

Unveiling the Cultural Ambiguity: A Cultural Interpretation of Roma Tearne's *Brixton Beach*

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Abstract

Roma Tearne the writer of the novel *Brixton Beach*, analyzes the quandary of Sri Lankan migrants living in a Western society and how some of the female characters triumph their feelings of estrangement and alienation to surface as individuals with their own logic of escalation. Being an expatriate, she elicits the story of Sri Lankan immigrants who flee from the civil war and try to acclimatize to life in the United Kingdom. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka depicts the realization of the unsettled situation in particular postcolonial societies after decolonization. Tearne's novel endows narrative representations of silence surrounding the married life of Sita and Stanley, who come from different ethnic backgrounds. The experience of a new and completely different place heartens the migrants to keep their language, traditions and culture to articulate their sense of otherness. The characters retain their traditions even though they are living in a foreign land. In *Brixton Beach*, Alice, Sita's daughter, experiences being alienated in her new environment in England and by her parents' separation. She is depicted as tussling for self-expression, which she later describes through her interest in art, rather than verbally. She is seen as trying to preserve her cultural identity in her confrontation with her

English-born son. The novelist also brings to surface the traditions of the Tamils and the Sinhalese and how their existence in United Kingdom gives them a hope for a better future.

Key words: Migrants, Immigration, Cultural Identity, Tradition, Otherness, Tamils, Sinhalese

Roma Tearne, a Sri Lankan born novelist and film maker living in the UK is born in 1954 in to a Tamil father and a Sinhalese mother. Her father is a poet and her mother a journalist. They marry in secret due to their different religious and cultural background. In 1964 the family migrates to the UK, where Tearne persists her education from a local comprehensive school.

In the fiction of Sri Lankan English writer and visual artist Tearne the journey of migration undertaken by several characters from war-torn Sri Lanka to Britain in the hope of finding sanctuary, mirrors the author's own migratory trajectory and experience of displacement. As a small child in the early 1960's Tearne left her native island with all its typical beauty as unrest originating in the conflict between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority intensified and escalated into full-blown Civil War.

The flight from Sri Lanka is often evoked in Tearne's fiction as a traumatic moment of rupture, generating a deeply distressing pursuit for home and belonging in her characters who as they struggle to forge their new, mobile identities and settle in Britain, constantly question the eligibility of their own host country to offer them refuge and provide them with a new home.

In all her novels she elicits the stress prevailing within the Island. The internal conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese heads to the upshot of the war, the Tamils are made to deport the nation turning the Island into a Sinhala Only State. The internal torment of the trouncing of proper childhood by the novelist can be identified in the characters.

“Cultural Studies is an innovative interdisciplinary field of research and teaching that investigates the ways in which “culture” creates and transforms individual experiences, everyday life, social relations and power”. Cultural life is not only apprehensive with symbolic communication, it is also the realm in which we set combined tasks for ourselves and begin to grapple with them as changing communities.

Tearne in this novel brings in her torments through the character’s voice. She uses memory as a tool in the novel to bring forth the brutal realities of the island. Through her own memory she writes about her hometown which she had left earlier as a child. Susan Wyndham has characterized the usage of memory as a tool in the novel. In retrospect it is clear that Tearne has effectively evoked a child’s sense of time and an adult’s languorous memories of childhood.

Tearne presents the character Alice who can be identified as the writer herself. The brutalities of the Island are portrayed where a Tamil doctor shows his hatred for a Sinhalese patient. Alice the granddaughter of Bee absconds the Island and sets out to the UK for a better future. She travels along with Sita, a woman who faces a series of terrible events. She enters a loveless marriage and has a son. She widens her skill and develops into an artist according to the wish of her grandfather.

Tearne in her interview with *The Independent* states how she feels when she has to leave the Island. Her feeling can be considered similar to that of Alice in the novel. Like the novelist Alice too had a deep feeling whether she could accept the fact of moving into a host country. Tearne mentions , “The day before I left Sri Lanka, I went down to the beach at Mount Lavinia. There are three rocks close to the sand and, using a penknife, I carved my name on one of them. Roma Chrysostom, Colombo, Ceylon, Asia. The World. The Universe. I was a 10-year-old half-

Tamil, half-Sinhalese girl on her way to the UK”. She states that she was aware that survival depends on the need to integrate into the life of the host country. She mentions how she felt certain that her Asian accent, the memories of frangipani, and her desire to wear a sari has no more significance.

