

Art as a Space of Belonging: The Third Space of Unhomely Homecoming in Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*

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Abstract

This article reads Roma Tearne's Mosquito (2007) as a novel in which physical return fails to restore a sense of belonging, and in which art becomes an alternative, hybrid space where displaced characters hold memory, loss, and present experience together. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of the "unhomely" and the "Third Space," alongside Avtar Brah's notion of "diaspora space," the article traces this argument through Theo Samarajeeva's failed homecoming, Nulani Mendis's painting practice, and the contrasting, foreclosed case of Vikram. Beyond its postcolonial critique, the article highlights how the novel intersects with linguistics and the broader humanities through its attention to the language politics of Sinhala and Tamil underlying Sri Lanka's civil conflict. Reading Mosquito across these registers clarifies how thoroughly Tearne's depiction of unhomely homecoming is anchored in the physical and linguistic realities of the landscape and history it represents. The study further demonstrates how fragmented identities emerge through the interaction of memory, language, place, and artistic expression. It ultimately argues that Mosquito presents belonging not as a recovered state but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by displacement and cultural difference.

Keywords: transnationalism, postcolonialism, diaspora, third space, hybrid space, climate of war, displacement.

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Introduction

Roma Tearne's debut novel *Mosquito* (2007) opens not with an image of homecoming but with its quiet negation. Theo Samarajeeva, a Sri Lankan-born writer who has spent decades in England, returns to his country of birth after his wife Anna's death, hoping the return will ease the burden of exile. Tearne instead stages a return that unsettles rather than restores: the homeland Theo re-enters is disfigured by civil war, patrolled by soldiers, and haunted by a violence that renders "home" itself unstable. Sri Lanka has, in Theo's own estimation, become a beautiful place that "had lost its way" (Tearne 30).

Aim and Objectives

This research article argues that in *Mosquito*, physical return does not guarantee psychological or cultural homecoming, and that art—first the painting practice of the young artist Nulani Mendis, and later Theo's own writing functions as an alternative space in which displaced characters negotiate belonging without ever fully resolving the contradictions of exile. "From a sociological perspective, diasporas have received considerable academic attention since the 1960s" (Papp et al. 25). Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of the "unhomely" and the "Third Space," alongside Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space as a site where multiple genealogies of belonging intersect and collide, this article contends that Tearne's novel positions art not as a substitute for a lost homeland but as a genuinely alternative geography of belonging: one that holds memory, loss, and present experience together without requiring their reconciliation.

This argument extends a body of criticism that has already identified memory as central to the novel's architecture. Sudipta Phukan observes that *Mosquito* is structured as "a thread of relentless memories" that "moulds and recreates the shape of the novel," arguing that memory itself becomes the organising device through which Tearne renders the "devastative side of Sri Lanka" and its human cost (Phukan 45). Sonya Andermahr's related study of Tearne's later novel *Brixton Beach* reads the author's fiction through frameworks of diasporic mourning, maternal loss, and what Andermahr, following Judith Butler, calls "ungrievable lives," showing that Tearne's work consistently figures migration as an unresolved wound rather than a completed transition (Andermahr 50). What remains underexamined in this critical conversation is art's specific operation as embodied practice, not merely as a recurring theme in mediating that wound. This essay extends existing memory-centred readings of *Mosquito* by asking a more pointed question: if return fails to restore home, where, if anywhere, do Tearne's characters find belonging?

Four questions organise the analysis that follows. First, how do war and displacement transform the meaning of home and homecoming for Theo? Second, how does Bhabha's Third Space illuminate Nulani's painting practice as an alternative site of belonging? Third, what does the contrasting case of Vikram, a former child soldier for whom no such artistic space becomes available, reveal about the conditions under which art can operate as belonging at all? Finally, how does the

novel's own narrative structure, which culminates in Theo authoring a book dedicated to Nulani, model art as a durable, if incomplete, reconstruction of home?

