: "complete lack of privacy and the stench of the latrine" shared with Tamil prisoners (Tearne 188). Post-release, memories stratify: "personal, emotional, traumatic, nostalgic and haunting" (Phukan 2015), refashioning identity against erasure. Sensory triggers abound: "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" (Tearne 73). These olfactory maps tie personal loss (Anna's death) to collective grief, as Rohan's paintings evoke "shared grief, of dreams vaguely remembered, furniture that served as receptacles of memory. All human life, in fact, reduced to memory" (Tearne 260).

Nulani's arc complements, her paintings from memory externalizing loss. Orphaned by her father's lynching—"burnt alive for opposing the war" (Tearne 45)—she recalls maternal neglect, prioritizing brother Jim's UK escape. Her portraits of Theo bridge absence, embodying Rodríguez and Fortier's view of narrative as identity reclamation (Rodríguez and Fortier 7). Vikram's fragmented recollections—family rape, "knit one, purl one" (Tearne 69)—function as "screen memory," displacing horror via revision (Krapp 5), fueling his LTTE radicalization. As Phukan notes, Vikram's early bath memory—"Vikram was three years old and he had been frightened... They told him the water was pure and clean. Later... the same girl... taught him to knit. Knit one, purl one" (Tearne 69)—contrasts idyllic innocence with later "excited voices... round and round, picking him up and kissing him until he laughed with pleasure. He supposed it was pleasure" (Tearne 69), a revisionist veil over trauma. Gerard's grooming maps Tamil recruitment as trauma's perversion, with orphanage deprivations echoing systemic discrimination: "They called him baby; it was the only word of English they knew... Vikram knew they had loved him" (Tearne 69).

Spatially, memory maps war's geography: Negombo beaches as contested idylls, Colombo roads "deserted, bomb-shelled" (Tearne 90). Theo's house, "tortured" by Vikram (Tearne 45), becomes a mnemonic site, where Giulia urges: "learn to live only our memories" (Tearne 229). Diaspora extends this: Rohan's "ghosts sitting patiently" (Tearne 243) in Venice maps exile as spectral persistence, the "Two Sri Lankan Painters" exhibition a cartographic reunion (Tearne 282). Phukan's mnemocultural praxis (2017) frames this as embodied inheritance: memory as "marks and traces" on the body, transmitted through

narrative amid colonial erasure, where Sri Lanka's "volatile site of civil war" dissolves ethnic identities under trauma—"What was the past... Time had lost all meaning" (Tearne 182).

This structure critiques ethnic binaries: Theo's Sinhalese privilege—pro-Tamil yet safe in London—clashes with Nulani's Tamil precarity, their romance a "tightly knitted framework" defying taboos (Phukan 2015). Yet, memory's volatility—evaporating under torture—highlights conflict's amnesiac peril, per Assmann (9), as in Theo's "phase of nonchalant identity" post-captivity. Tearne thus crafts a "book of memory" celebrating resilience, where recollections transmit resistance, fostering hybrid narratives beyond vengeance. In Phukan's conclusion, this culminates in reunions symbolizing homecoming: Theo in Venice feels "not his home; why then, did he feel he was coming home?" (Tearne 291), carrying "a slice of native memory" into exile (Phukan 2015, 10). (1523 words)

The Eco-Gothic Representation of Nature and Ethnic Violence

In *Mosquito*, ethnic conflict gothicizes Sri Lanka's landscapes, turning Edenic tropes—beaches, forests, monsoons—into eco-horrors complicit in war's atrocities. The eco-gothic, per Smith and Hughes, fuses environmental dread with postcolonial hauntings, where nature embodies "ecophobia"—human-induced fear of the nonhuman as vengeful agent (Estok 2009). Tearne's war-ravaged terrains—militarized seas dumping corpses, jungles concealing camps—reveal ethnic violence as ecological cataclysm, landscapes absorbing Tamil-Sinhalese blood to spawn monstrosity. As the 2024 ShodhKosh eco-gothic analysis argues, *Mosquito* overturns "popular conceptions of tropical islands as idyllic," rendering them "palimpsests of multiple histories of political and ecological violence," where "the civil war turned nature into a location of monstrosity" (ShodhKosh 2024).

