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Nature as Monster of Terror: Re-reading Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* through Eco-Gothic Theory

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Abstract
This paper aims to study Sri Lankan English writer Roma Tearne's novel *Mosquito* (2007)—as Eco Gothic texts that use gothicised landscape tropes of the sea, the forest, the beach to highlight the intersections between human exploitation and environmental degradation in post-colonial Sri Lanka. By drawing on the theories of the Eco Gothic and associated concepts such as Ecophobia, I examine how the EcoGothic is manifested in this novel through a close connection between nature and the (dark) history of a place immersed in terrorism and civil war. The paper argues that Mosquito portrays how the civil war turned nature into a location of monstrosity. The use to which certain landscapes are put in post-colonial Sri Lanka during the civil war creates an ecophobic narrative about them. Through the EcoGothic, Tearne in her novel overturns popular conceptions of tropical islands as idyllic and shows these landscapes as sites of fear and the uncanny, and as palimpsests of multiple histories of political and ecological violence. It highlights how the use to which certain landscapes are put in post-colonial Sri Lanka renders these spaces fearful and uncanny, generating ecophobia.
Keywords: Nature, Horror, EcoGothic, Sri Lankan, Ecophobia, war
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INTRODUCTION

One of the constant preoccupations of contemporary Sri Lankan writing in English is the civil war and the trauma that emanates from it; the writers trace the transformation of Sri Lanka from a "locus amoenus", a place of safety, to "locus horribilis," a place ruined by war. Landscape tropes such as the forest, the beach, or the sea in Sri Lankan literature are not mere settings or metaphors for the island but highlight the possibility of reading them for their own sake. This paper attempts to read the Roma Tearne's novel *Mosquito* through the EcoGothic theory. Andrew Smith and William Hughes's describe this theory as a distinct branch of the Gothic that stems from their belief that the Gothic as a genre has always been "ecologically aware" (1), since it associates nature with estrangement, dystopia, culture, and horror, presenting it as a space for crisis. Therefore, the Gothic mode is often used by writers to address anxieties about nature and the environment.

Simon Estok first proposed the term "ecophobia" in 1995 "to denote fear and loathing of the environment" (Estok 213). He suggests that ecophobia could also mean "a fear of ecological problems and the natural world" (3). Smith and Hughes define it, in the introduction to their volume, as "how the body as a site of Gothic fear – sexual, injured, dismembered and celebrated – can be seen and positively re-membered in a literary landscape" (p.8). Principe, meanwhile, emphasises the importance of taking a non-anthropocentric approach to examine nature in the gothic, yet goes on to say that "the EcoGothic examines the construction of the Gothic body – unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, post-human, or hybrid – through a more inclusive lens, asking how it can be more meaningfully understood as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity" (p.1). This definition, while less anthropocentric than that of Smith and Hughes, still retains focus on a living, animal body. Both of these definitions are vital to the ecogothic, but I think that the ecogothic is more than a focus on the faunal body, it is also a means through which to explore how nature in the sense of flora is gothic: how it constructs fear and monstrosity, and how nature and place as a whole can be haunting. Gothic tropes – monstrosity, imprisonment, the uncanny, oppression and repression, boundaries – are manifest not only in animal bodies, but also in the body of nature, through land, water, air, and plants.

Ecophobia indicates how human beings are propelled by their selfish interests to treat nature with contempt and ravage it for their utilitarian purposes. Dawn Keetley and Matthew Sivils argue that the EcoGothic inevitably intersects with ecophobia as not only ecophobic representations of nature are "infused, like the gothic, with fear

and dread, but also because ecophobia, is born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world. And control, or lack thereof" (3).

My reading of the selected novel from the EcoGothic perspective demonstrates how the question of the environment intertwines with the writers' preoccupation of the civil war that afflicted Sri Lanka (from 1983 to 2009). By drawing upon the theories of the EcoGothic by Smith, Hughes, and Deckard and associated concept such as Ecophobia by Simon Estok, my study shows how in the context of historical events like the civil war, certain landscape tropes are represented as sites of fear and terror. These representations move away from the pastoral and picturesque narratives about tropical landscapes represented in many colonial narratives. Within the framework of the "EcoGothic," Mosquito exhibit ecophobic tendencies as it portrays how the civil war turned nature into a location of monstrosity and fear.