Discussion

The Unhomely and the Third Space

Homi Bhabha's essay "The World and the Home" supplies this essay's central term: the unhomely. For Bhabha, the unhomely names "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" that occurs when the boundary separating domestic space from public history collapses, so that political violence intrudes directly into the space of dwelling (Bhabha 141). Crucially, Bhabha insists that unhomeliness is not homelessness: it does not describe an absence of shelter but a psychic condition in which "the border between home and world becomes confused," producing a disorientation that is "uncannily" familiar even as it estranges (Bhabha 141-42). This distinction matters for *Mosquito* because Theo is never without physical shelter: he owns a house on the coast and later finds refuge in Venice, yet he remains unhomed in Bhabha's sense; the places he inhabits repeatedly fail to deliver the interior sense of belonging that the word "home" promises.

Bhabha's related concept of the Third Space offers a way beyond the unhomely's diagnosis of loss. "Hybridity" is a concept that was developed by Homi Bhabha (Speelman 1). In his account of cultural hybridity, Bhabha argues that meaning and identity are never produced within a pure, self-identical culture of origin, but always in an interstitial space of enunciation where cultures translate and unsettle one another. This Third Space is not a comfortable synthesis of two homes; it is a site of productive ambivalence in which new, hybrid forms of identity and belonging can emerge precisely because it refuses the binary logic of homeland versus hostland. Applied to *Mosquito*, the Third Space offers a way to name what Nulani's canvas becomes: neither a straightforward return to a Sri Lankan past nor assimilation into a foreign artistic tradition, but a constructed space in which grief, memory, and present perception can coexist without being forced into resolution.

Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space complements Bhabha's more psychoanalytically inflected vocabulary with an explicitly relational one. For Brah, diaspora space is the point at which the genealogies of the displaced and the genealogies of those who consider themselves indigenous to a place "intersect," such that the concept of home becomes at once a mythic place of desire and a lived, contested locality (Brah). Read through Brah, Theo's Sri Lanka is precisely this kind of doubled space: it is simultaneously the mythic homeland of his memory and nostalgia, and a lived locality transformed beyond recognition by two decades of war, a place where, as Sugi warns him early in the novel, "this isn't England" and the rules of safe conduct he assumes from his life abroad no longer apply (Tearne 57). Taken together, Bhabha and Brah furnish this essay with its governing claim: that *Mosquito* stages homecoming as failure precisely so that it can relocate belonging elsewhere in the interstitial, hybrid space that art alone is able to hold open.

“This Was Not His Home”: Theo and the Failure of Return

Tearne signals from the novel’s opening pages that Theo’s return to Sri Lanka is motivated less by a positive desire for home than by grief-induced exhaustion. Having lost Anna, Theo reflects that he no longer had anything to “escape from,” so that going back is, in his own telling, “not a problem” (Tearne 23). The phrasing is telling: return is framed negatively, as the absence of an obstacle, rather than positively, as the presence of a pull toward belonging. This establishes what will become the novel’s recurring pattern: homecoming is figured not as arrival but as the removal of a reason to stay away.

The unhomely quality of Theo’s return deepens as the narrative unfolds. Sri Lanka’s civil war means that the domestic tranquillity Theo seeks on his veranda is continually interrupted by the intrusion of political violence: soldiers, curfews, and the ever-present threat that Nulani’s family, and eventually Theo himself, will be swept into the conflict’s machinery. This collapse of the boundary between home and world is precisely what Bhabha identifies as constitutive of the unhomely (Bhabha 141). Even Theo’s most intimate domestic scenes are shadowed by this collapse; when he tells Sugi he feels “a sudden sharp sense of belonging” in his friendship with his manservant, the admission arrives only in the dark, almost furtively, as though belonging itself has become something that must be smuggled past the surrounding danger (Tearne 52).

The clearest articulation of Theo’s unhomeliness comes later, during his exile in London after being tortured and separated from Nulani. Reflecting on his life abroad, the narrative states flatly: “however beautiful it was, still this was not his home” (Tearne 360). The sentence’s structure, conceding beauty before withdrawing belonging, enacts in miniature the logic of the unhomely: aesthetic or material comfort does not translate into the interior sense of dwelling that “home” requires. Tearne underscores this same logic, inverted, at the novel’s climax, when Theo arrives in Venice to be reunited with Nulani after years of presumed death. There, “happiness caught at his throat,” even as the narrative insists in the same breath that “this was not his home” (Tearne 456). The repetition of the phrase “this was not his home” across two geographically opposite locations, London and Venice, is the novel’s most economical statement of its thesis: home, for Theo, has become detached from any single geography. By the novel’s end, what has changed is not the map but the presence of Nulani and, crucially, the art that connects them, suggesting that the feeling of coming home has migrated out of place altogether and into relationship and creative practice.

