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SRI LANKAN MIGRANTS AND IDENTITY IN
CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION:
ROMA TEARNE'S ART OF MEMORY

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INTRODUCTION

Roma Chrysostom was born in 1954 in Colombo only a few years after the independence of Sri Lanka, still officially known at the time by its British colonial name, Ceylon. Her father, a Tamil poet, and her mother, a Sinhalese journalist, had secretly married despite the scandal that would have been caused by their different ethnic and religious origins. Her parents were disowned by their respective families. They became social outcasts. The young Roma was raised in English rather than Tamil or Sinhalese by her parents, who were both passionate about the language. She already declared as a child that she would later study English and become a writer. When Roma was ten years old, her father, discriminated against like the other Tamils by the Sinhalese majority, left for Britain, soon followed by mother and daughter who embarked on a long sea voyage to reach Britain and settle in growing cosmopolitan south London.

Educated in Britain from the age of ten, Roma integrated easily into British life and culture. In two interviews, she recalled: ‘so out went the Asian accent, the memories of frangipani and all desire to wear a sari’, whereas her parents struggled to adapt and felt a ‘terrible sense of loss.’¹ She grew up in Brixton where she went to the local comprehensive

¹ First quotation:

Article (17/07/2009) by John Lawrence on *The Independent* website <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/roma-tearne-the-success-of-serious-novelists-from-the-subcontinent-makes-it-good-to-be-an-asian-writing-in-britain-1749457.html> (Accessed 17/11/2010).

Second quotation:

Article (18/04/2008) by John Lawrence on *The Independent* website <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/roma-tearne-the-enemy-within-810743.html> (Accessed 17/11/2010).

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school. She had always been an avid reader and regular trips to the local library shaped her literary world around the same names as her contemporaries experienced: Jane Austen, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Gustave Flaubert or Tolstoy. Reluctant first to get in touch with her Asian roots when her father encouraged her to read V.S. Naipaul, she eventually fell in love with the work of Vikram Seth, then Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Narinder Dhama and Monica Ali among others.

Her dreams about higher education and becoming a writer were aborted soon after she went to teacher-training college in Rugby (Warwickshire). In the 2008 interview mentioned before, she recalled a lecturer accusing her of plagiarism: commenting on an essay she had written on Charles Dickens he declared: 'if you could write like that you wouldn't be at this university. You'd be at Oxford.' Ironically enough, Roma Tearne did end up at Oxford several years later, but as a painter. After marrying an English Professor from Reading University with whom she had three children, she started to paint and later gained her Master's degree at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art (Oxford) and was Leverhulme artist in Residence at the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford) in 2002. She was awarded a fellowship in visual arts by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain at Oxford Brookes University. Meanwhile, her work, also including installation art and filmmaking, has regularly sold and has been once exhibited at the Royal Academy. In 2006, an episode of loss made her start writing:

Five years ago, a strange thing happened. While working in our house, a builder accidentally threw my old trunk into a skip. It was the same trunk that long ago had been my mother's jasmine-scented shrine of hope. Carried across the seas on a journey that took 21 days, it now belonged to me and held the old photograph albums and diaries written by Heartsease. [her mother's pen name as a journalist]. By the time we realised what had happened, it was too late, and the skip had gone, taking the trunk with it. Apart from a diary and two or three blurred photographs, I no longer have anything to remind me of my parents. I had been orphaned a second time. Maybe this was what was needed to push me to do the thing I had been avoiding for so long. To follow in my mother's

footsteps, to write. I started on my first novel. For four years I worked furiously. It was as though a dam had broken. At last I was fitting the pieces of my parents' lives together.²

Her progress from painting to writing was also motivated by the striking contrast she felt between an idealized image of home – which appeared in her early paintings - and the reality of both her parents' families' rejection as well as the civil war. Her first novel, *Mosquito*, was published by Harper Press in 2007 and shortlisted for the 2007 Costa First Novel Award and the Kiriyaama Prize. Mainly set during the recent tumultuous Civil War in Sri Lanka, this novel shows an internal focus on that historical violence, which stands in the background of the fictionalized romance of an exiled middle-aged Sri Lankan writer and a seventeen-year old artist. In 2008, *Bone China* was published by Harper Collins. Along with *Brixton Beach*, published the following year, this novel, in the form of a family saga, encapsulates Roma Teane's autobiographical experience through the fate of Sri Lankan families migrating to Britain in the context of independence and civil war along with internal familial dissensions. By using the popular genre of the saga and anchoring it into the violent reality of Sri Lanka, she seems to have been targeting a large scale audience to which she means to bring certain awareness.

Although unknown or ignored by most Sri Lankans so far, Roma Teane has developed a meaningful growing group of admirers mostly in Britain, especially through the mediation of reading groups, TV book clubs and internet books reviews discussions groups. A recent review by *the Independent* underlines this particular trend by pointing out the appendix of questions for discussion at the end of each book.³ Those questions, extending both the book

² Article by Roma Teane in *The Guardian* (14/06/2008)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/jun/14/familyandrelationships.family3> (Accessed 28/01/2011).

³ Review by Brandon Robshaw (10/10/2010) <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-swimmer-by-roma-tearne-2099629.html> (Accessed 05/12/2010).

and its impact, suggest the permanent process of reflection Roma Tearne has engaged in. By drawing from her own past and linking it to an acute and inspired observation of the present, she sets her writing in this permanent movement between different kinds of spaces. Although her novels are mainly set in Sri Lanka, she chose Britain and specifically the Suffolk countryside to frame her latest fiction entitled *The Swimmer*, published in 2010. It tells the story of a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee hoping for a better life in England, away from the terrors of Jaffna, who will only find another kind of terror and violence. Contemporary violence in Britain represents a meaningful background for Roma Tearne's fiction. The terrorist attacks in London in July 2005 have thus given birth to the golden thread of *Brixton Beach* and *The Swimmer*. The tragic murder of an innocent Brazilian electrician by Scotland Yard at that time especially inspired Roma Tearne's political message in *The Swimmer*. In between two countries, two kinds of violence and two loves, these novels represent the political concerns of many migrant writers. Those political concerns are significant of Roma Tearne's strong awareness of the tremendous lack of information on the violent reality in Sri Lanka, particularly in Europe.