ANALYSIS

The association of nature with the racial politics and war in Sri Lanka is further amplified in Mosquito, where sites like the sea and the forests evolve as "liminal" and contested sites between the State and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in post-colonial Sri Lanka. Mosquito is the love story of Theo Samarajeva, a 47-year-old writer, and a 17-year-old girl named Nulani Mendis, a painter. Their love blooms amidst the civil war in Sri Lanka, and the war shatters their innocent, sincere, and beautiful relationship. Theo is attacked and kidnapped by the army for being outspoken and sympathizing with the Tamils, and Nulani is forced to leave the country. In the novel, the natural landscapes cannot be isolated from the political and ecological experience of the nation. Theo returns to Sri Lanka from London and settles into a beach house to collect materials for his second novel. The beach and the sea are constant images in the novel and Tearne also takes the readers through the island's dense forests. Theo is captured and taken captive and kept in remote regions of the forest, first by the Sinhalese army and later by the Tamil Tigers. The novel suggests that there is an integral relationship between ecophobia and the use to which nature is put in post-colonial Sri Lanka. In the novel, nature develops as an uncanny and horrific site, where to venture in could mean putting one's life in danger.

In *Mosquito*, Tearne presents the beach as a liminal and unpredictable site that often restricts freedom. While on the one hand, the beach and the beach house represent an idyllic existence, suggested through activities the characters enjoy, such as painting, writing, going for walks, and cooking, these sites also emerge as eerie and inhospitable spaces as the sea and the beach were often used by the army to lynch people who were suspected of being members of the LTTE. Sugi, Theo's manservant, frequently brings news about such violence:

> There's been some kind of trouble further along the coast … Someone told me the army drove their jeeps on the sands, chasing a group of men. And then they shot them. They were all young, Sir. Nobody knows what they had done …The army left the bodies on the beach, and the local people cleared the mess. (Tearne 27-28)

The beach is also constantly under the surveillance of the army, and the curfew imposed by the army in times of emergency further restricted the free use of the beach by the common people. During the civil war, the sea and the beach were two of the most guarded places in Sri Lanka. The LTTE rebels haunted the beach and the sea, forming unique groups such as the Sea Tigers. The Sea Tigers used the sea to launch attacks, smuggle weapons and other equipment into Sri Lanka, and terrorize the Indian Ocean with suicide boats and special forces attacking the Sri Lankan Navy. The Sri Lankan Navy also arranged massive patrol vessels to keep a check, and during an emergency, curfew was imposed on the beach. In her article, Jessica S. Lehman discusses how the ocean was an actor in the war in Sri Lanka, elaborating that "the ocean serves as a nexus for many and various relations and discourses on power, politics, security, economics, families, wealth, conservation, and more" (2013: 488). During the armed conflict, the ocean played out as a "battleground" as "some of the deadliest and most protracted battles in the thirty-year civil conflict were fought in the coastal regions of the North and the East, which comprised two-thirds of the country's coastline" (Lehman 493). Lehman further explains that the lagoons of the ocean often acted as a threat to the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, who suspected that their dense vegetation could provide cover for the LTTE. Therefore, as Edmonds-Dobrijevich suggests, the ocean emerged as an "archetypical site of the sublime and horror" (493) that can never be entirely governed (Connery "There was no more sea"). In many representations of the sea and beach in Sri Lankan writing, these spaces emerge as gothic sites of fear and violence. In Mosquito, these spaces also foreground growing ecological horrors because of the use of these spaces as dump yards for dead bodies and the overall neglect of the environment during the war. Tearne establishes the direct impact of the war on ecology when she further describes how the jungle was reduced to ashes when the army used the site to burn the corpses of people they had killed:

> A soldier leapt down and took out a can. He began to pour petrol over the bodies …The whole jungle seemed on fire, awash with the sour smells of tamarind and eucalyptus, and something else, something rotten and deep and terrifying. (71)

The flames that burnt for a long time impacted not only the plants and trees but also the animals; Tearne writes that "somewhere, in some impenetrable corner of the jungle, an elephant was preparing to charge" (72), disturbed by the flames and heat. Such gothic representations can also be connected to ecophobia. As Estok (2018) suggests, linking nature with terror leads to ecophobia since we look at nature as the agent of terror rather than at anthropogenic forces as the cause for natural imbalance.

