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Ecological Trauma and National Wounds in Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*

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Abstract

In Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*, the geography of Sri Lanka is not just a backdrop but an active force and a victim of the island's ecological and political collapse. The landscape carries the scars of both past and present violence, showing that it is deeply tied to the nation's history. Women in this war-torn setting face two layers of trauma: the ethnic conflict that surrounds them and the patriarchal structures that deny them dignity and recognition. Militarization and global neglect create a slow, ongoing violence that harms both people and the environment, turning nature into both a witness and a casualty of national wounds. As a result, people living in this damaged environment experience solastalgia, a deep sense of loss and displacement caused by the destruction of their home surroundings.

The paper explores how human suffering and environmental destruction are interconnected, showing the Sri Lankan landscape as a ravaged witness, while also examining how patriarchal family structures further marginalize women.

Keywords: ecological trauma; Sri Lankan civil war; solastalgia; capitalocene; stratification; Roma Tearne

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Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* shows how Sri Lanka's national wounds and environmental destruction continue even in the postcolonial present. The novel connects ecological trauma and gender inequality through its central characters—Theo Samarajeeva, Nulani Mendis, Sugi, and Mrs. Mendis—whose lives are trapped in the structures of

the civil war and the patriarchal system that remains intact. They face deep trauma shaped by a weaponized landscape and rigid gender roles tied to ethnicity, family, and national identity. Every person in society longs for dignity and freedom, but in this war-torn, male-dominated world, opportunities are controlled by ethnic and masculine power. As a result, both women and the environment are pushed to the margins. Theo, Nulani, and Sugi become victims because they resist this predatory system.

In Western discourse, the postcolonial landscape is often imagined as a place of untouched natural abundance. In reality, it is continually reshaped by the destructive forces of imperial history, global capitalism, and internal ethnic conflict, which together erode ecological and social stability. Within ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, and trauma theory, the environment must be read not as a passive or romanticized backdrop but as a dynamic, political entity that actively registers violence. The land itself bears the scars of historical and contemporary trauma, and from the opening pages of *Mosquito*, Tearne demonstrates how ecological unease precedes and foreshadows human violence. This atmosphere signals rupture, showing that the environment is not merely a stage for conflict but an actant that embodies the nation's wounds and anticipates the collapse of human relations:

> Every year it was like this, before the monsoon, for three or four days, sometimes even longer. Every year, around the third week in June, a yellowing stickiness, a blistering oppression clung everywhere, so that even the bougainvillea lost its radiance. (Tearne 1)

The oppressive weather—described as "blistering oppression"—mirrors the suffocating sociopolitical atmosphere of a nation sliding into civil war. The fading "radiance" of local flora foreshadows the loss of human life and dignity that follows. Theo Samarajeeva, a writer returning from the UK, embodies the diasporic impulse to confront these national wounds. His choice to return to a destabilized homeland is met with disbelief both in the West and in Sri Lanka, reflecting the scale of trauma consuming the island and the disconnect between the Global North and the collapsing Global South. Tearne captures this incomprehension in the novel:

> People thought him mad. The Liberation Tigers had been demanding a separate Tamil state for years with no success. Civil unrest grew daily. Then, after Singhala was made the national language, discrimination against the Tamils became commonplace. A potential guerrilla war was simmering. Why did he want to go back to that hell? they asked. Was he off his head? An established writer, with a comfortable life in London, his own flat, his work, what could he want with Colombo? Was it not enough writing books on the impending violence, did he want to *live* it too? (Tearne 3)

In the passage, the isolation Theo experiences is not momentary but enduring, shaped by his conscious decision to return and bear witness to a landscape marked by escalating violence. This choice, however, estranges him from the very society he seeks to engage, producing a sense of dislocation and quiet dejection. His liberal, diasporic sensibility—formed in the relative stability of London—finds little resonance within a homeland increasingly defined by polarization and suspicion. As a result, his established identity as a writer and observer is not affirmed but unsettled, leading to the realization that his return does not restore belonging but instead deepens his condition of intellectual and emotional isolation.

The situations in *Mosquito* dramatize how fractured human relationships are inseparable from the destruction of both environment and community. Sugi's testimony, "It was not possible to walk without looking over your shoulder at all times, without wondering who was friend and who a new enemy. Fear and suspicion was the thing they lived off" (Tearne 18) captures the pervasive atmosphere of distrust that corrodes everyday life. This constant vigilance signals the collapse of social bonds, where suspicion becomes the currency of survival. From a trauma-theory perspective, such conditions produce a collective psychic wound, embedding fear into the rhythms of ordinary existence. The weaponized landscape intensifies this rupture as the environment ceases to be a neutral backdrop and instead becomes complicit in sustaining violence, mirroring the instability of human relations.

