



Research Paper

## Glimpses of Cultural Memory in Roma Tearne's *The Road to Urbino*

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**ABSTRACT:** *The fictions of Roma Tearne, a Sri Lankan diasporic writer, talk extensively about loss, longing and memory. Her fictions are rooted to her homeland Sri Lanka which becomes the base for her characters, plots and events. Memory, whether nostalgic or traumatic, plays a vital role in all her fictions. Cultural memory, in particular, has a great role to play in the lives of her fictional characters. Jan Assmann terms 'cultural memory' as "one of the exterior dimensions of the human memory."*

*The Road to Urbino, a brilliant fiction by Tearne, is the story of Lynton Rasanagium, a Tamil from Jaffna in Sri Lanka. He was undergoing a trial for stealing a precious fresco painting and was denied of bail. He suffered a lot due to his Tamil identity and lost his parents during the gruesome Civil War in Sri Lanka. Later he escaped to London with his elder brother Sam. His unfurls his past life to Elizabeth, his barrister who was looking after his strange case of theft. His confessions contain floods of uncontrolled memories, his struggles and obstacles faced through different phases of life until he committed the crime of stealing of the fresco. This paper is, thus, an attempt to analyse the fiction in the light of cultural memory which gets thoroughly reflected in the entire work.*

**KEY WORDS:** Cultural Memory, Sri Lanka, Diaspora, Roma Tearne.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The very first lines of Roma Tearne's *The Road to Urbino* are heavily laden with memory, when its protagonist Lynton Rasanagium dreams of his homeland, in a foreign land.

Last night I dreamt I was in Talaimannar again. With the ancient lighthouse casting yellow stripes across the water and the rock rising steeply against the sky....towards the lighted house I walked with steady gaze and saw again the rattan roof on which the rain had tattooed out a sweet, sad song of childhood memory (3).

Roma Tearne, hailing originally from Sri Lanka and now settled down in the UK, is the author of several novels. The background of all her novels is Sri Lanka, and its association in the form of diasporic memory can be clearly visible in her fictions. In the "Introduction" to his work *Memory, Nationalism, and Narrative in Contemporary South Asia*, J. Edward Mallot exclusively talks about the problematic connections between memory, narrative and nationalism in South Asian countries. Different kinds of memory become the 'site' "only to return to the same, seemingly unanswerable quandaries of remembering the past" (23). Thus, Mallot observes:

Indeed, part of what makes this era of looking back so complex is the sheer variety of reasons for doing so; as this study will indicate, memory can serve to articulate or consolidate identity, validate or deny the identity of others, celebrate or mourn past events, or establish claims to agency, justice, or nationhood—serving both "good" and "bad" causes, resulting in triumphant and tragic outcomes. By the late twentieth century, however, "memory studies" seemed to become a byword for the interrogation of oppression, the search for silenced voices marginalized and traumatized (3-4).

Memory becomes the thread of the entire narrative of *The Road to Urbino*. The novel mostly deals with diasporic aspects such as loss, longing, nostalgia, homelessness, rootlessness, desire to go back to the origin, and so on and so forth. In its brilliant articulations of memory, the novel shows a deeper association with cultural memory.

The story of Lynton Rasanagium is shrouded in mystery and complexity. At the age of fifty, he has been undergoing a trial for stealing a precious fresco painting from the Palazzo Ducale, Urbino in Italy. His barrister Elizabeth Saunders tries her best to rescue him and asks Ras for his full cooperation to solve the case. Ras tries to convince her that he stole the fresco out of the circumstances he has been facing in life, not for money or glamour. His prime intention of stealing the fresco was to bring in world attention to the unrest going on in his home land Sri Lanka. Due to the civil war between the Singhalese and the Tamils of Sri Lanka, many innocent people lost their lives, lost their near and dear ones and became homeless. Ras left his country with his elder brother Sam, after their house got bombarded by the Singhalese army, killing their beloved mother. In London, Ras found a job in the National Gallery due to his love for paintings, after trying his hands at different occupations. Ras married an English woman Helen and they have a daughter named Lola. Initially everything was fine but gradually their relationship starts declining. Helen eventually got irritated with Ras's unnecessary association with Sri Lanka and involving Lola in his dreams and heedless memories.