The disappearance of the precious trunk also echoes an erased part of her motherland's history, which leaves a misinformed and misrepresented Tamil diaspora of nearly 900 000 people scattered around the globe.⁴ This is in response to this missing represented truth of Sri Lankan experience that Roma Tearne challenges the nationalist literary conventions in order to give the Tamil diaspora 'a recognizable face.'⁵ In fact, she strongly opposes the politics of nationalism and censorship in her country, where she has so far refused to go back. As a

⁴ *Wikipedia* article on the Sri Lankan diaspora http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lankan_Tamil_diaspora (Accessed 09/02/2011).

⁵ Review on *The New York Times* website (09/08/2009) <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/09/books/review/McCulloch-t.html> (Accessed 05/12/10).

supporter of the Sri Lankan Campaign for Peace and Justice, she advocates the need for ‘greater acceptance of what has already happened there’⁶ as a condition for the long-term establishment of peace. And most importantly, in a recent article emphasizing the importance of this work of memory as a determining factor for the future of her country, Roma Tearne mentions the necessity of ‘a mediator, and probably one from outside the country.’⁷ Still haunted by her birth country’s history, even after nearly fifty years spent in Britain, Roma Tearne has developed a specific mode of expression characterized by a permanent interaction of writing and visual arts which, according to her, ‘constantly work together.’⁸ Both inside and outside testimonies of Sri Lankan migrants’ experience(s), her novels challenge any monolithic vision of Sri Lankan migrants’ history, land or identity. By doing so, Roma Tearne aims at excavating ‘this mysterious otherness buried deep in the psyche of the country and the people that live there.’⁹

In what follows, I will focus my study on the way Sri Lankan migrants’ experience and identity are represented through an analysis of Roma Tearne’s latest novel *The Swimmer* in particular. The ‘in-betweenness’ of the migrants’ experience, a paradoxical relation to home and the role of memory as a determining process will be at the heart of this question of the challenge of representation.

Reading through this specific bi-cultural prism of a Sri Lankan born woman writer and painter living in Britain, I will begin by studying the hybridity of her writing, which blurs

⁶ Article by Paul Simon on *Morning Star* website <http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/index.php/news/content/view/full/89517> (Accessed 17/11/2010).

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Article (18/04/2008) by John Lawrence on *The Independent* website <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/roma-tearne-the-enemy-within-810743.html> (Accessed 17/11/2010).

⁹ Roma Tearne, ‘Reflecting memory’, Appendix in *Mosquito*, by Roma Tearne, (London, HarperPress 2007).

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the frontiers between history and fiction, writing and visual arts, and internal and polyphonic narrative voices. I will show how this feeling of estrangement, so common to diaspora literature, is united here with a multi-faceted memory process through paradoxical and metaphorical spaces. While carrying these ideas forward, I will examine the way the memory process represents shifting identity(-ies) through a transcendental spatial and temporal time frame, raising the question of the prism of the writer in 'ex-isle'. Throughout this analysis, I hope to demonstrate how questions and matters of representations and a specific work of memory meaningfully contribute to the new promising literary and political awareness of Sri Lankan contemporary diaspora and beyond.

I/. BLURRED FRONTIERS: (HI)STORY, TEXT(URES) AND VOICE(S)

Traditionally, it took longer for immigrants to constitute a diasporic community, and in fiction the individual plot of immigration and its hazards and eventual successes stood at the centre of the representation.

(Monika Fludernik, in *Imagined Communities as Imaginary Homelands*¹⁰)

1/. Story and History

A/. Fictionalized History or historical fiction?

Reading *Mosquito* and *The Swimmer*, one cannot escape a clear historical and political dimension. Despite an absence of dated landmarks, *Mosquito* is clearly set amidst the violence of the civil war in Sri Lanka. The episode of the Tamil Tigers' terrorist attack in Katunayake Airport (2001) is central in the novel. It is reported by Vikram, one of the main protagonist of the novel, a child-soldier representative of the many young Tamil orphans who were enrolled and brainwashed by the Tamil Tigers often to serve as suicide bombers. The destruction by explosives of an important part of the aircraft of this international airport outside of Colombo in July 2001 remains among the large-scale terrorist outrages in Sri Lanka. At this point in the plot, the reader has been following Vikram's story in parallel with the main story of Theo Samarajeeva for six chapters. In this scene, in chapter seven, the imminence of violence is rendered by juxtaposed short descriptive sentences, which convey a sense of methodical calmness and suspension in the narrative. After giving a nearly glorified vision of the airplane described as 'a small speck in the sky, glinting in the sun, descending fast, heading for the runway, graceful as a gull', we read that Vikram 'simply pressed the button' turning it into 'a coffin of flames.'¹¹ The significance of this passage can be shown through the conjunction of

¹⁰ Monika Fludernik (ed.), *Diaspora and Multiculturalism, Common Traditions and New Developments* (Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V. Cross/Cultures 66, 2007), p. 264.

¹¹ Roma Tearne, *Mosquito* (London, HarperPress, 2007) pp. 137-139.

the two parallel stories within this precise and emblematic episode. Theo Samarajeeva is about to be a passenger in Vikram's target and, as he reaches the airport doors, Theo hears the noise, 'feeling the blast of heat.'¹² The dramatic crossing of those two stories at this very moment represents an important feature of Roma Tearne's fiction, namely the often-blurred frontier between personal and collective history, this 'slippage between the interface of fact and fiction'¹³, as she puts it. The double internal focus she chooses through the prism of both Vikram and Theo creates a permanent tension between the personal and the collective. In her fiction, story and history constantly interact with each other, as personal lives are systematically overtaken by political forces. In *The Swimmer*, on which I will focus most of my analysis, Ben, a Sri Lankan refugee, first appears to the narrator, Ria, and reader, as this mysterious swimmer, coming out of the river, and is soon characterized by beauty and kindness. He and Ria, a lonely poet in her early forties, embark on a loving relationship. The plot can be seen as the nearly stereotypical idyll of the immigrant finding love and comfort in the host country, where hope looms with a prospect of marriage and the solution to Home Office administrative procedures. The violent narrative twist of Ben's murder by the local police who mistake him for a 'dangerous Pakistani' comes as a shock. The racist, political undertones reinforced by the character of Jack, Ria's far-right, xenophobic, and hated brother, moves the romance into the violent reality of British fears not only of immigrants, but of terrorism. The brutal intrusion of the terrorist threat and fears of 'asylum seekers' challenges the stereotypical 'migrant's success story of assimilation' in a multiculturalist country such as Britain. The depiction of Ben's death thus stands in sharp contrast with the sublimated romance which had been growing in intensity so far. Ria, reporting the scene with significant coldness and brutality, encapsulates this ultimate moment within one sentence: 'I saw Ben, blown backwards, in the act of trying to wildly wrench the pain from his eyes and then his

¹² *Ibid*, p 139.

