

The Unhomely Homeland: Exile, Contested Belonging, and the Politics of Cultural Identity in Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*

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Abstract

Exile is often understood as a geographical separation from one's homeland; however, in postcolonial literature, it also signifies a deeper disruption of memory, identity, and the emotional connections that make a place feel like home. Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* (2007) explores this complex relationship through the experiences of characters whose lives are shaped by Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, displacement, political violence, and cultural divisions. This paper examines how the novel represents the homeland as a contested space in which physical return does not necessarily guarantee emotional security or cultural belonging. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of cultural hybridity and the unhomely, Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, and Avtar Brah's understanding of diaspora, the study investigates the relationship between exile, place, memory, and identity. Through an analysis of Theo Samarajeeva's return to Sri Lanka, Nulani Mendis's artistic expression, and the conflict-ridden social environment surrounding them, the paper argues that belonging in *Mosquito* is neither stable nor exclusively determined by national origin. Instead, cultural identity emerges through encounters between personal memory, collective history, ethnic difference, and individual agency. The novel consequently challenges the assumption that the homeland provides an unquestionable source of identity. It suggests that home can become unfamiliar when political violence transforms the social and emotional meanings of place. The paper concludes that *Mosquito* presents belonging as an ongoing negotiation rather than a permanent condition, revealing the limitations of fixed cultural identities in a society fractured by conflict.

Keywords: Roma Tearne, *Mosquito*, exile, belonging, cultural identity, diaspora, postcolonialism, hybridity, homeland, Sri Lankan literature.

1. Introduction

The relationship between exile and belonging constitutes a significant concern in postcolonial literature, particularly in narratives shaped by colonial histories, ethnic conflict, migration, and political displacement. Home is frequently imagined as a place of origin that offers cultural continuity, emotional security, and a stable sense of identity. Yet this understanding becomes problematic when the homeland itself is transformed by violence, discrimination, and political instability. Under such circumstances,

geographical return may intensify rather than resolve an individual's sense of alienation. The individual may return to a familiar landscape while discovering that the social, political, and emotional conditions that once gave the landscape meaning have changed.

Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*, published in 2007, offers a compelling literary representation of this predicament. Set against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's civil conflict, the novel explores the intersecting experiences of displacement, ethnic division, personal loss, and the search for meaningful human connection. Its narrative centres on Theo Samarajeeva, a Sinhalese novelist who returns to Colombo from London following the death of his wife, and Nulani Mendis, a young Tamil artist whose life has been marked by violence and bereavement. Their developing relationship unfolds within a society in which ethnic identity has become inseparable from political suspicion and social vulnerability.

Although Theo's return appears initially to represent a recovery of his connection with his native country, the political circumstances of Sri Lanka complicate this possibility. His cultural familiarity with the country does not automatically provide protection, acceptance, or emotional security. Similarly, Nulani's artistic identity develops within a social environment in which inherited cultural affiliations cannot be separated from the consequences of conflict. Their experiences reveal that belonging involves more than residence within national boundaries: it depends on the possibility of living, remembering, and forming relationships without being entirely governed by ethnic categorisation or historical violence.

This paper approaches *Mosquito* through the concept of the **unhomely homeland**. The term describes a situation in which the homeland remains geographically recognisable but becomes emotionally and politically unfamiliar. The central argument is that Tearne challenges the idea of home as a fixed cultural foundation. Instead, the novel presents belonging as a fragile and contested process shaped by displacement, memory, ethnic politics, and individual relationships.

The study addresses three principal questions: How does Theo's return complicate conventional understandings of exile? How does ethnic conflict transform cultural identity and the experience of belonging? How might artistic expression and interpersonal relationships create alternative possibilities for negotiating cultural difference?

By bringing postcolonial theory into dialogue with close literary analysis, this paper argues that *Mosquito* portrays exile not merely as departure from a homeland but also as a condition that can persist after return. Its characters inhabit a fractured relationship with place, demonstrating that national origin alone cannot guarantee cultural or emotional belonging.