In Mosquito, the uncanny and gothic characteristics of nature are implicated through the violent use of these landscapes; for instance, the sea, the beach, and the river are represented as a dump yard for dead bodies, and the forest is represented as the hub of militants and state forces who have created hidden camps in the opaque jungles. One of the primary characters, Sugi, is also murdered on the beach. This turn of events in the story builds an intimidating fear in readers of the landscapes of Sri Lanka. Sugi's bloated body is recovered from the beach. Similarly, dead bodies are recovered in the eastern province—"bloated and stinking like cattle, with stiffened limbs" (130). An LTTE leader explains the phenomenon to Vikram, a new LTTE recruit:

> "First they were raped," he told Vikram, "then we were brought in to shoot them."
> "Who were they?" asked Vikram.
> "Muslims."
> The boy told Vikram that the dead amounted to 270. They were people who should not have been living here, it was not their land, it was Tamil land. And their husbands and sons were all in the Singhalese army. The Tigers had turned their sub-machine guns on them, sending bullets buzzing like bees. And then afterwards the rains had washed the bodies into the river. Later, the boy told Vikram, the bodies had surfaced, bloated and stinking like cattle, with stiffened limbs. Some soldiers still thought the place was haunted with the souls of the dead, others, that Muslims had no souls to speak of. (129-130)

The comparison of the bullets to bees to express the horror of the common people being hunted down and killed by terrorists suggests the human fear of insects. That humans look at bees as a mass of tiny creatures capable of stinging (humans) allows its use as a metaphor to highlight the monstrosity of the terrorist group. The bees embody the idea of predatory attacks and evoke a sinister entity that reflects ecophobia through their buzzing sounds and mobile swarms. The association of terror with the non-human and natural spaces creates a sense of suspicion of nature where nature is seen as the source of terror; it is perceived as what makes the conflict possible. For instance, the beach and the sea are perceived as convenient places to hide traces of violence, as the sea would swallow everything. Tearne complicates such representations of the sea by presenting the sea as a much more complex entity. In Mosquito, the sea is an elusive and symbolic space. Sometimes, it depicts the characters' inner state of mind. For instance, "the sea still scrolled restlessly up the beach" (110) while Theo walked restlessly on the beach with Nulani. At other times, the sea has a more foreboding tone: "It rained in the night but towards dawn the mist began rolling in from the sea" (97). Tearne writes that "the sea was like a mirror," (1), suggesting it reflects what one shows it and gives back what one gives it. The sea swallows the dead bodies; however, it also uncovers violence as it drives bloated dead bodies to the shore from its uncanny depths.

Jimmy Packham and David Punter suggest it is essential to examine the sea by considering its "non-human scale and depth" with "the prominence and pre-eminence of the uncanny non-human forms inhabiting the ocean" (2017:16). The depth of the ocean suggests "a site haunted by the accumulation of history, in which past blends with present, and where spatiality and temporality become unmoored from and exceed their traditional (or terrestrial) qualities" (16). In Mosquito, the imagery of the dead bodies suggests how "the sea illuminates the dead, the depths make visible what would otherwise be concealed within them" (Packham and Punter 2017: 19). The depth of the sea appears as another world housing the haunting spirits of those killed during the war. The sea in Mosquito, therefore, also exposes human violence, expressed through the haunting imagery of "bloated dead bodies" on the shore. It is interesting to note how Tearne further connects ecology with war through the imagery of the mosquito (and malaria):

> […]it was time when the swarms of mosquitoes appeared, thick as smoke and deadly as flying needles … It was a mosquito's paradise. They floated their dark canoes on these ponds among the lotus flowers and the water lilies. Waiting for the night. (77)

The war led to a collapse of the government, and the army, who were otherwise responsible for spraying DDT to contain the spread of malaria, was engaged in the war. Tearne explains the uncanny growth of mosquitoes on the island through various images. For instance, Theo always lights a mosquito coil to ward off the mosquitoes,