At the same time, posthumanist and new materialist approaches open flexible spaces to question power, sovereignty, and justice for both humans and non-humans. They do not reduce trauma to endless repetition or limit it to healing alone; rather, they highlight processes that cross boundaries—between people, environments, and scales of experience—thereby expanding trauma theory into a more dynamic and interconnected framework. The novel ultimately positions ecological devastation and interpersonal breakdown as co-constitutive, showing how war erodes not only the terrain but also the very possibility of coexistence. In this way, Tearne underscores that trauma is both environmental and relational, binding the fate of the land to the fate of its people.

Also, to critically understand the method of such destruction and the environmental devastation it causes, one must turn to Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence." Nixon defines this as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 2). He emphasizes that such violence is "often not just attritional but also exponential… a major threat multiplier" that generates "long-term, proliferating conflicts" as conditions for sustaining life are gradually degraded (Nixon 3). This expanded understanding shifts attention away from spectacular acts of violence toward the less visible yet more enduring processes of militarization, resource deprivation, and environmental poisoning. While bombings and assassinations dominate historical narratives—and are also represented within *Mosquito*—it is this slow, cumulative violence that produces the most persistent forms of trauma. Within this framework, the novel renders the postcolonial environment as a traumatized witness to national wounds, in which the physical casualties of human conflict are mirrored by the systematic degradation and weaponization of the natural world.

The inhabitants of such destabilized topography experience an intense psychological dislocation, articulated by Glenn Albrecht as "solastalgia"—an existential melancholia and profound distress produced by the alienation, militarization, and environmental degradation of one's home environment. In the article "Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change," Albrecht et al. describe it as "a concept

developed to give greater meaning and clarity to environmentally induced distress… the distress that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment" (Albrecht et al.).

In this context, the characters in *Mosquito* are not afflicted by conventional homesickness; rather, they are unsettled by the violent transformation of home into an unrecognizable and hostile space, even as they continue to inhabit it. This dual crisis of human and ecological collapse remains inseparable. Theo's manservant, Sugi confirms island's sociopolitical decay as inextricably bound to its ecological degradation: "Envy and poverty went hand in hand with the ravaged land" (Tearne 17). The land itself is thus figured as "ravaged" prior to, and alongside, its people, establishing a narrative in which the suffering of the earth and that of its inhabitants become tragically indistinguishable.

The systemic ecological degradation in the novel inextricably linked to socio-political collapse and the neocolonial impulses that predate the immediate civil conflict. The island's natural ecosystems are violently disrupted by colonial and postcolonial regimes of resource extraction, producing ecological imbalances that the state attempts to manage through further toxicity. While these processes lack the spectacle of wartime explosions, they are no less devastating in their cumulative impact. The resulting landscape is marked by a stark absence of ecological parity, reflecting patterns of uneven distribution and environmental dispossession. This ecological stratification is sustained by the logics of extractive capitalism, just as gender stratification is upheld by patriarchal structures under the guise of social stability. Tearne renders this convergence visible in her depiction of gem mining and state-sanctioned chemical intervention:

> They swarmed so thickly that they might easily have been mistaken for smoke. Rising swiftly from the water-filled holes dug by the gem miners in their search for sapphire, the mosquitoes seemed suspended in reflected light… The Ministry of Health sprayed the coconut groves with DDT to prevent outbreaks of malaria. The

metallic smell drifted and mixed heavily with the scent of frangipani and hibiscus. (Tearne 5)

Here, the landscape is forcibly reorganized to serve capitalistic desires; the pursuit of sapphires leaves literal voids in the earth, which inevitably birth parasitic threats, subsequently prompting lethal, anthropogenic contamination. The "metallic smell" overriding the indigenous, natural flora functions as a potent symbol for the complete subsumption of the natural world by mechanized, chemical decay. Treating the land only as a resource to be mined, or as a hazard to be chemically subdued, perfectly mirrors how the island's marginalized populations are treated—with utility when convenient, and with toxic suppression when they become inconvenient. Furthermore, the spatial reality of the inhabitants is defined by the terror of a landscape turned hostile. The coastal sands and beach, traditionally spaces of sustenance, communal gathering, and refuge, are physically and psychologically weaponized by the state apparatus:

