

Returning To A Fractured Homeland: Trauma And Identity In Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*

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Abstract : Roma Tearne's novel, *Mosquito* portrays the psychological and emotional dimensions of war trauma by depicting the story of the writer Theo Samarajeeva, an emigrant who faces numerous turmoils after coming back to his mother land. The happenings in the backdrop of Sri Lanka's civil war, presents a deeply personal narrative of fractured identities, internal exile, and emotional collapse. Focusing on the characters of Theo and Nulani Mendis, the research examines how trauma manifests not only in physical suffering but in silence, alienation, and the slow disintegration of one's identity. Drawing on trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Dori Laub, and Jeffrey C. Alexander, the paper places *Mosquito* as both a testimonial and a resistance text—one that transforms pain into narrative. Theo's retreat into muteness after torture, Rohan's depression in exile, and Nulani's inherited grief reflect the breakdown of language and identity under extreme psychological pressure. These characters, although differently wounded, embody what Caruth calls "a speaking wound," where memory and narrative intersect in painful but necessary testimony. Further, the paper indicates how artistic expression—Theo's writing, and Nulani and Rohan's painting—becomes a means of psychic rebirth, offering survivors a language to confront and reshape their trauma.

Key Words- Trauma, Memory, War narratives, fragmented identities, recovery.

I. INTRODUCTION

Roma Tearne, a Sri Lankan-born British novelist, artist, and filmmaker, wrote *Mosquito* drawing upon her personal experiences and the tumultuous history of her homeland. Tearne brings a unique perspective as both an immigrant and a witness to the cultural and political upheavals of Sri Lanka. Her background as an artist and filmmaker informs the vivid imagery and visual storytelling in *Mosquito*. The novel has been praised for its lyrical prose, evocative descriptions of Sri Lanka's landscapes, and sensitive portrayal of war's impact on ordinary lives. By humanizing complex political conflicts through intimate personal narratives, Tearne emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals in wartime.

Mosquito is set during the civil war between the Sinhalese-majority government and the Tamil Tigers. It follows the story of Theo Samarajeeva and Nulani Mendis, a young girl of mixed Sinhalese and Tamil heritage. Nulani's family has been torn apart by the conflict, and she navigates the complexities of war and displacement.

1.1 Personal Background and Experiences

Tearne was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and moved to the United Kingdom at the age of ten due to escalating ethnic violence (Tearne). Her intimate connection to Sri Lanka, its culture, and its people profoundly influenced her writing. As an immigrant, she navigated multiple identities, and this experience forms a rich backdrop for her storytelling. Themes of displacement, belonging, and the search for identity pervade *Mosquito*.

The Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009) serves as the novel's central backdrop. Tearne's firsthand knowledge of the war's impact is evident in her portrayal of the characters and their struggles. Motivated to shed light on the human cost of war, she emphasizes the resilience and deep scars left on ordinary people, highlighting the universal themes of love, loss, and survival (Tearne).

Tearne's interest in the healing power of art is also reflected in *Mosquito*. The character Nulani Mendis, a talented young artist, uses her creativity to process trauma. Literary influences such as Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie, who explore displacement and identity, shaped her narrative style. Tearne seeks to give voice to those silenced by conflict, portraying lives marked by suffering while also seeking beauty and meaning amid chaos. Writing *Mosquito* allowed Tearne to honor her Sri Lankan heritage, process her experiences of war and displacement, and foster empathy among readers (Tearne).

II. Trauma and the Characters in *Mosquito*

Theo Samarajeeva, a celebrated Sri Lankan writer who returns home after the death of his wife, embodies the expatriate grappling with loss and the desire for reconnection. His return to Sri Lanka is both literal and symbolic, a journey into the past and a search for meaning. Nulani Mendis, a young and gifted artist, is marked by silence and resilience. Her initial reticence gradually gives way to a profound connection with Theo, finding in him a mentor and father figure. Her art becomes a vital means of expression and healing, illustrating the theme of art as refuge against the dehumanizing effects of war (Tearne 45).

Theo's longing aligns with Kali Tal's observation that "trauma strips the individual of identity and meaning; the reconstruction of both becomes a survival strategy" (Tal 16). Returning to Sri Lanka is an act of psychic reclamation, even as the homeland remains fractured. Similarly, Rohan, Theo's friend and a renowned painter, returns driven by persistent emotional attachment. As Caruth notes, "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located" (Caruth 9). Both Theo and Rohan reflect the diasporic dissonance where physical safety abroad cannot compensate for emotional displacement.