¹³ *Ibid*, Appendix 'P.S, About the author', p.5.

body, convulsing like a rabbit, turned over and over until at last it lay still'.¹⁴ The impersonal aspect of this episode is implicitly accented by the effect created by the alliteration on 'b'. It also seems to have been foreshadowed earlier in the novel when Ria alludes to 'a line [that] kept turning slowly in [her] head. People of no account, no name, no documents, no graves...'
(p. 66). In fact, the sentence comparing Ben's death to the shooting of an animal also comes as a meaningful echo of the novel's cold incipit. Reporting the local mystery of calves found with their throat split – 'A small item in the local newspaper recorded the incident which otherwise went unnoticed' (p. 1) - , it reinforces the underlined racist representation of the 'savage, animal-like' and meaningless racialized other. The anti-climactic revelation of Ben's murder represents therefore a shift in the narrative as well as a disillusioned account of a Janus-faced migrant's experience. By blurring the frontier between a personal sublimated experience and the impersonal migrant's trivial or historical facts in both novels mentioned, Roma Tearne achieves more than giving a political undertone to her fiction. She seems to symbolically bridge the gap between a personal and collective experience.

B/. The Leitmotiv of bereavement: the personal versus the collective post-colonial experience

The overwhelming atmosphere of bereavement, which follows Ben's death in *The Swimmer*, constitutes a leitmotiv in all of Roma Tearne's novels. Whereas the first part of the book is narrated by Ria, the second part is told by Anula Chinniah, Ben's mother, who relates her time of grief and confused emotions over her son dead in Britain, but also her husband, now long 'disappeared' in Sri Lanka. In the train taking her back to Stansted airport after her journey to Ben's funeral, and from which she reports her grieving experience, she meets

¹⁴ Roma Tearne, *The Swimmer* (London, HarperPress, 2010) p. 120. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

another foreign woman, Italian this time, who urges her to let herself ‘lament this terrible chapter in [her] history’ (p. 142). The recurrence of this theme of bereavement, largely developed in *The Swimmer*, suggests the metonymic expression of a more collective one, that of the unresolved loss of thousands of Tamils killed over the past decades in Sri Lanka. English Ria seems to have alluded to this idea by saying how ‘we lived with our individual preoccupations in this way while all the time our collective skeleton languished in a hidden cupboard’ (p. 51). The haunting postcolonial dimension of the novel is nonetheless complex.

The bereavement theme seems first to reinstitute the old stereotypical colonial dichotomy through the character of Ben’s mother, Anula, who develops a targeted hate towards Ria as British. She thus refers to her as the ‘cold, white woman without feeling.’ Anula’s point of view is often described through self-conscious thoughts such as ‘What had my son to do with her?’ or, simply, ‘I hate you, I thought’ (pp. 147-8). Anula’s manichean perspective seems to reenact traditional binary oppositions inherited from the colonial period to such an extent that even language is implicated: ‘I had begun thinking in Tamil. My mind had switched into another mode and I could not think of a single thing to say in English’ (p. 176). Everything seems to distinguish Anula and Ria, yet Tearne goes beyond this dichotomy by linking the two women within a chiasmic mirror structure. Anula’s time in England, after Ben’s murder, allows a second unexpected love story between Ria’s surrogate ‘uncle’ and Ben’s mother, which reproduces a symmetrical, yet reversed, interracial couple. The network of relationships linking the four characters’ perspectives and intermingled emotions seems to represent the construction of a bicultural world. This reversal of situations shows how Tearne blurs conventional boundaries and postcolonial reading’s expectations. That is partly why, within her clear colonized-colonizer division discourse, Anula quotes Shakespeare to best express her most intimate thoughts: ‘*The quality of mercy is not strained*, I thought, remembering how I had learnt that speech long ago, in fifth grade’ (p. 188). This ambivalence

and allusiveness underlines the complexity of what is at stake in representing any kind of migrant's experience, marked by a bicultural dynamic.

C/. Sri Lanka versus England: transposition of the experience of violence and nationalism

As the story of Ben Chinniah deconstructs the stereotypical 'native expectations' and western projection of successful assimilation within a promised land, the disillusion is not limited to this event. In fact, the novel goes beyond mere disillusion to such an extent that it goes as far as developing police violence in Britain by direct comparison with that of the Sri Lankan civil war. Prior to his death, Ben narrates to Ria the way his cousin was brutally shot by a Singhalese soldiers:

One morning, my cousin went to the hospital to work as usual.[...] As he cycled up to the entrance, an army officer shouted to him to stop. So he stopped and started taking out his ID. The officer shouted at him to raise his arms above his head. My cousin tried to get his hand out of his pocket but wasn't quick enough and the soldier shot him in the face (p. 58).

The arbitrary violence in that testimony, more than simply foreshadowing Ben's own death, parallels a British manifestation of another violence. Anula herself is aware of this common violence in both countries' attitudes, which, she realizes, 'amount to one and the same thing' (p. 145). Her cruel statement: 'If the mood took them, they might put a bullet through your head' could well apply to both absurd situations (p. 135). The tragic irony of Ben being shot by British policemen after escaping everyday dangers in Sri Lanka, is exaggerated by the bureaucratic absurdities of British administration, following Ben's death. Anula, sitting in an office, facing a British solicitor, ponders on this absurdity saying: 'At home when they kill it is with noise and commotion. Here they fill in a form after the deed is done' (p. 187). This distanced rational coldness, in comparison with the arbitrary civil war

violence, is reinforced through an emphasis on the British materialistic treatment of humanity. The aim of the solicitor who requires Anula's presence is 'to talk about compensation', and Anula's reformulation highlights the absurd violence of this procedure: 'How much could be procured for the one life I had created' (p. 187). This crassness reappears in the third part of the book where sixteen-year old Lydia, who turns out to be Ben and Ria's daughter, is the narrator. As we learn that Ria died in a car accident three years earlier, similar absurdity is repeated when Lydia refers to her future wealth after she gets the insurance money:

The way it works is, you lose your mother by accident and you are given money to the value of that loss. I imagine someone sitting in front of their laptop, checking the chart. Accidental death of mother...£500,000. Accident death of migrant worker...£1,200. Sorry, mate, that's your lot (p. 242).