> Hoping not to put a foot wrong, thought Sugi, hoping not to tread the rusty barbed wire hidden in the sea sand... You must not walk on the beach when there is a curfew. The army is watching. Or if they are not, then there are thugs who will watch for them. Believe me, Sir. And another thing, you shouldn't have given your talk about your book at the schools. They won't like that. (Tearne 18-19)

The natural world is forcefully conscripted into the militarized zone as it depicts a militarized landscape in which Sugi's cautious awareness of hidden dangers and pervasive surveillance—where even the beach is transformed into a monitored, weaponized space and speech itself becomes restricted under the threat of state and informal violence—reveals a condition of everyday life governed by fear, control, and the erosion of ordinary freedom. The sand no longer represents the boundary between island and ocean, but rather a boundary between life and sudden, explosive death. This severance of the ancestral and functional ties the inhabitants hold with the earth initiates a profound trauma.

Theo repeatedly returns to the question of international indifference, foregrounding how violence persists in the absence of sustained external attention, thereby allowing internal conflict to intensify within a condition of geopolitical invisibility. His address to Sugi, "We aren't important enough for the British any more. And unlike the Middle East, we have no oil. So, we can kill each other and no one will notice. That's why things will take longer than we think." (Tearne 20)—articulates a hierarchy of global visibility structured by strategic and extractive value, where certain geographies are rendered legible to intervention while others are consigned to neglect. This logic can be read through Achille Mbembe's theorisation of necropolitics, in which sovereignty is constituted through the capacity to determine "who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 11), producing what he terms "death-worlds" wherein populations are maintained in conditions of chronic precarity through systematic abandonment. The comparison Theo draws between Sri Lanka and the Middle East, particularly through the invocation of oil, thus exposes how the valuation of life is mediated by resource economies that govern the distribution of global attention, urgency, and political accountability.

Extending this necropolitical logic into the domain of political ecology, Jason W. Moore's formulation of the Capitalocene situates such uneven distributions within a broader world-ecological regime in which capitalism does not merely extract from nature but actively reorganizes it in accordance with the imperatives of accumulation. As Moore argues, "appropriated nature becomes a productive force" (Moore 16), indicating that nature is not external to capital but continuously subsumed within its circuits of value production. Within *Mosquito*, these predatory logics materialize at the level of landscape, where the island's geological substrate is systematically hollowed out and reconfigured as a site of extraction, leaving behind ecological ruptures that surface as toxicity, disease, and forms of state-mediated environmental harm.

Parallel to the violence inflicted upon the earth is the trauma caused through gender-specific, stratified roles within the contemporary patriarchal social and familial

setup. Despite the overarching crisis of the civil war, the phallogocentric structure remains rigid, loading women with immense obligations while denying them dignity, autonomy, and recognition. As Wendy Bottero argues in *Stratification: Social Division and Inequality*, "The asymmetry of women's and men's relations is a marked feature of almost all social settings and leads to considerable separation in women's and men's lives" (Bottero 113). This asymmetry is not disrupted by the civil war; rather, it is consolidated under the pretext of national survival and familial necessity. Accustomed to such gender divisions within prevailing socio-dynamics, the female characters in *Mosquito* find their existence circumscribed by roles that the war reinforces rather than dismantles.

The character of Mrs. Mendis provides a stark analogy of a woman reduced to servitude and defined entirely by the trauma inflicted upon her husband, who was murdered in an act of horrific communal violence. Her personal trauma is subsumed into a patriarchal narrative of widowhood that positions her solely as a mother to her male heir:

> I am a widow,' she said. 'Has Nulani told you? Has she told you my husband was set fire to during the rioting in the seventies? They threw a petrol bomb at him. Aiyo, we watched as he went screaming down the Old Tissa Road... He lay blackened and burnt; clear liquid oozing out from his staring eyes, his body charred, the stench of flesh filling her open-mouthed screams. (Tearne 10)

Following this gruesome murder, Mrs. Mendis's existence is entirely subsumed by her maternal obligations to her male heir, perpetuating the patriarchal valuation of the male child over the female. Her survival is channelled solely into the advancement of her son. The text reveals that "The Mendis woman has only ever cared about the son... It was always the boy she worried about. Lucky Jim! That's her name for him. She hardly notices her daughter" (Tearne 37). Mrs. Mendis's complicity in the patriarchal structure ensures that her son is positioned to claim maximum opportunities—specifically a British Council scholarship—while her daughter, Nulani, is relegated to the periphery, expected to conform to domestic servitude. Thus, such stratification fits

women into certain obligations and sets men liberal and unaccountable. Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore remind us that society instils in individuals "the desire to fill certain positions, and, once in these positions, the desire to perform the duties attached to them" (Moore 242), and in the patriarchal framework of *Mosquito*, the position appointed to women is one of permanent subordination.