The culture of Sri Lanka dates back over 2500 years. Sri Lanka is the home to two main traditional cultures: the Sinhalese which is centered in the ancient cities of Kandy and Anuradhapura and the Tamil which is centered in the city of Jaffna. The rich cultural tradition adhered to by all Sri Lankan cultures is the basis of the country's long life.

Tearne brings forth the characteristic traits of belonging to the Sinhala and Tamil group. Being an offspring of both the groups she mentions the discriminations each group suffers on their own parts. The Kandyan custom of a widow wearing a white sari is portrayed. Mrs. Perris who loses her husband in the riots came to the school in a white sari. The reason she wears a white sari is that a widow is destined to be in a white sari after the death of her husband according to the Sinhala tradition.

Tearne has portrayed the custom of tying a pirith string around the wrist to help the unborn infant to have a safe life in the next birth. The monks offer prayers and bless the home after having their lunch. The belief is that after a prayer God will bless the home and rescue the people from any more loss. The Tamils and the Sinhalese are united and in a serene relation to each other at the outset. They help each other at times of difficulty. The British invasion leads to a drastic change within the Island, Their divide and rule policy creates hatred among the two groups. The state of unity which exists between the groups shatters completely.

The British, after their invasion of the Island, treats Sri Lanka as one single unit of administration under one central authority. Tamil people settle in Sri Lanka in large numbers. A large number of Tamils, due to their advancement in education takes up employment in the civil services to emerge as a special privileged social class. The Sinhalese on the opposite side, lacking in modern education, enter agriculture and other rural jobs. A feeling of isolation develops for the Sinhalese within their native place. Tamils thus settles in the Island in the hope of a better future.

The novelist portrays the dynamics of an inter-caste marriage and the struggle, pain and suffering which follows later. Sita, a Singhalese born into the Fonseka family falls in love with Stanley, a Tamil and eventually gets married to him. Their daughter Alice, the protagonist of the novel becomes an eye-witness to her family disputes, her father's decision to settle in the UK in the hope of better luck and fortune. Alice comes back with her mother Sita to the Sea House up on the Mount Lavinia Hill which belongs to her maternal grandparents. Brixton Beach is the name of Tearne's own home in Britain where they live after leaving Sri Lanka. Tearne in her longing for her past gives the same name to the novel as well as the house in the novel.

Tearne mentions the changes that happen within Sri Lanka. In Alice's family, we find how a Tamil doctor due to the racial discrimination neglects proper medication to her mother which results in the brutal killing of her sister. Sita develops labour pain and rushes to the maternity hospital but the Sinhalese doctor pays no attention. His lack of timely care leads to the death of an infant during child care. "Why should we help breed more Tamils? As if this country hasn't enough already!(44)"

Alice and her mother decide to go to the UK with the hope that conditions would be favorable for them in the UK rather than in Sri Lanka. Alice's grandfather advises Alice never to forget her homeland. “ ‘Listen, Putha,’ he had told her, trying very hard to be fair, to keep himself Out of the story,’ this is your first home, you were born here. That’s a powerful thing, don’t ever forget it. But it may not be your last.... It will be beautiful in England even though the difference will surprise you (82-83).”

The migration of the Tamil people to the UK is not an unusual task. All the people do migrate there in the hope that they could look after the needs of their family better. The people there too have to face many nuances but they silently endure them due to the brutal trauma in their homeland. “The Tamil diasporas are very successful men. They are also an important part of our fight against all the injustices we are enduring here. You musn’t forget that either!’ ” (106).

Though the family in the Island doesn’t want their relatives to leave their homeland and migrate to other places, they pray that the relatives should be safe and rescued from the disaster in the Island. Bee, the grandfather of Alice has always trained Alice on the importance of survival. He makes her understand that if a person can survive in the homeland he can surely survive in any place he is introduced to. He always nurtures her with good thoughts and good beliefs that the migration to the UK would surely influence her in a positive way even in her art of drawing.