The way both British and Sri Lankan violence is connected can also be noticed through a transposition of nationalistic hatred. Jack, Ria's brother, is characterized by his implication in a far-right movement, 'fascist politics' and clear xenophobic assumptions (p. 22). His presence, although he doesn't intervene often in the plot, is haunting. This powerful presence of nationalism is reinforced through the constant reference to the situation in Sri Lanka. In her analysis of the work of Sri Lankan writers writing in English, scholar Minoli Salgado demonstrates how 'nationalism itself is no longer territorially determined or bounded, but rather crucially diasporic.'¹⁵ One nationalism thus echoing another reinforces the blurring of frontiers in Teare's fiction.

Often collectively referred to as a 'diaspora', the migrants such as those in Roma Teare's novel, become part of those 'histories ignored in favour of an official history based on national constructions' ['histoires passées sous silence au profit d'une histoire officielle de constructions nationales']. Those diasporas have been said to highlight 'the classical

¹⁵ Minoli Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka : Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place* (London, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2007), p. 167.

oppositions that can be found in postcolonialism' ['les oppositions classiques que l'on retrouve dans le (post-) colonialisme'], and to create cultures which 'may seem today to be sometimes swimming in troubled waters, and producing blurred meanings' ['peuvent sembler aujourd'hui nager en eaux troubles parfois, produisant un brouillage du sens']¹⁶. Roma Tearne's novel, blurring the frontiers between story and history, the personal and the collective, traditional and subversive colonial subtexts, turns out to be constructed around the very theme of inner tensions, a constant to and fro movement, creating a dominating meaningful hybridity.

2/. Text(ures) and colours

A/. A chromatic approach

Roma Tearne emphasizes this hybridity, besides its symbolical expression, through the very nature of her approach to writing. Fighting against monochromism, which symbolizes a monolithic representation of experience, she produces a text which revives the instability of character and reader. The Sri Lankan Anula is thus struck by 'how many shades of grey' England has (p. 220). Colours create a powerful message in Roma Tearne's writing. An interview at the time of publication of *The Swimmer* celebrates the way Tearne 'instinctively thinks in terms of texture and colours.'¹⁷ Anula, assaulted by 'word-pictures' interrupting her thoughts 'again and again', recalls her contradictory feelings towards Sri Lanka and its 'dry red earth', and ponders on her 'black present' associated with a representation of England as 'black and petrified and poisoned' (pp. 130-148-213). Sixteen years later, in a letter recalling

¹⁶ Bénédicte Alliot, 'Avant- Propos' in *Ecritures et Représentations des Diasporas*. (Paris, Cahiers Charles V, Université Paris 7 – Denis-Diderot N°31, 2001), pp. 13-14.

¹⁷ Article 'An interview with Roma Tearne' (16/03/2010) by Sandra Kessel
<http://sandrakessel.wordpress.com/2010/03/16/an-interview-with-roma-tearne/> (Accessed 17/11/10).

that stay in England, she realizes how her memories and she ‘existed in colour’(p. 261). Similarly, at the beginning of the book, narrator Ria, amidst the time of bliss preceding Ben’s death, declares how important it is ‘to describe the fabric of that day’ (p. 18).

B/. Writing or Painting

The visual within this literary fiction creates specific narrative techniques. Emphasizing her use of colours and textural descriptions, Tearne combines her experiences as a writer and as a painter. Beyond the artistic dimension of her descriptions and lyricism, she structures her text around key visual images. Specific turning points in her fiction therefore present a particular focus on artistic devices such as a play on symbolism and contrast of colours. The very short and cold passage describing Ben’s brutal death is, for instance, preceded by an emphasis on ‘the whiteness of [his] shirt [...] fluttering in and out between the trees’ (p. 120). Since writing and painting are closely interlinked in Roma Tearne’s life, her fiction reveals the same interdependence, giving birth to powerful images where the painter seems to overlap the writer. This idea may be best illustrated through this point in the novel when Anula, receiving condolences from British officials for her son’s death, expresses her sudden and vital need to draw her son’s face for the last time. As she faces the lawyer, whom she perceives only through his ‘colourless skin, his bloodless lips, his cold blue eyes’, Anula seems to be in that state where words alone can no longer give account of what she is going through. It appears as if only the help –quasi therapeutic – of art may stand as the closest form of truth (p. 191). This vital need of a truer representation of the experience of grief, through a visual and immortal artistic performance, is an ideological stance which Roma Tearne seems to pass on to her readers through her fiction, and this passage of Anula’s sudden need to paint may best express this idea.

C/. The figures of the artists and double framed artistic creation

The presence of Tearne as a painter in direct relation to her being a writer is something that can also be found in her choice of characters. In *The Swimmer*, as well as in her other novels, the important artistic identity determining the characters is striking. While Ria is a poet, Ben plays the piano and his music seems to keep haunting both Ria and the book itself after his death. In *Mosquito*, Theo is a writer who falls in love with a young painter named Nulani. The part of those ‘artist-characters’ may be viewed on both a textual and metatextual level. From a literary point of view, words, colours, images interweave, representing the hybridity of a bi-cultural experience and creation. The importance of art within the narrative may be seen as operating outside the text. By putting an artist at the centre of her fiction and depending on an artistic dimension, Roma Tearne inscribes the artist in action in the tale, as much as in the world. This feature can be linked to a structure of ‘mise-en-abîme’. In *Mosquito* for instance, Theo, the protagonist, is a writer whose new novel is being thought of, defined and written as the plot progresses. This element of ‘the tale within the tale’ can also be found through the narrative technical use of frequent letters, which shed light on mysteries or feelings of the past. At the end of *The Swimmer*, reader and narrator discover at the same time a letter from Anula relating, in a disturbingly monotonous and humble tone, her years of suffering in Sri Lanka after her son’s death. The intervention of a first person narrator, who is different from the one of the ‘framing text’, conveys a powerful impression of an authoritarian intervention. Through the letters, Roma Tearne’s fiction acquires this element of ‘direct truth’. It may thus appeal to Sri Lankan migrants’ past experience in which letters were the only personal and direct link –though often censored - to their homeland. Anula’s account of the rape of the young Tamil woman, who might have been Ben’s fiancée, is a way for the author herself to include an everyday atrocity by Singhalese soldiers against their Tamil fellow-