2. Review of Literature

Scholarship on diaspora and postcolonial identity has challenged the assumption that cultural identity remains unchanged across geographical movement. Stuart Hall's influential essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" provides an important conceptual foundation for understanding identity as historically produced and continually transformed. Hall writes that cultural identity is a matter of "'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (225). This formulation rejects the idea that identity is an unchanging inheritance preserved intact from the past. Instead, identity emerges through historical experience, cultural representation, and relations of power.

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* similarly challenges essentialist understandings of cultural identity. His discussion of hybridity and the "unhomely" illuminates the instability of boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar, the private and political, and the national and personal. These

concepts are particularly useful for examining literary characters whose relationships with their homelands are disrupted by violence and displacement.

Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* extends this discussion by examining the intersections of diaspora, cultural difference, gender, ethnicity, and power. Her concept of diaspora space is valuable because it directs attention beyond the migrant alone to the broader social relationships through which belonging is constructed and contested. Diaspora, in this framework, cannot be reduced to the physical movement of individuals between countries.

Research specifically addressing *Mosquito* has also examined its representation of memory, war, and the Sri Lankan landscape. Sudipta Phukan's "Articulations of Memory-Making and Memory-Mapping in Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*" considers the novel's sustained engagement with memory and the consequences of civil conflict. Esther Daimari's study of the eco-Gothic in contemporary Sri Lankan English literature situates *Mosquito* within a broader examination of the relationship between landscape, violence, and postcolonial history.

These critical approaches establish the importance of historical memory, political conflict, and spatial experience in reading Tearne's novel. The present study builds on these discussions by concentrating on the relationship between return and belonging. Rather than treating exile, memory, and cultural identity as separate concerns, it examines how their interaction produces an unstable conception of home. Its distinctive emphasis lies in understanding the homeland itself as a space where belonging can be both desired and denied.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Stuart Hall and the Formation of Cultural Identity

Hall's theory of cultural identity provides a framework for understanding the instability of cultural belonging in *Mosquito*. According to Hall, identity is not simply an inherited essence that remains unaffected by historical change. It is produced through cultural representation and the experience of historical difference.

Hall's formulation of identity as both "being" and "becoming" (225) is particularly relevant to Theo's return. Theo possesses a historical connection with Sri Lanka, but his identity cannot be explained exclusively through his place of birth or ethnic affiliation. His experience of living in Britain, his personal losses, and his literary and political commitments shape his relationship with the homeland.

This perspective also helps illuminate the limitations of ethnic identity as a comprehensive explanation of individual behaviour. Although Theo is Sinhalese, his sympathy towards Tamil suffering complicates any assumption that ethnicity determines political allegiance or moral responsibility. His character demonstrates that cultural identity may be shaped by affiliations that cross established communal boundaries.

Hall's theory therefore enables a reading of *Mosquito* in which identity is neither entirely detached from history nor imprisoned by it. Cultural identity remains historically situated, but it can also be reinterpreted through experience and ethical engagement.

3.2 Homi K. Bhabha and the Unhomely

Bhabha's discussion of the unhomely provides another important perspective. The unhomely describes a condition in which the distinction between the private experience of home and wider political forces becomes unstable. The domestic sphere can no longer be understood as entirely separate from historical violence and social conflict.

In *Mosquito*, Sri Lanka is not simply a geographical setting. It is a landscape shaped by competing national narratives, ethnic suspicion, and the consequences of political violence. The conflict penetrates everyday relationships and transforms familiar surroundings into spaces of uncertainty.

Theo's return illustrates this contradiction. The country is connected to his earlier life, yet the circumstances he encounters prevent him from experiencing it as an uncomplicated place of refuge. The homeland becomes unhomely because familiarity does not eliminate danger or guarantee acceptance.

Bhabha's broader account of cultural hybridity also helps explain why the novel resists rigid divisions between cultural communities. Individual identities emerge through encounters, negotiations, and contradictions rather than through complete identification with a single, internally uniform culture. The significance of this framework lies in its recognition that cultural difference need not automatically result in absolute separation.

