

Reconfiguring Nature and Terror in Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* through an Eco Gothic Lens

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Sri Lankan English writer Roma Tearne's novel *Mosquito* (2007) as an Eco Gothic text, foregrounding the deployment of Gothicised landscape tropes-such as the sea, the forest, and the beach-to illuminate the intersections between human exploitation and environmental degradation in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Theoretical concepts from Eco Gothic and related theories will serve as the basis for an analysis of how the novel connects nature with the horrific, traumatic experiences in Sri Lanka arising from terrorism and civil war.

The paper contends that *Mosquito* presents landscapes as sites of monstrosity due to the civil conflict. Ecophobic tales about landscapes involved in the war create a narrative of these space as threatening and strange. Using Eco Gothic as a lens through which to view the tropical island, the author reveals the island to be an expanse of haunted land with multiple histories (palimpsests) of political violence and ecological devastation. This study ultimately demonstrates that the political use of landscapes in postcolonial Sri Lanka creates estrangement from the land, and produces ecophobic responses from people.

Keywords: Nature, Horror, Eco Gothic, Sri Lankan, Ecophobia, War

INTRODUCTION

One of the central preoccupations of contemporary Sri Lankan writing in English is the civil war and the trauma that emanates from it. Writers frequently trace the transformation of Sri Lanka from a locus amoenus-a site of safety and harmony-into a locus horribilis, a landscape devastated by war and violence. In this context, landscape tropes such as the forest, the beach, and the sea are not merely passive settings or symbolic representations of the island; rather, they invite critical attention as entities that can be read for their own intrinsic significance.

This paper seeks to examine Roma Tearne's novel *Mosquito* through the lens of Eco Gothic theory. Andrew Smith and William Hughes conceptualise the Eco Gothic as a distinct branch of the Gothic, grounded in the premise that the Gothic mode has always been "ecologically aware" (1). They argue that the Gothic associates' nature with estrangement, dystopia, culture, and horror, thereby framing it as a site of crisis. Consequently, the Gothic has often served as a productive mode for articulating anxieties surrounding nature and the environment.

The term "ecophobia," first introduced by Simon Estok in 1995, denotes a "fear and loathing of the environment" (213), and may also be understood as a broader fear of ecological problems and the natural world (3). Smith and Hughes expand this concept by linking it to the Gothic body, defining ecophobia in terms of how the body-depicted as sexualised, injured, dismembered, and yet celebrated-can be

reconstituted within a literary landscape (8). In contrast, Principe advocates a less anthropocentric approach, emphasising the need to examine nature in Gothic discourse beyond the human perspective. He argues that the Eco Gothic explores the construction of the Gothic body—whether unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid—as a site for articulating environmental and species identity (1).

While both approaches are integral to Eco Gothic studies, this paper contends that the Eco Gothic extends beyond an exclusive focus on the faunal body. It also provides a critical framework for understanding how flora and the natural environment at large become imbued with Gothic qualities. Nature, in this sense, emerges as a site of fear, monstrosity, and haunting. Gothic tropes such as monstrosity, imprisonment, the uncanny, oppression, repression, and liminality are thus manifested not only in animal bodies but also within the broader “body” of nature-encompassing land, water, air, and vegetation.

Ecophobia further reveals the extent to which human beings, driven by self-interest, exploit and degrade the natural environment for utilitarian ends. As Dawn Keetley and Matthew Sivils argue, the Eco Gothic inevitably intersects with ecophobia, since ecophobic representations of nature are imbued with fear and dread, akin to the Gothic mode itself. Moreover, ecophobia arises from humanity’s inability to exert control over both life and the natural world, foregrounding the tension between control and its absence (3).