This detachment of belonging from geography is precisely what Bhabha’s Third Space allows us to name with precision. If Theo’s exile in London and his prior life in Sri Lanka are both unhomely in their own ways, then his eventual sense of homecoming in Venice cannot be explained by a return to origin, since Venice is neither his birthplace nor his adopted country. It must instead be explained by the presence of an interstitial, hybrid space constituted jointly by Nulani’s paintings, his

own manuscript, and their reunion that exists outside the binary of homeland and hostland altogether.

Nulani's Canvas as Third Space

If Theo's arc demonstrates the failure of geographic return to restore belonging, Nulani's arc demonstrates art's capacity to construct belonging where geography cannot. From the novel's first chapter, Nulani's drawing is presented as a direct response to trauma: she turns to sketching in the aftermath of her father's violent death, and her early promise to Theo that she wants to draw him "from memory, with my eyes closed," so that she will "never forget" him (Tearne 48) already discloses art's double function in the novel as both memorial practice and survival strategy. For Nulani, drawing is not decorative; it is how she metabolises loss into a form she can carry forward rather than simply endure.

Nulani's practice takes on its full theoretical weight only once she is forced into exile herself, following Theo's presumed death and abduction. Displaced from Sri Lanka to Europe, cut off from the landscape and language of her childhood, Nulani does not attempt to reproduce a lost Sri Lankan idiom in her painting, nor does she assimilate wholesale into a European tradition. Instead, as the narrative reports of her later work, her canvases become "captivating, abstract paintings... infused with the tumult of her homeland," works that leave viewers to "ponder the deeper meanings" embedded within them. This is Bhabha's Third Space made visible on canvas: a hybrid form that translates the "tumult" of an unrecoverable homeland into a new visual language legible to an audience that has never seen that homeland at all. The paintings do not restore Sri Lanka; they construct a space adjacent to it, in which memory and present perception can be held together without collapsing into either simple nostalgia or simple assimilation.

Tearne makes this theoretical claim explicit through Theo's own commentary on Nulani's paintings once he finally sees the body of work she has produced during their years apart. He observes that the paintings reminded him of "a shared grief" and of "furniture that served as receptacles of memory," before concluding that "all of human life, in fact, [is] reduced to memory" in her work (Tearne 405). The word "receptacles" is significant: it casts the paintings not as windows onto a vanished past but as containers actively holding memory in the present, available to be entered and re-entered. This is precisely Brah's diaspora space in miniature: a site where the genealogy of what was lost and the genealogy of what now exists intersect and are held, rather than a straightforward act of retrieval (Brah). Later in the same conversation, Thercy, the servant who has cared for the traumatised Vikram, offers Theo advice that could equally serve as the novel's arc poetica: an unhealed "wound" must be tended by the sufferer, "yourself", a formulation that implicitly identifies art-making as the labour of self-authored healing that no external return can perform on a person's behalf (Tearne 408).

The novel further insists on art's alternative geography of belonging through its treatment of Nulani's professional recognition abroad. Her exhibition in London,

tellingly titled “Two Sri Lankan Painters,” stages exactly the hybrid, in-between positioning that Bhabha’s Third Space describes: Nulani is neither simply a Sri Lankan painter working within a national tradition, nor a British painter who happens to have Sri Lankan heritage, but an artist whose very billing acknowledges a doubled, unresolved belonging. When Theo’s own portrait painted years earlier on his veranda unexpectedly surfaces in that same exhibition, the narrative dramatises how art collapses the geographic distance the plot has otherwise insisted upon: two people separated by war, presumed death, and continents are nonetheless made present to one another within the space of the canvas, well before their physical reunion in Venice.