3.3 Avtar Brah and Diaspora Space

Brah's concept of diaspora space expands the discussion beyond the opposition between homeland and host country. In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, she examines how cultural identity and belonging emerge through relationships among migrants, established populations, and historically situated communities.

This perspective is useful for understanding the relationship between Theo's transnational experience and the political environment of Sri Lanka. His return does not erase the history of his life in Britain, nor does his earlier departure mean that he has ceased to be connected to Sri Lanka. Rather, the two locations contribute differently to his sense of self.

Brah's framework also helps prevent the reduction of diaspora to a personal feeling of nostalgia. Belonging is shaped by social structures, ethnic boundaries, and unequal distributions of vulnerability. Theo's and Nulani's experiences demonstrate that the ability to inhabit a place securely depends not only on personal attachment but also on the political conditions governing who can move, speak, form relationships, and claim a future.

Taken together, Hall, Bhabha, and Brah provide a framework for analysing exile as a condition produced through the interaction of historical change, cultural difference, and political power.

4. Exile and the Paradox of Return

Theo Samarajeeva's return to Colombo is central to the novel's exploration of exile. His decision to leave London and return to his native country follows the death of his wife. The journey suggests a desire to reconnect with a familiar environment and to continue his literary work in a place associated with his earlier life.

However, the circumstances surrounding his return complicate the conventional narrative of homecoming. Rather than discovering an unchanging homeland capable of restoring his sense of security, Theo encounters a society in which political conflict has transformed everyday life. His return exposes the difference between geographical familiarity and emotional belonging.

The significance of this experience lies in the distinction between **returning to a place and recovering a home**. A place can remain recognisable while the conditions that once made it meaningful are altered. Political violence changes the relationship between individuals and their surroundings, making ordinary encounters subject to suspicion and fear.

Theo's experience also challenges the assumption that exile is necessarily associated with physical distance. His earlier residence in Britain establishes a transnational dimension to his identity, but his return reveals that displacement can persist even after geographical separation has ended. He is

physically present in Sri Lanka without being fully protected by the cultural familiarity that his return might appear to promise.

Hall's understanding of identity as an ongoing process helps explain this contradiction. Theo cannot simply recover an earlier version of himself because neither his personal circumstances nor the historical environment remains unchanged. His experiences abroad, his bereavement, and his encounter with the consequences of civil conflict have altered the conditions through which he understands home.

His return therefore becomes a confrontation with the limitations of nostalgia. Nostalgia may preserve an image of the homeland as a coherent and familiar place, but the reality of return exposes the political and historical transformations that such an image cannot adequately contain.

Tearne's treatment of homecoming consequently complicates the conventional opposition between exile and belonging. The novel suggests that a person may remain connected to a homeland while simultaneously experiencing estrangement from it. Home is not merely a location to which an individual can return; it is a relationship that depends on the possibility of living within a social world that recognises one's presence.

5. Ethnic Conflict and the Politics of Belonging

The Sri Lankan civil conflict provides the political context through which the novel explores cultural identity. The division between Sinhalese and Tamil communities demonstrates how ethnic affiliations can become powerful mechanisms for determining social trust, political loyalty, and personal vulnerability.

Within such a context, belonging is not simply a private emotional attachment. It becomes a political question concerning who can claim the nation as home and under what conditions. National identity, which might ordinarily provide a shared framework for belonging, is destabilised when competing ethnic narratives determine who is considered legitimate, threatening, or alien.

Theo's identity as a Sinhalese writer who sympathises with Tamil suffering complicates the relationship between ethnicity and political allegiance. His position challenges the assumption that communal identity necessarily dictates an individual's understanding of justice. He demonstrates that an individual can remain connected to a cultural community while questioning the political structures and collective assumptions associated with it.

This distinction is crucial because the novel does not present cultural identity as inherently responsible for violence. Rather, it exposes the dangers of transforming cultural differences into rigid political boundaries. Ethnic affiliation becomes destructive when it is treated as an unquestionable determinant of human value or moral responsibility.