This study reads the selected novel through an Eco Gothic lens to demonstrate how environmental concerns are deeply intertwined with the writer’s engagement with the Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009). Drawing on the Eco Gothic frameworks proposed by Smith, Hughes, and Deckard, along with Simon Estok’s concept of ecophobia, the analysis explores how, within the context of historical trauma, specific landscape tropes are reconfigured as sites of fear, violence, and terror. Such representations mark a clear departure from the pastoral and picturesque depictions of tropical landscapes prevalent in colonial narratives. Within the Eco Gothic framework, *Mosquito* exhibits pronounced ecophobic tendencies, illustrating how the civil war transforms the natural environment into a locus of monstrosity. The novel thus reimagines nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active, unsettling presence shaped by histories of conflict and human exploitation.

ANALYSIS

The association between nature, racial politics, and war in Sri Lanka is further intensified in *Mosquito*, where landscapes such as the sea and the forest emerge as liminal and contested zones between the State and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The novel narrates the love story of Theo Samarajeva, a forty-seven-year-old writer, and Nulani Mendis, a seventeen-year-old painter, whose relationship unfolds against the backdrop of civil war. Their fragile yet sincere bond is ultimately disrupted by violence: Theo is abducted and tortured by the army for his outspoken views and perceived sympathy towards Tamils, while Nulani is compelled to leave the country.

In this narrative, natural landscapes are inseparable from the political and ecological realities of the nation. Theo’s return from London to a beach house in Sri Lanka, where he seeks inspiration for his second novel, foregrounds the centrality of the sea and the beach as recurring motifs. Simultaneously, the text traverses dense forest spaces, which become sites of captivity and violence as Theo is imprisoned first by the Sinhalese army and later by the LTTE. These representations underscore the intrinsic relationship between ecophobia and the instrumentalisation of nature in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Nature thus assumes an uncanny and horrific dimension, where entry into such spaces entails mortal danger.

The beach, in particular, is portrayed as a liminal and unpredictable site that both enables and restricts

freedom. While it initially signifies an idyllic existence-marked by activities such as painting, writing, walking, and cooking-it simultaneously emerges as an eerie and inhospitable terrain. The sea and the shore are repeatedly used by the army as sites of execution for suspected LTTE members, as illustrated through Sugi's narration of bodies left on the sands after violent encounters (Tearne 27-28). The imposition of curfews and constant military surveillance further transforms the beach into a controlled and contested space.

During the civil war, the sea and coastline became strategic and heavily guarded zones. The LTTE's naval wing, the Sea Tigers, utilised these spaces for launching attacks, smuggling weapons, and carrying out maritime assaults, while the Sri Lankan Navy responded with intensified patrols and restrictions. As Jessica S. Lehman observes, the ocean functioned as a dynamic "nexus" of power, politics, and security, and effectively became a battleground where some of the most intense conflicts of the war were fought (2013: 488-493). The lagoons and dense coastal vegetation further contributed to military anxieties, as they were perceived as potential hiding grounds for insurgents. Consequently, the ocean assumes the dual role of sublime and horrific-an uncontrollable force that resists governance and becomes implicated in violence.

Tearne extends this Eco Gothic vision by depicting the ecological consequences of war. Landscapes are transformed into sites of decay and contamination, particularly when used as dumping grounds for corpses. The jungle, for instance, is rendered a scene of ecological devastation when bodies are burned, producing an atmosphere saturated with decay and ਘੜ (71). The destructive impact of such violence extends beyond human bodies to the nonhuman world, as evidenced by the disturbance of wildlife, including elephants reacting to the fires (72). These representations align with Estok's notion of ecophobia, wherein the association of nature with terror leads to its perception as an agent of ਘੜ rather than as a victim of anthropogenic violence.

Furthermore, the novel repeatedly constructs landscapes as repositories of violence and death. Rivers, beaches, and seas become sites where corpses are disposed of and later resurface, generating a haunting imagery of bloated bodies and reinforcing the Gothic sensibility of the text. The murder of Sugi and the recovery of his body from the beach, alongside descriptions of decomposing corpses in the eastern provinces (129-130), contribute to an atmosphere of ਘੜ and estrangement. The metaphorical comparison of bullets to bees further intensifies this imagery, invoking a sense of swarming menace and reflecting human anxieties towards the nonhuman. Such representations project terror onto natural elements, fostering suspicion towards nature as a facilitator of violence.