Art becomes a source of solace for these characters. After the brutality of war, Rohan struggles with grief and trauma, but artistic expression gradually restores him. Tearne describes: "The war was embossed on Rohan's life like a watermark, visible only under close scrutiny... he began to use crimson and pink... the surface of his paintings were like bruised flesh, visceral and close to death" (Tearne, *Mosquito* 243). The canvas mirrors the inner world—raw, wounded, and transformed.

Vikram, a young Tamil boy, exemplifies childhood trauma. After witnessing the brutal deaths of his mother and sister, he grows emotionally shut down. Tearne writes that his mental landscape is "so empty that it almost echoed" (48–49), and he repeatedly hears "his mother's muffled screams, his sister's voice crying out in Tamil" (*Mosquito* 67). The trauma he witnesses—captured in the disembodied hands flailing in vain—echoes Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as a fragmented and intrusive repetition of the original event (Caruth).

Freud's theories also resonate in the novel. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he introduces Eros (life drive) and Thanatos (death drive), suggesting human behavior is influenced by these opposing forces. Theo's return to Sri Lanka and nurturing of Nulani's talent represent Eros, while the pervasive violence and loss reflect Thanatos. The characters' struggles to find love and meaning amid destruction echo Freud's psychoanalytic insights.

III. Trauma, Narrative, and Historical Context

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* explores how trauma disrupts traditional narrative, resurfacing through fragmented memories and repetitive behaviors. Tearne's *Mosquito* mirrors these themes: Theo and Nulani experience fragmented memories of war and personal loss, emerging sporadically through dreams, art, and recollections (Caruth). Theo's time in torture cells illustrates extreme deprivation and mental collapse, yet his concern for Nulani reflects Judith Herman's insight that human connection persists even under disempowering circumstances (Herman 37). Tearne writes: "He knew with chilling certainty that he had entered a dark and terrible place where an ineluctable and malevolent fate had swallowed him whole" (*Mosquito* 185), echoing Caruth's notion that trauma collapses understanding and narrative coherence.

The historical backdrop aligns with documented realities of the Sri Lankan civil war. The OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL, 2015) reports enforced disappearances, unlawful detentions, torture, and civilian targeting—parallels evident in Theo's experiences. Many returning expatriates and intellectuals faced interrogation, monitoring, or detention under suspicion of rebel sympathies, underscoring Tearne's depiction of inner exile and the long-term psychological consequences of torture (OHCHR, 2015). Repetition compulsion, as discussed by Caruth, is evident in Theo's and Nulani's actions as they attempt to master and reconcile with traumatic experiences.

Thus, *Mosquito* not only portrays the psychological and emotional impact of trauma but situates these experiences within the historical realities of Sri Lanka's civil war. Tearne's characters' fragmented memories, delayed processing of trauma, and artistic expression resonate with Caruth's insights into trauma and its representation in literature and memory studies (Caruth).

In *Mosquito*, art becomes a deep source of comfort for the wounded soul. It offers an outlet when words fail and becomes a quiet space where pain finds form. Rohan, Theo's friend and a celebrated painter, is one such figure who finds meaning again through artistic expression. After hearing of Theo's supposed death and experiencing the brutality of war, Rohan returns to Venice but he is no longer the same man. His grief and trauma isolate him. He suffers in silence, struggling with a sense of homelessness and emotional emptiness. Yet, it is art that slowly brings him back to life. After much hesitation, he begins to paint again but not in the same style. His work changes completely, reflecting the pain he now carries within. Tearne captures

this transformation with striking imagery: “The war was embossed on Rohan’s life like a watermark, visible only under close scrutiny... he began to use crimson and pink... the surface of his paintings were like bruised flesh, visceral and close to death” (Mosquito, 243). The canvas becomes a mirror of his inner world—raw, wounded, and deeply altered.

In conclusion, Roma Tearne’s *Mosquito* brings to light the deep emotional and psychological scars that war leaves, especially on those who return to a homeland shattered by violence and loss. Through Theo, Nulani, and Rohan, the novel shows how trauma can fracture one’s identity, disturb memory, and force survivors to navigate silence, grief, and the healing power of art. Returning to Sri Lanka is both a physical and emotional journey for these characters—a confrontation with personal and collective wounds, a negotiation of fractured identities, and an effort to reclaim a sense of self. By blending storytelling, art, and memory, Tearne highlights the resilience of the human spirit and the way creativity can help survivors process and make sense of their pain. Ultimately, *Mosquito* not only bears witness to the costs of war but also affirms the possibility of healing, remembering, and rebuilding oneself, even in the midst of a fractured homeland.

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