citizens. The cynical anger expressed by Anula can be viewed as Tearne's own engaged empathy, particularly through acid statements such as: 'Yes, [...] the soldiers who were guarding us 'for our own good' were often unable to resist doling out some extra punishment for our past 'crimes'. It was, you understand, all part of the peace process.' (pp. 263) This 'author-itarian' example erases any possible clear-cut delineation of both literary genre and voices.

D/. A hybrid genre

In between writing and painting, politics and fiction, half-author, half-character of her own book, Roma Tearne reinforces the ambivalent hybridity that characterizes her work. *The Swimmer*, at first qualified as a novel, reveals all sorts of fragmented narratives, hence its incipit marked by its journalistic overtone: 'SOMEONE HAD PLACED THE CALVES AT the entrance to Unthank Farm [...] Shocked, the farmer called the vet, who in turn reported the matter to the police, but the calves were already dead' (p. 1). Then, the progress of this trivial story in parallel – until the absurd shooting scene – with that of Ben and Ria's meeting, adds an element of mystery, which is a feature of detective stories. Punctuated by epistolary interventions and even reports of psychoanalytical sessions told by Lydia – Ria and Ben's daughter – in the third part, the text complexifies the representation of the mere refugee's story. Besides that variety of genres interlinked to each other, the hybridity of the text diversifies the reader's approach to the plot, showing how one migrant's story can be told and perceived in very different ways. I will therefore study now how Roma Tearne's use of shifting narrators allows more than one voice to be heard.

3/. Blurred narrative voice(s)

A/. A multi-internal focalization: a search for truth?

The tri-partite structure of the novel is the striking expression of this polyphonic aspect of the text. Each part of the book is told by a first person narrator, starting with Ria, then Anula and Lydia. The use of first person narrators reinforces the contrast of experiences between different individuals. There again, an intention to link the personal to the collective is at stake. Roma Tearne suggests that it is necessary to vary our prisms on one story or history. This use of three narrators may then be viewed from the same investigating lens mentioned before. Like an investigator questioning different witnesses in order to resolve a case, the reader is led through three different voices, three different prisms, which are all linked to the story of Ben's fate, representing the variety of refugees and migrants' fates and hidden stories. All three of them are charged with the trauma of Ben's death, which ends up determining their life and future they try to deal with. This combination of a search for the truth through different insights and an effort to deal with past trauma reinforces the idea of Roma Tearne's text standing as a metaphorical collective work of grieving. The setting of the psychoanalytical session, which frames the last part of the book told by Lydia thus constitutes the metonymical example of an urge to heal Sri Lanka's past wounds, and deal with its history, memories, and identities.

B/. A multi-faceted and transgenerational Memory: the question of representation

The fact that the three different narrators belong to a different generation introduces a link between past and present, with a hint to the future through the last part of the book meaningfully devoted to sixteen-year old Lydia. By uniting a three internal focalization

through the memory of Ben, who stands as the pure emblem of loss, the text becomes much more than the simple place of grief. Beyond the mere theme of bereavement expressed in the three parts, Roma Tearne suggests the –quasi therapeutical – necessity of voicing all sides of a history as the condition for authenticity and acknowledgment of the past. This multi-faceted search for truth is thus represented in a trans-generational dynamic, which implies the importance of the evolution of memory. The traditional idealized longing of the migrant is in fact used by Tearne in order to be subverted through a transnational perspective and linked to a quest for identity. Fighting against a monolithic vision of memory, she questions the very representation of migrants' complex memories.

In Stuart Hall's essay entitled *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, he discusses this 'surge of an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins', which, he argues, 'can neither be fulfilled nor required, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation.'¹⁸ In this project of representation, Roma Tearne reunites the different memories of the dislocated and the traumatized –represented by our three different narrators – within a specific space, the Suffolk countryside and seaside.

¹⁸ In Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (ed.), *Colonial discourse and Post-Colonial theory, A Reader*. (London, Longman, 1994), pp. 401-402.

II/. PLACES OF/AND MEMORY : UNITY IN DISLOCATION ?

Who can ever forget [...] those islands of enchantment?¹⁹

(Stuart Hall)

1/. Spaces of threshold: unity and in-betweenness

A/. In-between places

In the first part, I showed how Roma Tearne questions postcolonial stereotypes, by transposing traditional paradigms of violence and nationalist ideologies within a hybrid text. By inscribing her characters in this bi-cultural world, she challenges other representations of the experience of dislocation. Her specific treatment of space in *The Swimmer* is thus synonymous with an intention to resist metaphorical closure through the use of transnational spaces. The idea of resistance to closure can be found in her use of key places which turn out to be liminal.

The last scene of the novel exemplifies this by being set in Heathrow airport. Lydia, daughter of Ria and Ben (both now dead), is waiting for Anula, the Sri Lankan grandmother she has never met. The airport stands as a place of both refuge and threat. The passage depicts people finding comfort in a welcoming embrace – such as the one described by Lydia of a Sinhalese man finding his wife in the crowd marked by ‘a flurry of voices in greeting, rising above the public address system’. Simultaneously, it conveys the impression of an underlying threat and control, as Lydia emphasizes the overwhelming presence of security procedures: ‘I would have liked to watch the plane as it landed, but it is forbidden to do so for fear of yet another terrorist attack’ (pp. 271-267). This specific setting reproduces the underlying denouncement of a paradoxical terrorist-like approach to the idea of security, that is illustrated

¹⁹ In Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (ed.), *Colonial discourse and Post-Colonial theory, A Reader* (London, Longman, 1994), pp. 401-402.

by both the British policemen who shot Ben thinking he was ‘a Pakistani Muslim; a terrorist who steals passports and makes bombs’, and the rape of Tara, the young Sri Lankan woman, by Singhalese soldiers who were ‘guarding [Tara and Anula] for their own good’(p. 247). Lydia significantly reflects on this precise paradoxical emphasis on safety when she observes that ‘Britain is no longer a law-abiding country and everything in the airport is designed to stop people hindering the safe passage of others in and out of the country’ (p. 267). This choice of the airport at the end of her novel may reveal Tearne’s intention to underline this particular contradiction of our time which may be transposed to the migrant’s own experience of disillusioned expatriation to an idealized, though not necessarily safer, place. But this choice may also be considered from a metaphorical perspective where this kind of place, characterized by in-betweenness, symbolizes a point of meeting of the dislocated.