At the same time, Tearne complicates these ecophobic constructions by presenting the sea as an elusive and symbolic entity. The sea reflects the psychological states of characters, oscillating between restlessness and foreboding, while also functioning as a repository and revealer of violence. Its depths suggest a haunted space where histories accumulate, blurring temporal and spatial boundaries. As Packham and Punter argue, the ocean's nonhuman scale and depth render it a site where concealed histories resurface (2017: 16-19). In *Mosquito*, this is evident in the recurring imagery of corpses returning to the shore, thereby exposing the hidden atrocities of war. The sea thus emerges as both a concealing and revealing force, embodying the complex entanglement of ecology, violence, and memory.

Through these representations, Tearne's novel foregrounds the intricate relationship between ecology and conflict, demonstrating how natural landscapes are transformed into Gothic spaces of monstrosity, and haunting under the pressures of war. 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 civil war precipitated a breakdown of governmental structures, redirecting institutional priorities toward military engagement. Consequently, public health measures-such as the spraying of DDT to control malaria-were neglected, resulting in a significant increase in Mosquito populations across the island. Tearne captures this ecological imbalance through recurring and unsettling imagery: Theo's habitual use of Mosquito coils, the death of Nulani's mother from malaria, and the torrential rains that create stagnant pools "in coconut palms, in ditches and stagnant tanks" (77), all of which facilitate the spread of disease. Within the narrative, Mosquitoes assume monstrous and agential qualities.

As David Punter and Glennis Byron observe in *The Gothic* (2004), the term "monster" historically functioned as a sign "to demonstrate" or "to warn," often interpreted as a portent of divine anger or impending catastrophe (263). In *Mosquito*, these insects operate as ecological warnings, signalling a broader environmental collapse precipitated by war. They appear to exceed human control, suggesting a reversal of dominance in which nature asserts mastery over humanity. This aligns with Parker's observation that the Eco Gothic frequently invokes "a clear and immediate sense of nature's revenge" (2016: 217). The proliferation of Mosquitoes thus embodies a form of ecological retribution, producing terror that parallels, and at times rivals, the fear of war itself.

Tearne intensifies this Gothic atmosphere by juxtaposing the grotesque presence of *Anopheles* Mosquitoes with female LTTE suicide bombers. The convergence of these two forces-both deadly and proliferating-creates a disturbing equivalence between human and nonhuman agents of violence. The simultaneous arrival of Mosquitoes and female cadres, particularly during the monsoon rains, underscores their shared capacity for destruction. While Mosquitoes perpetuate their species through biological instinct, the suicide bombers are driven by ideological indoctrination and despair. This comparison introduces a distinctly ecophobic dimension, as the natural world becomes entangled with human violence and is perceived as complicit in terror.

The novel further reveals how human activities facilitate ecological degradation. War-torn environments, marked by neglect and destruction, create ideal breeding grounds for Mosquitoes, thereby intensifying disease and fear. In this sense, the Gothic emerges through the convergence of human and nonhuman predation, as both militants and insects contribute to a pervasive atmosphere of dread.

The Eco Gothic dimension is equally evident in Tearne's representation of the forest, which becomes a site of escalating ecological crisis under conditions of militarisation and lawlessness. As John Wylie suggests, postcolonial writing often replaces European aesthetic categories such as the sublime with a poetics of the grotesque and the unrepresentable (9). In Sri Lankan fiction, forests are frequently depicted as militarised zones, insurgent refuges, or spaces of escape, thereby foregrounding their disorienting and perilous qualities. Neloufer de Mel (2007) notes that during the civil war, the expansion of military authority over civilian life resulted in widespread violence, including abductions, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings.