Nulani's experience offers a different perspective on this problem. As a young Tamil artist whose life has been affected by violence and loss, she inhabits a social environment in which cultural identity is connected to vulnerability. Her experience illustrates how historical conflict enters individual life and affects the possibilities available for personal development.

The relationship between Theo and Nulani further complicates the boundaries imposed by communal divisions. Their connection creates the possibility of recognising one another as individuals rather than interpreting each other exclusively through collective identities. However, the surrounding political environment demonstrates that private understanding cannot automatically overcome the social structures that make such relationships precarious.

The novel thus presents belonging as an unequal process. Some individuals may possess greater freedom to move through social spaces, while others encounter restrictions arising from ethnic identification and historical prejudice. This inequality reveals that belonging cannot be achieved through personal goodwill alone; it also requires a transformation of the conditions that produce exclusion.

6. Nulani Mendis: Artistic Expression and Cultural Identity

Nulani Mendis's artistic practice provides an important counterpoint to the novel's representations of ethnic conflict and displacement. Her identity as an artist creates a means of expression through which personal experience can be articulated beyond the restrictive categories imposed by the surrounding social environment.

Artistic expression is particularly significant in a narrative shaped by violence because it offers a way to approach experiences that cannot be adequately contained within conventional political language. Nulani's painting allows her to develop a form of self-expression that is not entirely dependent on the identities assigned to her by others.

Her artistic practice should not be interpreted as an escape from history. Rather, it offers a means of engaging with a world in which personal experience is deeply affected by historical events. Art becomes a space where individual perception can coexist with collective memory without being reduced entirely to a political slogan or ethnic classification.

Bhabha's account of cultural hybridity helps clarify this possibility. If cultural identity develops through encounters and negotiations, artistic practice can become one of the sites where such processes occur. Nulani's work suggests that identity may be expressed through forms of perception and creativity that exceed rigid communal divisions.

The contrast between artistic expression and political categorisation is central to the novel's broader argument. Ethnic politics attempts to organise individuals through fixed categories, whereas artistic practice makes room for ambiguity, interpretation, and personal agency. It allows the individual to become more than a representative of a community.

Nevertheless, the novel does not imply that creativity automatically resolves trauma or removes the consequences of violence. Art cannot independently dismantle the political structures that produce displacement and exclusion. Its importance lies instead in its capacity to preserve individual expression and create possibilities for recognition.

Nulani's artistic identity therefore contributes to a broader understanding of cultural belonging. It demonstrates that belonging can emerge through creative practices and interpersonal recognition rather than exclusively through ancestry, national origin, or collective identity.

7. Memory, Loss, and the Reconstruction of Home

Memory occupies a significant position in the relationship between exile and belonging. Individuals understand their connection to places partly through recollections of earlier experiences, relationships, and cultural practices. Yet memory does not reproduce the past in an entirely stable form. It is shaped by subsequent experiences and by the emotional needs through which individuals interpret their histories.

In *Mosquito*, Theo's return is inseparable from personal bereavement. The death of his wife creates a context in which his relationship with Sri Lanka acquires renewed significance. His return can therefore be understood as an attempt to negotiate personal loss alongside his connection with a country marked by political conflict.

The significance of this journey lies in the impossibility of separating personal memory from collective history. Theo's experience is not determined solely by private grief, because the environment to which he returns is structured by social and political tensions. Similarly, the homeland cannot be understood independently of the memories and losses carried by those who inhabit it.

This relationship complicates the idea that returning to one's birthplace can restore an earlier sense of identity. Memory may preserve an emotional connection with a place, but the present can challenge the assumptions on which that connection depends. The homeland remembered and the homeland encountered are related but not identical.

Hall's understanding of identity as historically produced provides a useful way to interpret this discrepancy. Cultural identity emerges through the interaction of past and present rather than through the preservation of an untouched origin. The meaning of home changes as individuals acquire new experiences and reinterpret their relationship with history.