Ras was very close to his mother whose memory keeps on haunting him throughout his life. Whenever he feels depressed or stressed, his mother appears in his dream to give him solace:

With no warning, I am back in Jaffna, age five, sitting on the step while she prepares our food. Three red chillies strung against an uncut lime dangle from the door handle; she had hung them there to ward off evil (16).

Vague, long-forgotten longings open up in me like flowers after rain. I have a sudden memory of Ma standing under the shade of a mango tree. There are coins of sunshine dancing on her body, filling me with shot after shot of happiness (55).

Along with Ras's story as the main plot, the novel offers a sub-plot which evolves around three other major characters namely Alex Benson, Charles Boyar and Boyar's wife Delia. One part exclusively deals with Lola, Ras's daughter and her association with these three, out of mere circumstances. The novel deals with Ras's story in three parts while the other two parts are associated with the events taking place in these characters' lives. When Ras was working as a gallery attendant, his love for fresco painting fortunately helped him to get introduced to Charles Boyar, a passionate art lover and critic. Charles invited Ras to Urbino for the exhibition of Piero della Francesca paintings. It was in the "Palazzo Ducale" where for the first time, Ras saw "The Flagellation", 'the greatest small painting in the world', as mentioned by Charles Boyar. When Ras visited Charles's house, he met Delia and Alex Benson as well.

Elizabeth tries to find out each and every detail related to Ras's life and his association with these people. So, she personally visits Alex Benson to learn the truth behind Ras's confession. So, Alex becomes the narrator of the events that occurred in and around his life as well as Charles and Delia. Alex and Delia were good friends but after their encounter with Charles, Delia got attracted towards him and finally got married. They had a son called Matt about nine years old. Matt died in a tragic incident when he stepped into a land mine, remained unused from World War II. Alex says: "Memory can destroy. Those who cannot forget live in a twilight place, for remembered pain is the worst of all" (127).

Ras was desperate to meet his daughter Lola, who lived her mother after the separation of her parents. Helen, the British wife of Ras got annoyed by his unnecessary association and love for Sri Lanka. He further involved Lola in his distant memories and each and every day to day activity later turned out to be a glimpse of his Sri Lankan past. So, after their separation and Ras living with another lady, a day finally came when Ras no longer able to decide whom to give more attention. Adele with whom Ras came to live first pampered and loved Lola, but it was Lola who could not bear it easily that her father was under the clutch of other woman. So, things worsened gradually and Ras slapped Lola in a particular incident. After that Lola stopped meeting him and moved with her mother. Ras repeatedly tried his best to meet and apologise to Lola but in vain. Ras mentions Elizabeth in one of their meetings later that "she stopped wanting my memories, long ago" (229).

When he was under trial Ras kept on requesting Elizabeth, his lawyer to bring Lola to meet him but she ignored it. In fact, Lola started hating her father when he stole the valuable fresco painting and the entire world came to know about the theft. Actually Lola never believed and approved of her Sri Lankan connection and was happy with her present status. Elizabeth replies that "other people's memories are too insubstantial" (229). Lola feels disappointed even at the mention of the place, particularly because of her father as she says "they have mangoes for brains" (308). Meanwhile Ras's brother Sam was busy in helping the Tamil militant groups back in Sri Lanka, who fought for their rights and freedom. Sam asked Ras to join in his adventure but Ras never agreed to such proposals.

Elizabeth, during her interrogation with Ras asked why he had stolen a precious painting and not any other valuables. Ras replied: "The painting was a bit of history. I stole a bit of western history. I knew it would cause a stir" (221). Refusing to be a terrorist or a murderer, Ras further added: "There is a process going on in my home; a process that is stopping the Tamil people from lamenting their loss. Memory is a basic right, denied us by a government intent on whitewashing the past" (221-22). By stealing the precious fresco, Ras, thus wanted to create attention of the people worldwide, what was actually going on in his homeland. The discrepancies, the

unrest and the deprivation of their rights were some of the issues that the Tamils were focusing. Ras lived in a past where he could not return. His childhood spent with his mother and brother in a small Jaffna village in Sri Lanka remained fixated throughout his entire life. Ras eventually admits to Elizabeth that he is “cursed with a photographic memory” (19). Every time he tried to get associated with other things finally results in his memory of Sri Lanka.