Nulani Mendis finds her existence stuck in these constructed norms. She is a subject of gender stratification in a society that insists on placing women in subordinated roles. Her uncle serves as the primary enforcer of this phallogocentric law. The uncle discerns a threat to his socially perpetuated domination when she attempts to widen her existential horizon through art. When Theo proposes that Nulani's art could offer her a scholarship and a future, the uncle's response is saturated with sexist ideology:

> Art!' he said. His voice was falsetto with amusement. 'We are a country at war, trying to survive in spite of the Tamils. What do we need art for, men?' He looked briefly and threateningly towards the house. 'It isn't art she needs. At this rate, she will have a serious problem finding a husband. (Tearne 80)

The uncle's enunciation represents the gender-specific social stratification that reduces women into objects meant only for marriage and reproduction. He underestimates her intellectual and artistic capabilities, and instrumentalizes the war itself as justification for the suppression of female aspiration. With reference from *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society,* gender is defined as "a social practice that is organized in relation to the material realities of the human body," emphasizing that "while biological differences exist between men and women, only through the social process of defining masculinity and femininity do these biological differences become stratified" (O'Brien 542). In the uncle's worldview, Nulani's gender is her entire identity—her art, her ambition, her future are irrelevant beyond the marriage market. However, Nulani prefers to negotiate for her career and identity, actively rebelling against her family's expectations: "My uncle said Jim is old enough and it was time for

him to give up his studies... only this time he began to shout at me. He said I hadn't been trained properly and I needed a husband!... I don't have to do what he tells me" (Tearne 31-32).

In a landscape defined by slow violence and female subjugation, Nulani's art emerges as a crucial mode of resistance. Through drawing, she moves beyond the restrictive boundaries imposed by both familial authority and the broader conditions of war. Denied a voice within a patriarchal order and further silenced by the pervasive terror of civil conflict, she turns to visual expression as her primary language. Her compulsion to draw functions as a coping strategy for processing ecological and familial trauma that exceeds verbal articulation, as suggested by the observation that "Since her father was murdered she has become silent... All she does is draw, draw, draw" (Tearne 10). This condition resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that womanhood is not biologically given but socially produced, insofar as Nulani's silence is not innate but constructed—an effect of intersecting regimes of ethnic violence and patriarchal erasure. Her art thus operates as a counter-creation, a mode of self-inscription through which she asserts a presence that exceeds the identities imposed upon her.

By capturing the micro-realities of her environment and the people within it, Nulani attempts to reclaim the landscape from its weaponized state. She creates a sanctuary in Theo's house, a space where the smell is of "coconuts and linseed oil," replacing the metallic smell of DDT and the stench of burning flesh that plague the outside world. Her obsessive documentation of Theo is an act of preservation of her comfort, her newfound love against the destructive forces of the war. She tells him:

> I don't want to see you, Mr Samarajeeva. I'm learning to draw you from memory...I want to be able to draw you from memory, with my eyes closed,' she said, 'so I will never forget you. (Tearne 12)

Through her canvas, she captures the humanity that the war is actively trying to erase. Her mentor Theo's friend, the painter Rohan, articulates the necessity of this aesthetic resistance in a world devoid of political or linguistic salvation. For Rohan, the act of painting is deeply tied to the sorrow of the nation, and he deliberately utilizes a

palette that reflects the trauma of the landscape. He explains his deliberate choice to her:

> I myself... love grey. You may say this is a little ridiculous of me. To come all this way back home to paint with grey? But, grey has no agenda. And that's what really interests me. Its neutrality. Grey has the ability, that no other colour has, to make the invisible visible... For, you see, my heart is saddened by what's happening to our beautiful country. (Tearne 94)