The novel also invites readers to recognise that memories of conflict cannot be separated from the unequal conditions under which different communities experience violence. For Nulani, the past is not merely a source of nostalgia; it is associated with losses that shape her present circumstances. Her artistic practice provides a means of expressing a personal identity that has been affected by collective events without being exhausted by them.

Memory thus operates as both a source of attachment and a reminder of rupture. It sustains the desire for belonging while revealing the transformations that make an uncomplicated return impossible.

8. Cultural Hybridity and the Possibility of Alternative Belonging

The novel's representation of belonging challenges the assumption that individuals must identify completely with one cultural community. Theo's transnational experience and his sympathy towards Tamil suffering demonstrate the possibility of affiliations that cross established ethnic boundaries. His identity cannot be explained adequately through a single cultural label.

Cultural hybridity offers a productive framework for understanding this complexity. In Bhabha's account, cultural interaction creates spaces in which identities are negotiated rather than simply inherited. Such spaces are not necessarily harmonious. They may contain conflict, uncertainty, and unequal relations of power. Nevertheless, they challenge the idea that cultures exist as completely separate and internally uniform entities.

In *Mosquito*, the possibility of alternative belonging emerges through relationships that question the authority of ethnic divisions. Theo and Nulani's connection suggests that interpersonal recognition can interrupt the logic through which communities are treated as mutually exclusive. Their relationship creates a space in which individual experience becomes more significant than inherited assumptions about cultural difference.

However, it is important not to idealise this possibility. Personal relationships remain vulnerable to the political structures surrounding them. Affection, sympathy, and mutual recognition cannot by themselves guarantee security in a society marked by conflict. The novel's representation of vulnerability therefore prevents hybridity from becoming a simplistic solution to ethnic division.

Brah's concept of diaspora space is particularly useful here because it situates individual identities within broader relationships of power. Belonging emerges through interactions between communities, histories, and social structures. It is not an achievement that individuals can secure independently of their political circumstances.

The novel consequently suggests that an alternative form of belonging requires both individual openness and social conditions that permit cultural difference to exist without becoming a basis for exclusion. Such belonging does not demand the erasure of cultural histories. Instead, it allows individuals to acknowledge those histories while developing relationships and affiliations that exceed rigid identity categories.

This understanding is particularly important in postcolonial contexts, where national identity may be shaped by historical inequalities and contested accounts of collective belonging. Tearne's novel demonstrates that a more inclusive sense of home depends on recognising the complexity of cultural identity rather than forcing individuals into fixed communal positions.

9. The Unhomely Homeland: A Postcolonial Reading

The concept of the unhomely homeland brings together the principal concerns of the novel. It describes the contradiction through which a place of origin remains culturally significant while becoming politically or emotionally unfamiliar.

Sri Lanka occupies precisely this contradictory position in Theo's experience. It is his native country, but its political conditions prevent him from treating it as an unquestionable refuge. His return exposes the distance between national belonging as an inherited idea and belonging as a lived experience.

This distinction has important implications for postcolonial understandings of home. The nation is often imagined as a source of unity, shared history, and collective identity. However, where political institutions and communal narratives privilege some groups over others, the nation may fail to provide equal conditions of belonging.

The novel's treatment of ethnic conflict reveals how national space can become internally divided. The same geographical territory may signify home to one individual, insecurity to another, and a painful reminder of loss to a third. Belonging is therefore shaped not only by the physical characteristics of a place but also by the histories and power relations through which that place is experienced.

Bhabha's concept of the unhomely illuminates this relationship between private life and political history. The personal consequences of conflict demonstrate that violence does not remain confined to public institutions or abstract ideological disputes. It enters relationships, memories, and everyday experiences, changing the meanings attached to familiar surroundings.

The unhomely homeland also complicates the distinction between the insider and the outsider. Theo's status as a returning native does not protect him from alienation, while Nulani's experience illustrates the vulnerability produced when ethnic identity becomes politically charged. Both characters reveal that geographical origin and cultural familiarity cannot independently determine whether a person can inhabit a place securely.