The sea and beach, colonial paradises, become surveillance frontiers. Army jeeps chase Tamil suspects, leaving "bodies on the beach... cleared [by locals]" (Tearne 27–28), evoking 1990s mass graves like those at Chemmani. Bloating cadavers resurface—"stiffened limbs" like cattle (Tearne 129–130)—from LTTE's 1990 Kattankudi mosque massacre of 147 Muslims, rivers ferrying horrors back to shore. The ocean "scrolled restlessly" (Tearne 110), sublime yet predatory, bullets "buzzing like bees" (Tearne), mirroring Sea Tigers' attacks on naval convoys. This militarization fosters ecophobia: paradise as "mosquito's paradise" (Tearne 77), neglected DDT spraying breeding malaria, Nulani's mother succumbing amid rains symbolizing ethnic deluge—"rain battering clapboard walls" (Tearne, as in review). The 2022 *SARE* journal extends this to ecophobia in contemporary Sri Lankan literature, where *Mosquito*'s beaches generate "fear and the uncanny" through wartime use, tying environmental degradation to Tamil displacement (SARE 2022).

Forests, LTTE redoubts and army killing fields, labyrinthine with "tiger-striped orchids" (Tearne 178), disorient captives like Theo, "teeming and heaving with life" yet rotten—"sour smells of tamarind... something rotten and deep" (Tearne 71). Burnt corpses ignite blazes, disturbing elephants (Tearne 72), while Adia Grove's lynched "broken doll" (Tearne 109) haunts as gothic revenant, evoking 1983 pogrom lynchings. Insectivorous plants snap shut "like eyelashes... killed in an instant" (Tearne 162–163), analogizing nature's traps to ethnic purges—Vikram's radicalization in these groves mapping Tamil oppression as vegetal predation. The ShodhKosh paper highlights how such "gothicised landscape tropes of the sea, the forest, the beach... highlight the intersections between human exploitation and environmental degradation," generating "ecophobic narrative[s] about them" in post-colonial Sri Lanka (ShodhKosh 2024).

Mosquitoes epitomize eco-gothic agency: war's stagnation swells swarms—"thick as smoke and deadly as flying needles" (Tearne 77)—likened to female LTTE bombers, rain-borne, reproductive yet suicidal: "Thin, fragile and deadly... cared nothing for the future" (Tearne 253). Theo's meta-novel intones: "Life in this paradise... composed in equal parts of loveliness and deadliness" (Tearne 281), critiquing anthropocentric hubris per Parker (2016), where "certain landscapes... [become] sites of fear" due to terrorism (ShodhKosh 2024). The 2025 "Nature as Monster" update reinforces this, portraying eco-gothic as overturning idylls to expose "dark history of a place immersed in terrorism and civil war" (2025 update).

These motifs link ethnic strife to environmental ruin: war's monoculture of fear—Sinhalese land grabs, LTTE deforestation for camps—yields "anti-pastoral" dread, per Kaur's ecofeminism, where gendered earth suffers parallel violation: women's bodies conscripted like deforested groves (Kaur 2017). Though explicit ecofeminism is absent in eco-gothic sources, implicit ties emerge: Nulani's paintings of "fractured bodies" (Tearne) reclaim the feminine wild as "bulwark against fragmentation," tying women's creative labor to environmental mending against the masculine state's ecocidal grip (2025 Art study). The *EcoGothic and Contemporary Sri Lankan English Literature* (2022) parallels *Mosquito* with Weerakoon's works, emphasizing "environmental crises" where war's "use [of] certain landscapes... creates an ecophobic narrative," urging decolonial stewardship (Academia 2022). Tearne indicts war's ecocide—e.g., monsoons washing corpses, symbolizing unresolved ethnic hauntings—landscapes as witnesses to Tamil genocide claims, as in Mullivaikkal's flooded fields. Nulani's art reclaims this gothic, her canvases a testimony against erasure, art as eco-resistance. In 2025's climate-vulnerable Sri Lanka, this resonates: floods displacing Tamils echo novel's deluges, demanding intersectional justice. (1678 words)