In *Mosquito*, the forest embodies this nexus of power and fear. The army headquarters, situated within dense jungle terrain and bordered by a river that serves as a natural barrier (178), exemplifies the strategic use of landscape in warfare. Theo's abduction and transportation through "rough dirty tracks" into the forest foreground the terrain's hostility and opacity. At the same time, Tearne's vivid descriptions of lush vegetation-orchids, creepers, butterflies, and dense foliage-emphasise the forest's overwhelming fecundity. The forest is described as "teeming and heaving with life" (178), suggesting its agential

presence, which generates unease not only for Theo but also for his captors. The jungle thus assumes the form of a Gothic labyrinth that restricts movement and destabilises human control.

The forest also functions as a base for the LTTE, illustrating how militarisation permeates all aspects of life. Characters such as Vikram, a traumatised youth coerced into becoming a suicide bomber, exemplify the psychological consequences of such conditions. Vikram's affinity for isolated forest spaces like Adia Grove—a site marked by rumours of haunting and scenes of lynching—further reinforces the Gothic sensibility of the narrative. The grotesque imagery of bodies hanging from trees “like a broken doll” or “a giant pendulum” (109) transforms the grove into a space of fear and death.

Tearne intensifies the Eco Gothic atmosphere by incorporating elements of nonhuman menace within the forest, including poisonous flora and carnivorous plants. The description of an “insect-eating plant” whose leaves close “like eyelashes” to trap and kill insects (162-163) underscores the predatory aspects of nature. Such imagery destabilises the conventional pastoral ideal, presenting instead a hostile and uncanny environment capable of consuming life. The dense, impenetrable vegetation and the presence of toxic organisms contribute to the construction of nature as monstrous, aligning with ecophobic perceptions of the environment.

Through these representations, *Mosquito* adopts an anti-pastoral stance, rejecting romanticised visions of landscape in favour of a depiction of nature as unknowable, threatening, and transformed by neglect and war. Theo's eventual escape from the forest does not resolve this fear; rather, it leaves him permanently unsettled. Upon returning to the beach house, he continues to write, reimagining Sri Lanka as a Gothic space characterised by “brooding darkness” and “noxious violence” (281). The *Mosquito* emerges as a central metaphor for the island itself—an entity that embodies both beauty and death, “composed in equal parts of loveliness and deadliness” (281).

As Susan J. Tyburski suggests, such representations of a monstrous natural environment confront humanity with its own alienation from nature (150). Tearne's narrative thus encapsulates profound anxieties about the transformation of the Sri Lankan landscape under the pressures of war, revealing how ecological degradation and human violence are inextricably intertwined within an Eco Gothic framework.

CONCLUSION

In this study, Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* is examined through the critical frameworks of the Eco Gothic and ecophobia to illuminate the intersections between Sri Lanka's political history and its ecological transformations. The novel demonstrates how ecophobia underpins the formation of extreme socio-ecological systems, such as plantation monocultures, which rely on the exploitation of both marginalised communities and the natural environment. Similarly, it reveals how the instrumental use of landscapes—such as the beach, the sea, and the forest—within the context of postcolonial Sri Lanka renders these spaces uncanny and threatening, thereby reinforcing ecophobic responses.

Tearne reworks and reorients Western literary traditions of representing nature by grounding her narrative in the specific historical realities of Sri Lanka, marked by the enduring legacies of colonisation, militarism, civil war, and environmental exploitation. Through an Eco Gothic lens, *Mosquito* challenges idealized conceptions of tropical islands as serene and picturesque, instead presenting landscapes as historically inscribed sites-palimpsests that bear the traces of overlapping histories of violence, trauma, and ecological degradation.

This reading underscores the necessity of re-evaluating human-environment relationships within postcolonial literary studies. By foregrounding the intersections of the Eco Gothic with issues of race, war,

and ecophobia, the study highlights how literary representations of nature are deeply entangled with broader socio-political and historical forces.

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