Tearne's representation of home consequently resists nostalgic idealisation. The homeland is neither rejected entirely nor celebrated as an inherently restorative space. It remains a site of attachment and possibility, but also of exclusion and historical rupture.

The novel's postcolonial significance lies in this refusal to treat national belonging as an uncomplicated inheritance. It suggests that the meaning of home must be continually negotiated in relation to historical responsibility, cultural difference, and the possibility of living together without the domination of one identity over another.

10. Discussion: Belonging Beyond Geographical Return

The preceding analysis demonstrates that *Mosquito* represents exile as a complex relationship between geographical location, historical memory, and social recognition. Theo's return to Sri Lanka reveals that physical proximity to a homeland cannot guarantee the restoration of emotional security. His experience exposes the limitations of understanding exile solely as separation from a place.

Nulani's artistic identity further demonstrates that cultural belonging need not depend exclusively on national origin or collective categorisation. Her creative practice provides a means of expressing individuality within a society that often interprets individuals through ethnic and political divisions.

These representations support three related conclusions.

First, **home is historically changeable**. It cannot be understood as an untouched space outside political history. Conflict alters the meanings of familiar places and transforms the conditions under which individuals experience attachment.

Second, **cultural identity is relational rather than absolute**. Hall's concept of identity as an ongoing process helps explain why personal history, geographical movement, and encounters with others can transform the meaning of cultural affiliation.

Third, **belonging depends on recognition as well as attachment**. Individuals may feel connected to a homeland yet encounter social conditions that prevent them from inhabiting it securely. The experience of belonging therefore involves not only personal memory but also the political and social relationships that determine who is accepted and who is excluded.

These conclusions do not suggest that cultural identity or national affiliation is meaningless. Rather, the novel challenges the assumption that either can provide a complete and permanent explanation of individual identity. Cultural histories remain significant, but their meanings are continually shaped by present circumstances.

The concept of the unhomely homeland captures this tension. It allows the novel to represent the homeland as simultaneously familiar and alienating, desired and dangerous, historically meaningful and politically fractured. Such a reading demonstrates how *Mosquito* contributes to broader discussions of postcolonial belonging by questioning whether a return to geographical origins can overcome the divisions produced by history.

11. Conclusion

Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* presents exile, belonging, and cultural identity as interconnected processes shaped by personal loss, ethnic conflict, historical memory, and the search for meaningful human relationships. Through Theo Samarajeeva's return to Sri Lanka and Nulani Mendis's artistic engagement with her circumstances, the novel challenges the assumption that a homeland automatically provides emotional security or a stable cultural identity.

The concept of the unhomely homeland provides a framework for understanding this challenge. It identifies the contradiction through which geographical familiarity coexists with political alienation. Theo's return does not erase the consequences of his experiences abroad or restore an earlier relationship with his native country. Instead, it exposes the limitations of a model of belonging founded exclusively on national origin.

Hall's theory of cultural identity demonstrates that identity is continuously shaped by history and difference. Bhabha's concept of the unhomely illuminates the penetration of political conflict into personal experience, while Brah's account of diaspora emphasises the unequal social relationships

through which belonging is negotiated. Together, these perspectives clarify how Tearne's novel represents identity as historically situated yet open to transformation.

The study also highlights the significance of artistic expression and interpersonal recognition. Nulani's painting and the relationship between Theo and Nulani suggest that individual agency and cultural understanding can create possibilities beyond rigid communal boundaries. Nevertheless, these possibilities remain vulnerable to the political structures that sustain exclusion and violence.

Ultimately, *Mosquito* does not offer a simple resolution to the problem of exile. Instead, it invites readers to reconsider the assumptions underlying home, nation, and cultural identity. Belonging emerges not as an automatic consequence of birth or geographical return but as a continuing negotiation between memory, place, history, and human relationships. By representing the homeland as both a source of attachment and a site of estrangement, Tearne's novel demonstrates that the search for home involves not merely returning to one's origins but also confronting the histories and power relations that determine whether a place can become home.

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