Nulani's mother dies of malaria, and the terrible rains that led to water logging "in coconut palms, in ditches and stagnant tanks" (77) provoked a malaria outbreak across the island. The mosquitoes take on a monstrous quality with agential qualities in the narrative. In The Gothic (2004), Punter and Glennis Byron explain the word "monster" was traditionally used "to demonstrate" or "to warn": "From classical times through to the Renaissance, monsters were interpreted either as signs of divine anger or as portents of impending disasters" (2004: 263). The mosquitoes serve as a warning, heralding a complete ecological collapse because of the war where nature, through the mosquitoes, aims at a complete mastery over humans, surpassing any human attempt to contain them. Parker also points out how the EcoGothic plays around with "a clear and immediate sense of nature's revenge" (2016: 217). The mosquitoes show how nature strikes back in an unnerving way, causing terror and death on the island. The terror of the mosquitoes is highlighted as being distinct yet as equally unnerving as the terror of war. Tearne creates an uncanny world immersed in violence, disease, and death as she compares the grotesque and fearful anopheles mosquitoes with female LTTE suicide bombers:

> In Colombo, the mosquitoes were back. Thin, fragile and deadly, they coated the walls of buildings in their thousands, filling the waterlogged coconut shells, turning the surfaces of everything they alighted into a living carpet. They fed on the flesh of rotting fruit, sucking out what remained of the honeydew nectar. Arriving with the mosquitoes was a new breed of women from the north of the island. Like the mosquitoes, they came with the rains. But unlike the mosquitoes, the women were full of a new kind of despair and a frightening rage. Their desire for revenge was greater than their interest in life. They had been trained; a whole army of psychologists working tirelessly on them had shaped their impressionable minds. The female mosquitoes' purpose in life was the continuation of their species, but the suicide bombers cared nothing for the future. (253)

The comparison of the terrorists with the mosquitoes lends an ecophobic dimension to the text. The simultaneous arrival of the female LTTE cadres and the female mosquitoes is further marked by their huge numbers and their monstrous capacities. Just as the female suicide bombers plan for more attacks on the island, they facilitate a perfect environment for the mosquitoes to breed and transform the landscape through disease and death by creating lots of dilapidated spaces. As the mosquitoes attack more and more people, the environment becomes even more frightening. Thus, the activities of humans are intertwined with those of the non-humans and the Gothic is manifested through the fear of the predatory instincts of both the female LTTE cadres and the mosquitoes.

The Gothic is further manifested in the novel through the trope of the forest that connects it to the escalating ecological crisis in Sri Lanka because of militarization, violence, and lawlessness in the country. John Wylie observes that postcolonial writers often replace the "European landscape aesthetics such as the sublime with a poetics of the ugly and the unpresentable" (9). In Sri Lankan fiction, the forests are often depicted as sites of refuge for the LTTE, state-militarized zones, or places of escape, highlighting its disorienting and dangerous nature. Neloufer de Mel (2007) points out that during the civil war in Sri Lanka, the army was given paramount power over civilians under the pretext of maintaining law and order. Such unchecked powers led to government sponsored killings, kidnappings, rape, disappearance, arbitrary detention, and other kinds of crime. In Mosquito the army headquarters is located in the middle of a dense forest and "the running river through parts of the jungle" (178) "provided a natural barrier around the low-slung concrete building that was the army headquarters" (178). Theo was kidnapped by the army and driven into the forest through "rough dirty tracks" and fecund vegetation:

> Brilliant tiger-striped orchids sprouted everywhere. Lilies grew wild, choked by the scented stephanotis, and huge creepers tangled with trees. Birds rustled in the dense mass of leaves, their cries echoing across the valley. Everywhere, in every pocket of light, there were small clouds of tiny butterflies hovering above the flowers, slipping through the hard scalloped leaves of the belimal trees. (178)

Tearne writes that the "forest was teeming and heaving with life" (178) alluding to the agential properties of the forest, which created a frightening atmosphere for Theo as well as his kidnappers. The ruggedness and the fecundity of the jungle functioned as a hostile and gothic labyrinth that restricted the free movement of the people.