The memory he carries throughout of his native place and people, thus, can be termed as “cultural memory”. The concept of “cultural memory” was first introduced by Jan Assmann, in connection to archaeological disciplines. He defines it as ‘outer dimension of human memory’ which embraces two different concepts: “memory culture” and ‘reference to the past’. “Memory culture”, as Assmann observes, “is the process by which a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity. (Introduction, 1). The emergence of ‘cultural memory can trace back to ‘catastrophic tragedy’.

Cultural memory or mnemocultural praxis has been widely propagated and popularised by D. Venkat Rao. His idea of cultural memory hugely differs from the western classical memory tradition which talks about the presence of a memory goddess. In South Asia, particularly India, we do not have any such goddess and so does our cultural memory is apparently different from theirs.

Mnemocultures impel us to reflect on the filiations of biocultural formations and cultural forms. As we know, colonialism, drawing on the classical and medieval scribal and print communication systems of the West, has valorized and institutionalized these (archiving and museumizing) forms (19).

In “Cultural Memory: A European Perspective”, Vita Fortunati and Elena Lamberti observe,

For an individual, as well as for a nation, cultural memory is a complex and stratified entity strictly connected not only to the history and the experience of either the individual or the nation, but also to the way in which that very history and experience are read in time, individually and collectively. Each time, the past acquires new meanings and the same fact, even though it stays the same, is nevertheless shaped through remembrance; inevitably, it is juxtaposed against new backgrounds, new biographies, and new recollections (128).

Elizabeth on the day of final trial defends Ras by saying that “I do not pretend that what Lynton Rasanagium did was right. But I ask to bear in mind, Your Honour, that this is his only criminal act, born of a misplaced love for his home” (362). Ras’s love and memory of his country overpowers all other human connections. He could not hold back his family life and thus got stranded and separated from his beloved daughter. He wanted his wife and daughter to empathise in his journey of loss, longing and memory. But this is a complex world where individual emotions and feelings hardly work. Jan Assmann observes:

It is “cultural” because it can only be realized institutionally and artificially, and it is “memory” because in relation to social communication it functions in exactly the same way as individual memory does in relation to consciousness (Introduction, 9).

Glimpses of cultural memory in bits and pieces are present throughout the narrative of *The Road to Urbino*. At the opening chapter during his interrogations, Ras tells Elizabeth:

I gaze at you and remember our house. There was no glass in the windows. Only bars. This being the tropics, the air needed to circulate freely. Sometimes small birds would lose their way and fly in before disappearing swiftly our again with a soft confused flutter (7).

Memory anyways has a strong connection with place and landscape. Ras’s longing to return to his native place keeps on appearing in the forms of cultural memory. “Many cultural memories”, as observed by Rodríguez and Fortier, “often arise out of events that prove transformative, igniting recognizable shifts in the world of meaning for a people” (12).

After getting married, Ras often imagined the presence of his mother and tries to fix her picture in his wife but in vain. Helen belongs to a totally different culture altogether and nowhere resembles his mother in appearance or activities. While teaching Lola how to draw objects, he ends up drawing green mangoes and it becomes a regular habit. The repetitive mention of his land finally offended Helen as she says: “I’ve had enough of you. Get a grip of yourself. I’m sick of hearing about Sri Lanka. I can’t even escape in my sleep. This has got to stop” (53).

At another point, Ras thinks of Lola whose memory also traces him back to place:

Lo, Lo-la, my girl with the dark eyes. My dearest daughter. Memories come back to me in shreds, like the long wisps of smoke trailing from the burning homes in Jaffna (91).

During his visit to Urbino sponsored by Charles Boyar, the journey through the mountainous road reminds him of his country once more:

Long ago I remember being told there were places in the hill country of Sri Lanka that were this way. Kandy, where the tea wad grown; Nuwara Eliya, too (109).