Alice detests her life in London. She always has a habit of talking whatever came into her mind to her grandfather. She assumes that he was also responding to her voice. Her alienation grows to such an extent that she wants to return to Sri Lanka and live with her grandparents. Sita,

the mother of Alice also feels alienated. The conditions go to such an extent where her husband Stanley whom she loves and marries decides to leave her due to his westernized way of living. Sita feels her life in the UK similar to that of living in a desert. She feels like a bird that has lost its wings and is trapped in a place without rescue.

Alice marries Tim and when they go to a seaside for a honeymoon, it gives her remembrance of her own home. When she buys a new home in the UK she names it as Brixton Beach with the memories of the past. She longs to visit her home once again. Alice though doesn't feel a bonding with the UK, she tries all possible ways to develop her art which she learns from her grandfather. She feels that as a way to be one with him even after he has died. She feels that they have a meaningful conversation which inspires her always. Tim her husband divorces her, finding the fact she gave more importance to her art. Alice feels sad that as an immigrant she has to face a lot of problems in another place.

Tearne's act of crossing the boundary indicates a symbolic meaning that she has the prerogative to cross the man made boundaries with her double identity. The present experience with the settlers helps her to relearn some words of the language that she has almost lost. Tearne has made use of many Indian words in her novels. These words aren't something which is new to her. As she is familiar with these words in spite of the present gap with the language she uses them to create a native tone in her language. Though she has written these novels as an outsider she has taken special care to create a familiarity with the nation.

Certain Tamil words used by the novelist in her novels are 'ekel stick', 'thambili', 'vadi' and 'kirbath'. She has also made use of the native food habits in her novels. She represents characters like Anna-Meeka who longs for rice though they have started a western way of life. A

sense of belongingness of the author with the native place is characterized through the use of native touch in her novels. Charles Saravan comments that, "Tearne writes for a British readership which finds the Island's tropical beauty "exotic" in one sense, and its violence "exotic" in another. Sinhala words increase the feel of foreignness: *kade, putha, pirith* and so on."

Sri Lankan cuisine is renowned for being hot and spicy. For Buddhists and Hindus the sharing of food between family and relatives symbolize the importance of reconciliation and harmony. Emma Boyle mention the importance of kiribath as, "Rice, a symbol of life and fertility, is the main food used in nearly every ceremonial occasion alongside more contemporary sweet foods....it's a baby's first solid meal, it is the first food that the bride and groom share, and it is ritually prepared at the opening of a new business venture or when a couple moves into their new home, to ensure a lucky and propitious beginning."

Using the backdrop of the Sri Lankan Civil War, Tearne has beautifully illustrated the realities of the life in Sri Lanka and the UK. The narrative in *Brixton Beach* details on what happens when a country is plagued by inter-racial disputes and civil wars. In the case of Sri Lanka, the violent atrocities cause the whole community to live in fear: a fear that generates an atmosphere in which silence reigns on key social issues. By giving an autobiographical touch to her characters she has presented her own torments and fears she has endured as a native of Sri Lanka and how the life in the UK has changed her life to a better one. She acknowledges the fact that a complete uprooting of a person is not possible and thus the search for the roots will always have a proper depth in one's own homeland.

In the age of globalization, the demarcation line of culture and heritage becomes no longer useful. The main dilemma arises when the two different cultural people and their

background meet together. Expectations are always roaming in both the birth country and the country of origin regardless of creed, colour, religion, culture and overall the lifestyle. In this immigrant situation one society expects the other to change but they don't feel importance to change the ideologies of conducting with the diasporic community. In this way the immigrant has to suffer the plight of this unstable doctrine of the society.

However, by capturing the complexity of war and refuge in her writing, she strives to intersect the histories of contemporary England and Sri Lanka, Tearne's narratives clearly usher in a passage to globalism, reflecting the complex relationship between Britain as a former colonial power and the formation of diasporic British Asian identities, against the backdrop of contemporary global mobility, while raising questions of individual agency within a global framework.

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