The forest in Mosquito is also the base for the LTTE. Tearne shows how militarism had become a dominant ideology in independent Sri Lanka and how people—women, youth, and children—were inducted into a martial survival model. Such extreme conditions are exemplified through the character of Vikram, a traumatized schoolboy who is forced to become a suicide bomber to avenge the murder of his parents and his sister's rape. Gerard, the LTTE commander, initiates him into the path of violence by constantly reminding him of his awful

past and asking, "Don't you want to avenge your family, then?" (52) Tearne links the Gothic dimensions of Vikram's personality—he is reserved and anti-social—with his acquired liking for isolated places within forests like the Adia Grove, a wasteland haunted by rumours of ghosts. Tearne writes that because of its eerie nature, "Adia Grove would never become popular" (108) and that "[o]nly Vikram frequented the place" (108). The uncanny dimensions of the grove are further accentuated through the grotesque images of dead bodies hanging from the trees "like a broken doll, swinging in the slight breeze" (109), "like a giant pendulum moving backwards and forwards, swinging to an invisible beat" (109), as the grove also became a lynching zone during the civil war. Tearne highlights the dense forests as extreme sites of fear characterized by festering bodies, detention camps, mysterious insects, deliriums, fever, and death. Such ecophobic representations of nature intersect with the EcoGothic as the non-human seems to equally contribute to the construction of monstrosity and fear in the narrative. Tearne further elucidates the forest's malevolent nature through the images of the "insect-eating plant" and poisonous creatures and plants that threaten to consume anyone who messes with them:

> In certain parts of the jungle, there grows an insect-eating plant not found anywhere else on the island. If disturbed, its elegant leaves close down, like eyelashes. When this happens the butterflies or bees, flies or mosquitoes drawn to its scent, are trapped in its vice-like grip, killed in an instant. (162-163)

Thus, Tearne highlights not only Theo's encounter with human forces of terror but also with the forest's overwhelming presence. The forests are spaces of lurking fear that overwhelm humans, even the terrorists and the army who try to dominate them. The fecund vegetation that Tearne describes as "mostly impenetrable and dense," (162) so much so that "the afternoon sun could filter (only) in a diffused way through the branches of the tree" (163) and the strange and poisonous insects, highlights a natural world twisting into an uncanny and monstrous figure. The narrative takes an anti-pastoral form as the text moves away from the romantic connotations of the landscape and instead presents Theo's encounter with the unknowable landscape that, because of the neglect and war, was taking monstrous proportions, capable of effectively destroying and turning Sri Lanka into an eerie place. Such narratives about a place could generate old fears about such landscapes and further generate ecophobia. Theo somehow escapes from the forest but the experience permanently unsettles him. He returns to the beach house and once again starts writing about the island. In his narrative, Sri Lanka emerges as a Gothic place—"the new novel continued to grow with a logic and rhythm of its own. It took its time, following a path of its own. The atmosphere of brooding darkness in a jungle of noxious violence and superstitions had developed in a manner that had nothing to do with him" (281). The mosquito develops into an apt metaphor for the island in his narrative — "Life in this paradise, he felt, was exactly as the beautiful mosquito that lived here, composed in equal parts of loveliness and deadliness," (281) reflective of Tearne's own preoccupation with the theme of the transformation of Sri Lanka from a paradisical island into a place of danger and foreboding in *Mosquito*. As Susan J. Tyburski says, "in depicting the transformation of our natural environment into something monstrous, we come face to face with our alienation from nature" (150). Tearne's narrative, therefore, reflects anxieties about the changing Sri Lankan landscape and environment in the face of war and violence.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the novel *Mosquito* read through the lens of the EcoGothic and ecophobia highlight the intersections of the political history of Sri Lanka with the ecological history of the island. The texts exemplify how ecophobia generates extreme cultures such as plantation monocultures, which are based on the exploitation of both the underprivileged people and the environment, and on the other hand, how the use to which spaces like the beach, the sea, and the forest are put in post-colonial Sri Lanka renders these spaces fearful and uncanny, generating ecophobia. Tearne revises and reorients Western traditions of writing, and their engagement with nature is informed by the history of Sri Lanka and the haunting evils of colonization, militarism, war, and the ruthless exploitation of the landscape. Through the EcoGothic, Tearne overturns popular conceptions of tropical islands as idyllic and show landscapes as historical sites and palimpsests of multiple histories of violence. This reading, therefore, highlights the need to re-examine the relations between humans and their environment in postcolonial literature by foregrounding the intersections of the EcoGothic with postcolonial questions of race, war, and ecophobia.

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