In her analysis of Sri Lankan Anglophone writers’ work, Minoli Salgado shows, through a study of specific spatial tropes, how ‘diasporic and migrants mediations [...] demand a form of deterritorialisation that is based upon our ability to re-situate ourselves – to move into dislocated spaces and find alternative origins and sites of belonging in them.’²⁰ Since Roma Tearne’s choice of spaces escape fixity, her diasporic experience is visible in her novel, which interlinks dislocated characters and rediscovery of self and identity. Interstitial spaces such as the airport, beyond metaphorically and literally ‘interrupt[ing] the closure of national boundaries’²¹, mediate the complex and diverse experience of dislocated diaspora, allowing them to express their specific topographical and symbolical position of being in-between two territories, two cultures, two histories. Through such a use of metaphorical in-between spaces, *The Swimmer* exploits ‘this interstitial passage between fixed identifications [which] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an

²⁰ Minoli Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka : Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place* (London, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2007), p. 172.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 172.

assumed or imposed hierarchy'²², as Homi Bhabha puts it in his introduction to his work *The Location of Culture*. The togetherness celebrated in this last scene at the airport proves this intention of a transcendental crossing of monolithic national or ethnic categories leading to a paradoxical unity within dislocation. Lydia's brief encounter with an anonymous man, also waiting at the airport and who turns out to be Singhalese, may represent this idea:

'You waiting for the Qantas flight?' he asks.

'No,' I say, also smiling. 'I'm waiting for the plane from Colombo.'

'Oh, Colombo!' he seems delighted. 'So am I. My wife is on this flight. You know it has taken me a long time to get her a visa. [...] You have a friend on the flight?'

I marvel at his friendliness.

'Yes,' I say, carefully, 'a Tamil.'

He doesn't bat an eyelid.

'Ah, the Tamils. It's terrible what has happened to them. I am a Singhalese but I'm ashamed at what we did to the Tamils' (p. 270).

The emphasis on Lydia's feeling of friendly communion in this specific place shows the importance Tearne's fiction devotes to the relation between space, sense of belonging and a notion of united hybridity, with very much hope for the future.

B/. Natural and symbolical threshold

As the reader progresses through the novel, he/she seems to literally swim between the different places, people and powerful pictures which constitute Tearne's writing. The unity associated with a feeling of dislocation is also to be found within the description and metaphorical use of natural setting, which becomes a leitmotiv of Tearne's artistic writing. From this perspective, the central place of the River, which runs through Suffolk and the

²² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, Routledge, 2004), p. 5.

village of Orford where Ria lives, epitomizes this metaphorical unity through nature. Both link and frontier between territories, it is also, from a narrative point of view, the place of both the arrival and death of Ben. The paradoxical in-betweenness, reinforced by the narrative, of this natural place, seems to become a powerful and central representation of both dislocation and unity which characterizes migrants' experiences. This river, which has become 'a swamp of leaves and drowned insects', is where Ben ends his journey, finding a new sort of refuge at Ria's house. Defying 'the filthy water', he soon becomes associated with this symbol of water, as Ria, and later Anula, refers to him as 'the swimmer'. Through magnified descriptions, if not sometimes erotically connoted, the river thus becomes personified, 'licking itself' or 'gasping softly', and symbolically foreshadows the sensual relationship between Ben and Ria. Associated both with love through its physical communion, and death, through its irreversible separation, this in-between space of the river invites different sorts of symbolical reading, from a narrative to a political point of view. More than a running link through the novel – as the river lives on through Lydia's comparison of her frequent boat trip with *The Wind in the Willows* at the end of the book –, it also carries a political metaphor introduced by Anula. She indeed ponders on those 'glass eels [...] carried on currents each year towards the cold waters of the spring tides, to the rivers of England; and how some of them returned and some of them did not' (p. 172). The space, if not character, of the river seems to represent an alternative landmark where both experience and innocence, both unity and dislocation, can be represented. As it becomes a point of reference for our different protagonists, it allows the possibility of an alternative site of identification, beyond cultural, textual and historical dichotomies.

If we entertain the postcolonial idea of diasporic literature as 'a process of aleatory mediation, of dislocated and emergent subjectivities, and interrupted and bifurcated histories

[which] reroutes the diasporic and mobilises it to address new formulations of belonging'²³, *The Swimmer* presents us with significant spatial tropes such as the river, which follows Bhabha's celebration of 'theses in-between spaces [which] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity.'²⁴

With such examples of liminal spaces as the airport or the river, Roma Tearne maintains a hybrid text within a symbolical frame, which embodies unity as well as dislocation, and adds a transcendental dimension, where the issue of identity seems to be reformulated.

2/. Sublimated transnational metaphorical spaces

There is overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities.

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*²⁵

A/. Landscape

All the main characters in *The Swimmer*, whether British or Sri Lankan, have experienced both kinds of loss and dislocation. As their different voices are heard through the hybrid prism of the text, itself epitomized by the literal and metaphorical in-betweenness of key narrative places, their common effect is to raise the one and important question of their identity and its representation.

As I started to show by mentioning the metaphorical significance of the river, natural setting plays a great part in Roma Tearne's narrative project. Reading *The Swimmer*, one

²³ Minoli Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka : Literature, Resistance and The Politics of Place* (London, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2007), p. 172.

²⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, Routledge, 2004), p.2.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.7.

cannot but be struck by the overwhelming presence of a landscape whose descriptions constantly interweave, if not swim, between narrative watersheds. It seems that in this specific use of landscape lies the very quest of identity of Tearne's characters. In previous novels, Roma Tearne focused her setting on the vivid Sri Lankan coast. Landscapes thus already had a specific purpose of idealizing a sort of past Sri Lankan paradise, which resembles Romesh Gunasekera's approach. In *The Sandglass*, this Sri Lankan author celebrates the 'tear-shaped homeland', 'fecund and beautiful, [...] the putative site of the Garden of Eden, of the paradisiacal Atlantis, from which humanity was exiled.'²⁶ Still highlighting a glorified relationship between the dislocated migrants and their native land, Roma Tearne however chooses to locate this metaphorical paradise to the Suffolk English coast in *The Swimmer*. It links the different characters of the novel, beyond mere binary oppositions. Reinforcing this uniting hybridity, already pursued through a polyphonic narrative, the landscape becomes the place where characters can project their collective identifications. In his essay, *The Diasporic Imaginary*, Vijay Mishra – as analysed by Monika Fludernik – 'links the current concern for diasporic self-styling with Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities'[...] suggest[ing] that people who identify themselves as part of a diaspora are creating an 'imaginary' – a landscape of dream and fantasy that answers to their desires.'²⁷ While loss and memories grow in importance and significance throughout the novel, descriptions of the British landscape grow in intensity and become the epitome of those 'living absences' and past histories. Both Sri Lankan Anula and British Ria become 'capsules of helplessness and passivity [...], and project that passivity into the world around [them], into landscapes, riverscapes, skyscapes.'²⁸

²⁶ Minoli Salgado, "Romesh Gunasekera: past paradise" in *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and The Politics of Place* (London, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2007), p. 148.

²⁷ Monika Fludernik, Introduction 'The Diasporic Imaginary, Postcolonial Reconfigurations in the Context of Multiculturalism' in *Diaspora and Multiculturalism, Common Traditions and New Developments*, Edited by Monika Fludernik. (Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V. Cross/Cultures 66, 2007) p. xi.

²⁸ Vera Mihailovich-Dickman (ed.), « Return » in *Post-Colonial Writing – A Cultural Labyrinth* (Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V., 1994), p. 1.

In Part II of *The Swimmer*, which focuses on Anula, the reader goes from pages of anger to love, from states of shock to sudden reaction. As we progress through the novel, Anula's complex psyche is echoed by the British countryside that she crosses. Mentioning 'the wide, flawless landscape [which] had become static' as she is 'in a state of shock', she also seems mesmerized by 'the empty countryside flanked by fields and leafless trees' which remind her of 'a child's drawing' (p. 173). The intersection of both present complex feelings and references to memories seems to underline the close relationship Tearne – literally – draws between memory and identity. It seems that the landscape allows the characters to excavate their memories, as well as to question their own identity and position, both in the story and the world at large. Eric, with whom Anula has a love affair, urges her at some point to 'look at the land' in front of her, while directly connecting it with the 'damaged by bloodshed', yet 'still there' Sri Lankan land. This mingling of references to both lands shows how this particular setting of the Suffolk countryside epitomizes a place where the transnational quest of memory and identity can take place. The passage thus significantly carries on with Eric underlining 'those that survived' [the civil war] and who are in foreign places 'have to migrate in their mind's eye to those places' (p. 171). The fusion of both Sri Lanka and Britain is thus beautifully rendered when Anula, contemplating the Suffolk countryside, feels 'like a pilgrim on the way to Adam's Peak, in the centre of Sri Lanka, [...] rest[ing] in this oasis of calm' (p. 164).

B/. Sky and Seascape: transcending frame of memories

In a 2010 interview linked to the publication of *The Swimmer*, Roma Tearne's prose is defined as being 'illuminated by a painterly sensitivity to light.'²⁹ This emphasis on light is to be found in many passages devoted to the description of a significant 'skyscape', which expresses both the characters' most inner feelings as well as a general atmosphere of hybrid memories. Anula thus notices 'the strange half-light' of the sky which she perceives 'yellow with cold, very wide and empty', while declaring that she is 'on the threshold of grief' (pp. 124-127). As Ria takes her to a spot where she comes and dwells on her memories of Ben, Anula's growing awareness of the tragedy she is going through is symbolically expressed within the frame of natural elements around her: 'The light was beginning to go. The sky, which had seemed pale and insipid, had suddenly become stained with blood red. The sea changed' (p. 150). From this lyric awareness stemming from nature around her, she also recurrently associates her grieving process over her son's death with the natural passage of seasons. As if the British winter acted as a reminder or even a link to the absurdity of the civil war in Sri Lanka, she reflects on 'how life is, as fragile as the snow that has melted, and just as elusive', just after noticing: 'While I have been thinking, the landscape has changed' (p. 221). As she drifts away from the realistic painful descriptions of everyday atrocities during the civil war, which is particularly present in her previous novels, Roma Tearne seems to operate a shift in her way of using natural elements in her attempt at representing a hybrid totality. Since the central part of the book is structured around those paradoxical metaphorical bonding between Sri Lankan Anula and the British landscape around her, this choice may well represent again the idea of paradoxical unity within dislocation. This idea may thus accord with Homi Bhabha's question regarding the identity of those 'that remain unrepresented in the vaster invisibility of this transnational totality':

²⁹ Article 'An interview with Roma Tearne' (16/03/2010) by Sandra Kessel
<http://sandrakessel.wordpress.com/2010/03/16/an-interview-with-roma-tearne> (Accessed 17/11/10).

Paradoxically, it is only through a structure of splitting and displacement – ‘the fragmented and schizophrenic decentring of the self’ – that the architecture of the new historical subject emerges at the limits of representation itself, to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual to that vaster and unrepresentable totality.³⁰

In an attempt to represent the unrepresentable truth of a gathered grief around Sri Lankan history and beyond ethnic, national or postcolonial divides, *The Swimmer* often alludes to this pursuit of ‘situational representation’ through images such as ‘the blurry landscape that had become whiter than when I [Anula] arrived’ (p. 203). Tearne’s specific use of light also adds a representative dimension to such lyric sentences as Anula’s: ‘What daylight there was took on a hallucinatory air, adding to my sense of dislocation’, or when she realizes that she has been living her life ‘in small glimmers of light, brief illumination’ (pp. 212-217).

