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MUSING OF VERACITY AND FICTION IN ROMA TEARNE'S *BONE CHINA AND BRIXTON BEACH*

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Abstract

Roma Tearne's novels *Bone China* and *Brixton Beachen* compass the Sri Lankan Civil War as the backdrop. An autobiographical touch is exemplified in the novels. The prominent role in each novel can be deemed as the novelist herself. Alice, a character is the perfect facsimile of Tearne. Tearne through her characters exemplifies the anguish she abides as an alien. The protagonists are unveiled as characters that perk up their proficiencies in numerous art forms and thus abscond their vexations about the certainties they withstand.

Keywords: Autobiography, Drawing, Painting, Riots, Tamil, Sinhalese, Hybrid distinctiveness, Civil War, Letters

The term autobiography takes its lineage to 1809. Before the apparatus of the phrase it is relegated to numerous terms such as life narratives written by the author himself, memoirs, journals, diary, a biography by self or as history by self. The *Oxford English Dictionary* classifies an autobiography as a biography, life-history, life story, life-an account of the series of events which makes up a person's life. Autobiography is the biography of the author written by himself. It encompasses a crucial segment of the individual's life.

It is only by writing and expressing himself that the auto biographer uncovers the life expectancy and generates a place for himself. Facts are streamlined by the writer and exhibited artistically. Through the powerful memory, the novelist explores deeper into the history and reminisces the intense sensations. In an autobiography, the self is being remade. Autobiography describes the imaginative truth rather than the reality. Marlene Fisher, a critic remarks that an autobiography cannot be complete as it is based on a fragment of a person's life. An autobiography is not only a historical record of a person's life but an artistic personification of life.

Roma Tearne has utilized art as a tool to make out the autobiographical elements in the novels. After school, she enlists at a teacher-training college in Rugby. But when she is expected to write down an essay on Charles Dickens, a lecturer alleges her of plagiarism and remarks that if he composes like that, he would be in Oxford rather than in Rugby University. Tearne is so appalled that she drops college and soon gets married to an English professor. When her youngest child is a toddler, she re-enters university and research painting at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford. Since then, she has progressively sold her work, organized exhibitions at the Royal Academy, achieved a prestigious Leverhulme residency at the Ashmolean Museum, and presently has a fellowship at Oxford Brookes University.

Tearne has presented a love for art in all her protagonists. She has illustrated their interest in the art forms. The uneasy life that they lead vicissitudes by their passion for art forms. Tearne, a renowned writer elects for other art forms to prevail over the challenges in life. Tearne attempts her skills in painting and effectively starts demonstrating well-accomplished paintings. In her novels, all the characters are described as characters who must confront the agonies owing to the internal riots between the Tamil and the Sinhalese. As an aftermath of these disputes, they are obliged to leave their own homeland and evacuate to other places in the search of a good future. Tearne through her characters has represented the pain she endures as a native. The protagonists are presented as characters who seek to enhance their proficiencies in various art forms and thus put aside their aggravations about the realities they endure.

Drawing, writing, and playing music are the main art forms stated in the novels by Tearne. Each protagonist learns the art form and gives importance to their developing the skill in their own art. Art is used as a source of outlet from the various torments within the Island. They try to keep themselves active with the development of each art form. Alice's skill in painting, Ria's interest in writing and Anna-Meeka's passion in playing music are the art forms the novelist reveals in the novels. Tearne illustrates her painting and drawing which enriches her to write on her homeland

Sri Lanka. The paintings and her postcards give her an intuition on the magnificence of the Island. Each character expands their appeal and the art in the certainty that they could lead their own successful life with their art. All the characters in each novel finally ends up living a better life as well talented artists instead of being constrained within the walls of the war-torn Island.