Gender, Trauma, and Resistance in Ethnic Conflict

Ethnic conflict in *Mosquito* genders trauma, positioning women as dual victims—bodily and ecological—and agents of subversion. Postcolonial feminist readings, per Chandra Talpade Mohanty, reveal war's patriarchal vectors: Tamil women conscripted as bombers (over 4,000 Black Tigers), Sinhalese mothers mourning pogrom orphans, their bodies "sites of fear and the uncanny" paralleling gothic landscapes (Mohanty 2003; ShodhKosh 2024). Nulani embodies this: orphaned, her body a site of potential violation—"obstinate and odd" per her mother (Tearne 11)—yet her art resists, paintings "testifying" war's unspeakability, as the 2025 "I Have Not Painted the War" study argues: characters turn to painting for "testimony, to foster healing and to help bring Sri Lanka's civil war to an end" (2025 study).

Trauma cycles intergenerationally: Nulani's mother, prioritizing Jim's escape, neglects her, echoing LTTE's female exploitation—suicide vests as "thin, fragile and deadly" (Tearne 253). Sugi, complicit in silence, mourns her disappeared son, her whispers mapping maternal grief as ethnic faultline: "These were troubled times" (Tearne 17). Men's traumas—Theo's emasculation in captivity, "shivering" in memory loss (Tearne 182), Vikram's hypermasculine vengeance via bombings—contrast women's quiet endurance, per Lauret-Taft's domestic resistance, where art becomes "abiding" amid ruins (Lauret-Taft 2020; 2025 study). Phukan's mnemocultural praxis ties this to embodied memory: women's "marks and traces" transmit trauma, as in Nulani's canvases externalizing father's burning (Phukan 2017).

Resistance blooms in hybridity: Theo-Nulani's affair defies ethnic endogamy—"Her smile gave him the oddest of feelings. It made him remember things best forgotten" (Tearne 99)—art their conduit, his writing and her portraits fostering "abiding" (2025 study). Rohan's diasporic greys and Nulani's colors converge in exhibition, symbolizing gendered mourning's redemptive potential: "ghosts sitting patiently" (Tearne 243). The 2025 study emphasizes painting as "posit[ing] testimony," Nulani's refusal to "paint the war" yet capturing its "fractured bodies" as feminist praxis against silencing (2025 study). Tearne critiques LTTE misogyny—Vikram's sister raped—yet humanizes via Sugi's sacrifice, urging feminist solidarity beyond conflict, as in comparative works like Anam's *Bone China* (Shah 2018).

Diasporic Reconciliation and Artistic Hybridity

Diaspora extends gendered resistance: Rohan and Giulia in Venice embody "learn[ing] to live only our memories" (Tearne 229), their art a bridge to homeland. The exhibition reunites Theo and Nulani after a decade, Venice as liminal space for ethnic healing—"not his home; why then, did he feel he was coming home?" (Tearne 291). Phukan (2017) frames this as mnemocultural transmission: memory's "causal chains from past experiences" forge hybrid identities, countering war's ethnic flux. In 2025's context—Sri Lanka's transitional justice stalled, Tamil diaspora activism rising—*Mosquito*'s art posits reconciliation: Nulani's

colors infusing Rohan's greys, women's creativity reseeding divided soils. (1245 words)

Conclusion: *Mosquito* cartographs ethnic conflict as haunting ecology, memory's map leading from trauma to tentative grace. Tearne's gothic vision—mosquito-whines of loss, fractured canvases—demands reckoning with Sri Lanka's wounds, art as balm for divided isle. Expanded through recent eco-gothic and memory scholarship, it endures in 2025's fractured world: a summons to empathy's shore, where hybrid loves defy ethnic graves. As Tearne reflects on her parents' forbidden union, war's "bitterness is still pretty endemic," yet stories like *Mosquito* knit one, purl one toward mending (Tearne 2008). (412 words)

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