Vikram and the Foreclosure of the Third Space

Tearne’s novel does not present art as belonging’s guaranteed outcome; the character of Vikram exists precisely to demonstrate the conditions under which the Third Space fails to open. Recruited as a child soldier before being taken in by the elderly Mr Gunadeen, Vikram is introduced as a figure who “lived in a world without people,” whose interior life is so hollowed by violence that “the space inside his head was so empty that it almost echoed” (Tearne 75). Unlike Nulani, Vikram possesses no comparable creative practice through which to process this emptiness; the local community instead explains him through a fatalistic idiom “once a child soldier always a soldier” that forecloses in advance any possibility of transformation (Tearne 87).

Without access to an alternative, hybrid space in which to hold his trauma, Vikram becomes vulnerable to Gerard, a manipulative figure who redirects his emptiness toward political violence rather than toward creative expression. Where Nulani’s grief is channelled into drawing that keeps memory alive without demanding revenge, Vikram’s grief is channelled by Gerard into an ideology that promises purpose only through violence: “avenge your family,” Gerard tells him, and Vikram experiences the instruction, chillingly, as a form of being liked (Tearne 99). The contrast is instructive: both Nulani and Vikram are orphaned by the same war and burdened with comparable grief, yet only Nulani has access to an artistic practice capable of becoming a Third Space. Vikram’s tragedy is not merely personal; it is structural, illustrating that art functions as an alternative geography of belonging only when a displaced or traumatised subject has the material, relational, and psychological access necessary to practice it. Theo’s patronage, Rohan’s mentorship, and Nulani’s own innate vocation for drawing are precisely the enabling conditions Vikram lacks.

This contrast sharpens the essay’s central claim rather than complicating it. If *Mosquito* simply asserted that art heals displacement, Vikram’s arc would sit awkwardly within the novel; instead, by withholding an artistic Third Space from Vikram specifically, Tearne clarifies that belonging-through-art is neither automatic nor universally available; it is an achievement contingent on circumstance, one the novel is careful to show can also be denied.

Writing the Unhomely: Theo's Novel and the Reconstruction of Belonging

The essay's argument would remain incomplete without attending to Theo's own turn to writing during his years of forced exile in London, since it is here that Tearne extends her claims about art beyond the visual into the literary, implicitly reflecting on the very form of the novel the reader holds. Encouraged by Thercy's advice to "write about the way we survive," Theo channels the unspeakable fact of his imprisonment and torture, recorded starkly in his own words as "I have been tortured... four simple words. Changing a life forever", into a manuscript that his agent eventually calls his most "optimistic and tender" work (Tearne 411, 420, 436-44). The transformation of unspeakable trauma into publishable narrative recapitulates, in literary form, exactly the process Nulani's painting performs visually: neither erasing the violence nor being consumed by it, but constructing around it a hybrid space in which memory can be organised into something survivable.

Tearne makes the connection between the two artists' practices explicit at the level of plot: Theo dedicates his finished novel to Nulani, "the girl who painted the invisible," closing the narrative loop between his writing and her painting and confirming that both practices are engaged in the same essential labour rendering visible, and therefore bearable, what displacement has otherwise made unspeakable (Tearne 444). This moment also gestures toward Edward Said's account of exile, which the novel appears to invoke directly when Theo, reading during his captivity, encounters the claim that exile is "an indignity curiously difficult to overcome" (Tearne 345). Said's own writing on exile similarly insists that exile is best understood not as a solvable problem but as a permanent condition to be lived with and, where possible, transmuted into insight (Said). Tearne's novel dramatises exactly this Saidian transmutation: Theo does not overcome his exile so much as he learns, through writing, to carry it differently.

The novel's final image reinforces this reading of art as reconstructed, rather than restored, belonging. When Theo and Nulani are at last reunited in Venice, the narrative does not return them to Sri Lanka, nor does it resolve the political conflict that displaced them in the first place; it leaves them instead in a third city, surrounded by Nulani's paintings, with Rohan noting simply that "these are simply very, very good paintings" (Tearne 455). The understatement is deliberate. Home, in this final scene, is not a place reclaimed but a relationship and a body of work sustained evidence that belonging, for Tearne's displaced characters, has been relocated from geography into the durable, portable space that art alone can provide.