As Tearne's mother has perished due to a massive heart attack, she is the one who is expected to call her mother's relatives in Sri Lanka, the southernmost tip of the island. Over the telephone, she finds it complicated to determine their personal responses. Tearne tells her relatives, it always has been her mother's intention to visit her family. At her mother's funeral, Tearne remembers, "there were only a handful of people present. Afterwards, I stood looking at the flowers. Four wreaths marked the end of her life. I wept at last. Why had none of her relatives sent even one?" (*The Guardian*)

Tearne reminds the events of the 1950s and reconsiders a past that occurred, in the country which she has left as a child. She realizes that Sri Lanka is a place on which she has intentionally turned her back. Even though she has spent the first 10 years of her life there, she is still frustrated by the instances which happened to her mother, and she is anxious to start old unhealed wounds. Her father, a poet is an up-country Tamil and her mother is a southern Sinhalese.

Tearne's parents marry after 10 years of courtship. As they belong to two ethnic groups, they are not able to communicate with each other freely. The necessity for confidentiality raises out of the vicious animosity that prevails amongst the two main ethnic groups on the island, the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Even after the marriage, the mother is not acknowledged by her father's family as she is a Sinhalese. In *The Guardian*, Tearne recalls,

They lived this way for nearly a month, but things went from bad to worse. My grandmother, who doted on my father, began to behave as though my mother did not exist. My father's sisters followed suit. Worst of all, my father's aunt went out of her way to make life hell for my mother.... My maternal grandfather was beside himself with rage. Shame had engulfed him so that he hardly left the house. It was unthinkable that a Sinhalese girl from a good family should marry a Tamil dog, he said. The entire family agreed. All of them vowed they would never speak to her again. All except the youngest boy. (*The Guardian*)

Tearne recalls how her father has dispatched to her mother a picture of himself. She places the photograph in a satinwood trunk under her bed. Every evening she collects jasmine flowers and places them like an offering next to it. On the eve of the departure to England, her mother burns everything that she has retained secure with herself. Tearne deems that her mother understood that the new phase of her life may have reduced prominence to emotions.

Tearne's mother conceals all her letters and photos in a trunk box under her bed. In the novel, *Bone China* Anna-Meeka's mother hides dolls in a box under her bed. In the box, she protects all the dolls she has created which signify her dead child. After the death of her infant, she tries to amend her mind by making dolls. When Anna-Meeka finds the dolls, she persuades her mother to discard the dolls.

Tearne cites her sad childhood. She is born as the child of a humiliated union, neither Tamil nor Sinhalese, born with a foot in both worlds. By the time, the novelist is two years; her mother's youngest brother has completed university. He alone visits them regularly, halting in Colombo on his way down south.

In the novel, *Brixton Beach* Alicia's parents belonging to a mixed origin, the Tamil and the Sinhalese majority endure a lot of discrepancy in the Island. They are considered as inferior and are mistreated by the ethnic groups. Alicia's parents must even miss their second child due to the negligent approach of the doctor on the fact of her mother being a Tamil. Tearne's parents are repudiated by the parents of both the families. Alicia's family and Tearne's family must finally displace themselves from the Island and settle in the UK. Alicia and Tearne are children who have their place with a hybrid identity. They neither have an identity in the Tamil nor in the Sinhalese side.

Though Tearne's parents have both departed, she understands that their hybrid distinctiveness is prevalent in her children. She exemplifies how her father's dark eyes see out at her through her sons' eyes and her mother's smile is

the same as her daughter. She considers that being a hybrid is a source of strength as it has the potential for a better time to come.

When the Island is turning into a war zone, Tearne opts to leave for England with her mother in a boat. Tearne gives reference about the long twenty-one-day voyage. In the novel, *Bone China* Tearne has progressed her real-life events through the story of the De Silva family. Like her parents, the characters in the novel must move to London to avoid the brutal Civil War. Tearne has described her nature in the character Anna-Meeka. Like Tearne, she seeks to become accustomed to the Western culture. Tearne's hope is to adapt to the Western culture more rapidly than her parents. Though the parents primarily find it hard they try to alter themselves to the new place and culture. Anna-Meeka who is initially lonely in school later gets into a close relation with the western style and she thus gains new friends.