Rohan's philosophy underscores the failure of hegemonic political discourse: "They are killing each other,' he said softly. 'Day after day. Over which language is more important. Can you credit these stupid bastards!"(Tearne 94). Language, in this context, has become just another weapon. The civil war is itself fuelled by linguistic nationalism—the imposition of Singhala as the national language that rendered the Tamil population alien in their own home. When politicians and armies use words only to wage war and divide people, visual art becomes the only true way to bear witness. It transcends the violent agendas of the state. Nulani paints to anchor herself in a collapsing world, asserting her existence as both creator and witness, refusing reduction to a subordinate female or passive victim of the state's slow violence; Theo, in turn, asserts his intelligence and testimony against the nation's wounds, while Rohan critiques the sociopolitical chaos that perpetuates instability.

In *Mosquito*, the environment becomes the closest witness to atrocities committed against the human body. Tearne repeatedly uses images of fire and carbon—basic elements of the earth—twisted into tools of violence, murders and terrorism. The land absorbs the ashes of the dead, fusing ecological destruction with human loss. This state-sanctioned burning is vividly described in Sugi's account of the jungle, where soldiers pour petrol over bodies and vehicles, igniting explosions that leave the forest choked with smoke and the stench of decay. In this moment, the decayed system operating at the all margins of the nation denies people dignity even in death, forcing both human remains and the environment into a shared register of obliteration:

> A soldier leapt down and took out a can. He began to pour petrol over the bodies… The soldiers poured petrol over the Morris Minor… In another minute there was an explosion as the Morris Minor blew up. Black smoke choked the edges of the trees. The whole jungle seemed on fire, awash with the sour smells of tamarind and eucalyptus, and something else, something rotten and deep and terrifying. (Tearne 71)

The representation of the ubiquitous use of petrol—a fossil fuel extracted from the earth itself—to incinerate citizens and conceal murders finalizes the tragic synthesis of ecological and human destruction. The nature is forced to consume the charred remains of the nation's violence. This process reaches its extreme during the airport bombing executed by Vikram and the Tamil Tigers: "In Sri Lanka a series of explosions that set fire to seven aircraft in the international airport of Katunayake has brought the country to a standstill… Tamil separatists have claimed responsibility" (Tearne 142). The nation's very infrastructure—its capacity to connect with the outside world—is incinerated. Militarization and terrorism together inscribe wounds that are both ecological and national, embedding trauma in the land, the body, and the collective psyche. For ordinary citizens, this convergence translates into lived experiences of fear, dispossession, and disorientation, where the destruction of environment and infrastructure mirrors the collapse of social bonds. Tearne thus underscores that war is not only fought on battlefields but also in the everyday spaces of survival, where ecological trauma and national wound converge to define the condition of existence.

Conclusions

Tearne's portrayal of the island compels a re-evaluation of the postcolonial social milieu, in which contemporaneity emerges as a condition shaped by entrenched ecological degradation, structural violence, and stratification—systems that continually obstruct subjects from realizing their full potential to exist as equal human beings. The positioning of human subjects and the natural world within intersecting structures of nation, war, patriarchy, and colonial residue becomes central to this reading. Ecological trauma and gendered stratification, therefore, are not abstract analytical categories but lived conditions that shape the precariousness of marginal existence.

Mosquito offers a devastating portrait of a postcolonial nation consuming itself, where the wounds inflicted upon the populace are mirrored, sustained, and intensified by the destruction of the physical environment. The narrative aligns the slow violence of chemical spraying and resource exploitation with the immediate violence of ethnic slaughter and state-sanctioned burning. Within this framework, the anguish experienced by characters underscores the impossibility of separating human suffering from ecological devastation.

The text further exposes how systemic violence is unevenly distributed, becoming more insidious for women such as Nulani and Mrs. Mendis, who must navigate the layered pressures of gendered stratification embedded within patriarchal order. Nulani's marginalization unfolds incrementally across every dimension of her life—her artistic expression dismissed, her future reduced to matrimonial exchange, and her voice suppressed by both domestic authority and the broader violence of war. Through these interwoven trajectories, Tearne reveals how stratification operates as a mechanism that assigns women structurally subordinate positions while normalizing their constrained agency.

In doing so, *Mosquito* foregrounds the ways in which ecological and social systems of degradation are mutually reinforcing. The Sri Lankan landscape in Tearne's prose becomes a ravaged witness, ultimately demonstrating that the deterioration of the environment is inseparable from the erosion of human dignity, gender equity, and conditions of survival.

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