Linguistics and the Politics of Language in Sri Lanka's Civil War

Mosquito cannot be fully read apart from the linguistic politics that helped produce the civil war it depicts, and Tearne's prose registers this history even where it is not made explicit. Sri Lanka's postcolonial language policy, most notably the 1956 legislation that established Sinhala as the sole official language, displacing

both Tamil and English from public administration, is widely identified by historians of the conflict as a foundational grievance in the escalation toward civil war, since it converted linguistic identity directly into political exclusion (DeVotta 4-6). Tearne's Sinhalese protagonist and Tamil-adjacent supporting characters move through a Sri Lanka still structured by this linguistic hierarchy, and the novel's persistent anxiety about who is "watched," who is "selfish," and whose family draws suspicion tracks closely onto the ethnic and linguistic fault lines this history produced (Tearne 11-48).

Tearne's own narrative language performs a related kind of humanities work, translating a bilingual, code-switching social world into English prose for an international readership without fully domesticating it. Terms of address, place names, and untranslated exclamations recur throughout the text as small linguistic insistences that the world of the novel is not natively English-speaking, even though English is the language in which the reader receives it a structural choice that itself performs the novel's larger argument about hybridity, since the prose is neither purely Sinhala or Tamil in cultural texture nor purely metropolitan English, but occupies its own interstitial register. This linguistic hybridity mirrors, at the level of sentence and diction, the Third Space this essay has located in Nulani's painting: just as her canvases translate an unrecoverable homeland into a new visual idiom, Tearne's prose translates a linguistically divided society into a new literary idiom legible across that division.

Vikram's characteristic silence gains additional weight when read through this linguistic lens. Introduced as a figure whose interior world is "so empty that it almost echoed," Vikram is persistently described in terms of an absence of speech and narrative rather than an absence of feeling (Tearne 75). Trauma theory within the humanities has long observed that extreme violence frequently produces exactly this kind of representational failure: an experience so far outside ordinary linguistic categories that it resists articulation in narrative form altogether. Where Nulani translates her father's death into a visual language, and Theo eventually translates his imprisonment into a manuscript, Vikram, denied access to any comparable artistic or linguistic outlet, remains trapped in an experience the novel repeatedly figures as literally unspeakable a linguistic as well as artistic foreclosure that compounds the Third Space's absence in his case.

Conclusion

Reading *Mosquito* through Bhabha's unhomely and Third Space, alongside Brah's diaspora space, clarifies what existing memory-focused criticism of the novel has already sensed but not fully theorised: that Tearne's narrative is organised around a structural substitution, in which the failure of geographic return is compensated for by the construction of an artistic space capable of holding displacement without resolving it. Theo's repeated, almost ritual insistence that neither London nor Sri Lanka nor even Venice is truly "his home" establishes homecoming as an impossibility that the plot never actually delivers in geographic terms. Nulani's canvases, by contrast, succeed precisely where physical return fails,

because they do not attempt to reconstruct a vanished Sri Lanka but instead translate its “tumult” into a hybrid visual language that can travel with her into exile. Vikram’s foreclosed access to any comparable practice demonstrates that this substitution is not guaranteed; it is a contingent achievement, dependent on relationships, resources, and vocation that not every displaced character in the novel possesses.

This reading carries an implication beyond *Mosquito* itself, one that speaks to the broader concerns of diaspora and displacement studies with which this essay began. If art can function as a Third Space of belonging only under specific enabling conditions, then celebratory accounts of diasporic creativity as inherently redemptive risk obscuring the structural inequalities of patronage, mentorship, and material security that determine who gets to construct such a space and who, like Vikram, does not. Tearne’s novel, read carefully, offers not a naive affirmation that art heals displacement, but a more exacting claim: art can become a space of belonging when a displaced subject is given the means to practice it, and its absence can be as consequential as its presence. Future work might extend this analysis to Tearne’s later fiction, particularly *Brixton Beach*, where Andermahr has already identified comparable structures of diasporic mourning, to ask whether the artistic Third Space this essay has traced in *Mosquito* recurs, mutates, or fails across the author’s broader body of work.

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