Anna-Meeka, at the outset realizes everything distinct in London. She believes that even the fruit Pineapple which is given for lunch in school is different from what she finds in her homeland. She is desolate in the beginning with no friends. She constantly recalls the actions in her own homeland. She yearns to reside with her grandparents. The word 'home' itself has a different meaning for her. Later when she gets along well with the new friends she quickly adapts to the changes.

The letter is the only source of communication with the people in Sri Lanka. They are rarely forwarded photographs of the cousins with whom she used to play. The letters that accompany them are penned in a close-curved Sinhalese script that Tearne believed she is fast forgetting. In both the novels *Bone China* and *Brixton Beach*, Tearne has used the letter as a source of communication to people who have drifted from one place to the other. The letter is the only source that connects them to their home. Anna-Meeka mentions of the letters and photographs she receives from her aunt. Tearne says of how she has retained the postcard of Sri Lanka, which induces her to compose a work of fiction on Sri Lanka. Tearne provides significance to the letters and photos stored by her which has persuaded her to set up her profession as a writer.

The conflict in Sri Lanka turns crueler with the passing of days. Her mother is no longer getting on well with her husband. Love in a country with the war in the background is a tricky thing to be pursued. Her parents' relationship begins to diminish. Tearne recalls how though they live together, her father had dropped out of love. Anna-Meeka's father has a good relationship with the westernized way of life and leaves her mother.

After the death of her parents, a long shadow which is vague until then came into sharp focus. Tearne starts painting a series of images in shades of grey and white. The paintings are called 'Waiting for Summer', the idea illustrates her parents' longing for home. Tearne begins to paint her children. She feels that like her plight, the children do not retain a proper root in any land.

Tearne mentions that while working in their house, a builder accidentally discovers her old trunk. It is the same trunk that long ago has been her mother's jasmine-scented shrine of hope. Carried across the seas, on a journey that took twenty-one-days, it now belongs to her and retains the old photo albums and diaries penned by her mother. Apart from a diary and two or three blurred photographs, Tearne no longer has anything to remind her of her parents. Tearne follows her mother's footsteps, to write.

Anna-Meeka gets married to an Englishman like Tearne. Anna-Meeka in a later stage in the novel craves to go back to her own home once more and remember all the beautiful memories she has of the Island when she is a child. Tearne composes the novel *Bone China* after being influenced by a painting. Both Tearne and Anna-Meeka feel a craving for the homeland after the death of their parents.

For clearly she saw it, in spite of the shock, she saw that the things 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...that here with this remarkable Englishman, with his sense of the ridiculous, his understanding and his love for her, was something of her beloved family. Returning again. ("Bone China" 400)

In the novel *Brixton Beach*, Tearne has used the term Brixton Beach for the novel which is also the name of her home. Even in the novel *Alice* finally names her home as Brixton. Tearne mentions her home as a place which has a great significance in her life. The term Brixton helps her to maintain a link between Sri Lanka and the UK, “In their new home in Brixton, after a honeymoon of a week of cloudy weather in the Lake District, a sudden memory of the Sea House broke over Alice like a squall of monsoon rain. It caught her unawares and took her breath away, floating in the September sky like a kite released from its string....She called it Brixton Beach” (“Brixton Beach” 324).

Tearne has used many native words in her novels. 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 authored these novels as an outsider she has taken exceptional 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 with native touch in her novels.

Tearne has used both native and westernized way in naming her characters. Some native names used by her are Sita, and Vikram. The westernized names are also used by Tearne in her novels. She has authored her novels depicting a longing for her homeland by presenting each character. Though she writes from the UK favoring the western readers she still gives a beautiful description of Sri Lanka keeping the native readers in her mind.

Using the backdrop of the Sri Lankan Civil War, Tearne has beautifully depicted the realities of the life in Sri Lanka and the UK. 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.

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