Lola disapproves of her father until and unless the trial is over. She wanted to start her political career but the theft by her father anyhow affected it. So she accuses Ras:

'In the end, the only thing that always mattered to you is yourself...And that Third World hovel you originated from' (349).

Ras has been termed by a terrorist and to escape his crime seemed impossible. However Elizabeth tries her best to defend Ras and succeeds at last, by minimising his punishment. Thus, he was sentenced for prison for eight years, instead of twelve years. Ras simply believes of his Sri Lankan origin that "ours was a civilization which the West disturbed but could never acquire" (366).

Ras is stuck in between two different time and space: his unbearable present in London and his sweet and soothing past as a child in Jaffna. The past in a discursive form appears as a cultural memory in Ras's later life. Andreas Huyssen thus observes:

Memory as re-presentation, as making present, is always in danger of collapsing the constitutive tension between past and present, especially when the imagined past is sucked into the timeless present of the all-pervasive virtual space of consumer culture(10).

Ras's main problem occurs because he could not erase the past memories, both nostalgic and traumatic. He always prefers to live in the past, instead of the present. He could not shed away his Tamil identity in the foreign land and he prefers to stick back to his country. The tragic and unnatural death of his beloved mother in a bombarding at their house and kidnapping of his father prior to that were enough to annihilate Ras's life at a very early stage. These nightmares remained forever inside his heart and being a common, simple man, he could not find any solution to such national crisis. Unlike Ras, Sam started funding for the Tamil Tigers from London and wanted Ras to cooperate in his mission as well. But Ras, being a passive man could not imagine destroying lives of his native people.

So, he tried to bring world attention in a different and peculiar manner. His intention was never to make money by stealing the precious fresco painting but to grab attention of people who had never ever imagined or realised what has been going on the small island country of Asia. Ras, thus declares to Elizabeth:

I am not a terrorist, I am not a murderer, I do not wish to destroy others. But something needed to be done. There is a process going on in my home; a process that is stopping the Tamil people from lamenting their loss. Memory is a basic right, denied us by a government intent on whitewashing the past (221-22).

In this regards, Jeanette Rodríguez & Ted Fortier in the chapter entitled "The Concept of Cultural Memory" observe,

With regard to cultural memory, therefore, we contend that a people carry a memory and that the memory itself is also a carrier. One means by which memory is transmitted is through narrative. Narrative emphasizes the active, self-shaping quality of human thought. Its power resides in its ability to create, form, refashion, and reclaim identity (7).

Sam on the other hand willingly contributed to the extremist group LTTE, funding whenever possible to buy arms. He repeatedly asked Ras to join but was not successful. Sam visited Ras for three times in prison and promised to come for the fourth time. Sam was about to bring for Ras a 'Tamil newspaper', some 'bitter gourd sambals' and a ripe 'Jaffna mango'. But unfortunately he died on that very day out of severe heart attack and could not fulfil his promise. The things were later on brought to Ras by Elizabeth. The durability of cultural traces knows no specific boundaries. It is retained in a cross cultural scenario and cultural memory mostly helps in such aspects. Spatio-cultural memory has become a new trend in today's globalised world. In this context, Andreas Huyssen further observes:

The geographic spread of the culture of memory is as wide as memory's political uses are varied, ranging from a mobilization of mythic pasts to support aggressively chauvinist or fundamentalist politics.... But the fault line between mythic past and real past is not always easy to draw-which is one of the conundrums of any politics, of memory anywhere. The real can be mythologized, just as the mythic may engender strong reality effects. In sum, memory has become a cultural obsession of monumental proportions across the globe (15-16).

## II. CONCLUSION

Cultural memory, at times, acts as a pool of reference for Roma Tearne. Not only it is exteriorized and objectified but also stored "in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, is stable and situation-transcendent" (Assmann 2008: 110). It is transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. Tearne treats memory as a starting point and a springboard for a series of interrelated and diffuse cultural, social and political experiences stemming from an association with both real and imagined spaces.

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