Since Sri Lanka is an island, the importance and symbolic load linked to the sea is striking in Sri Lankan literature. In Romesh Gunasekera’s novel, *Reef* (1994), one of the characters wants to transform the coast into a ‘sea sanctuary.’³¹ The notion of the sacred associated with the sea is a dominating trope in Sri Lankan literature. In Roma Tearne’s novels, the sea’s omnipresence and its use as a metaphorical space of memory may be seen as close to a real ‘lieu de mémoire’, as developed by French historian Pierre Nora in his famous work *Les Lieux de Mémoire*³². Nora’s collection stems from a reflection on memory and identity. He based his analysis on common and/or historical objects and places, which, he demonstrates, incarnate French national memory. The notion of a ‘lieu de mémoire’ applies to the way the sea works within the imaginary space of Sri Lankan migrants. Roma Tearne emphasizes the importance of ‘locating memory’, as a condition for a necessary sense of belonging. All kinds of dislocation experienced by her characters apply and appeal to a larger

³⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, Routledge, 2004), pp. 316, 310.

³¹ Romesh Gunasekera, *Reef* (London, Granta, 1994), p. 171.

³² Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Paris, Gallimard, 1992).

Sri Lankan diasporic community. Makarand Paranjape's essay, 'Writing Across Boundaries, South Asian Diasporas and Homelands', demonstrates how, 'as deterritorialized and dislocated communities, diasporas have a special need to forge their own sense of location wherever they are. While older diasporas fetishized the homeland, the new diasporas commodify it.'³³ After spending many days in this historically connected, yet foreign, English land, Anula suddenly realizes 'its true beauty' as she is walking across the marshlands of the Suffolk countryside with 'the sea beyond' (p. 214). Having understood 'too late [...] the subtle beauty of this waterlogged colour', she realizes 'what this land meant to him [Ben].' The fact that she chooses this particular spot of water to scatter her son's ashes reveals Tearne's intention to relocate Sri Lankan memory within a transnational metaphorical space, which is even more significant by its connection to an emblematic sea. In her analysis of expatriate South Asian writers, Monika Fludernik shows how they are 'clearly converting their imagined communities into real ones, transferring their imaginary homelands abroad. If diasporic imaginary there is, its emotional roots are now clearly in the transplanted culture.'³⁴ This specific relocation of a Sri Lankan migrant's consciousness within the frame of the sublimated British countryside may be significant of Roma Tearne's own experience of living in England for nearly fifty years. The fact that this emphasis was not in her previous novels marks a change in her evolution. The specific emphasis she puts on the different water sites, such as the river and the sea, may also reveal another feature of symbolism significant of Roma Tearne's writing.

³³ Makarand Paranjape, 'Writing Across Boundaries, South Asian Diasporas and Homelands' in *Diaspora and Multiculturalism, Common Traditions and New Developments*, Edited by Monika Fludernik. (Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V. Cross/Cultures 66, 2007), p. 255.

³⁴ Monika Fludernik (ed.), 'Imagined Communities as Imaginary Homelands' in *Diaspora and Multiculturalism, Common Traditions and New Developments* (Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V. Cross/Cultures 66, 2007), p. 283.

3/. Mothering Memory and regenerated (hi)story(-ies) through generations and interracial unions

A/. The Womb

The theme of water, the river and/or the sea, is a recurrent and powerful element in Roma Tearne's novel, from its title *The Swimmer*. Beyond the previous approach regarding the part of the setting, it might be relevant to consider this theme in relation with a particular perspective from the only female narrators, and especially Ria.

Ria is a poet who is struggling to complete her next collection, and who lives alone in the Suffolk countryside. The way the reader discovers Ria's insight at the beginning of the novel is intimate, and is above all marked by a particular emphasis on her dwelling on her recently discovered sterility. Comparing her recent inability to produce any work and her impression of emptiness regarding her body, she powerfully confides how 'everything had dried up inside' (p. 14). Ria's loneliness stemming from the first pages of the novel, and reinforced by a nearly diary-like approach, thus develops into an overall atmosphere of alienation surrounding her, both outside and inside. This particular way of leading the reader into the novel might be significant of Tearne's intention to convey the precise alienating process migrants individually go through. The theme of dryness as opposed to an important focus on water within the Sri Lankans' imaginary homelands, thus powerfully creates an ambivalent discrepancy in the text. This contrast, however, acquires its full narrative meaning in the third part of the book when we discover that Ria astonishingly realized that she was pregnant a few months after Ben's death, and that she gave birth to a girl named Lydia, who is the narrator. This narrative twist might end up revealing an important structure of reversal grounded in the theme of water, which goes beyond strict biological or narrative prisms.

The way this opposition, from both a biological and a textual perspective, between sterility at the beginning and fecundity at the end, frames '*The Swimmer*' – as title and character –, may well be representative of both shift and continuity. The plot is significantly triggered by Ria and Ben's meeting, which is introduced by Ben's secret intrusion into Ria's old house. First perceived by Ria as coming out of the river, Ben might be seen, on a metaphorical level, as penetrating Ria's body, which could foreshadow the sexual and very sensually described relationship between them. It may also refer to the 'pending impregnation' or the way Ben symbolizes water entering Ria's life and body, bringing her back to life as well as life into her. This opening image of Ben and Ria's relationship is therefore marked by a theme of degeneration through Ria's alienated self and body, as well as a theme of regeneration through the river where Ben swims. More than foreshadowing the future birth of Lydia through their union, this image may also reveal another reading.

First, this contrast is maintained throughout a large part of the book, since it is only with Lydia's part that the symbolical and actual 'regeneration' takes place. This maintained ambivalence between degeneration and regeneration seems to reinforce an overall tension between two polarities, which may thus represent a particular state of in-betweenness and hidden tensions that often characterizes the writing of diaspora experiences. In the case of the Sri Lankan characters in *The Swimmer*, such as Anula or Ben, it also refers to their specific prism of being both haunted by the officially ending civil war and the ambivalent growing, and not yet established, peace.

B/. Sex and transcultural 'Pro-creation'

As we move forward into the plot and come to Lydia's part, the revelation of Lydia's lineage comes as a reversal of our expectations from the beginning of the book. This reversal

of expectations may also be viewed from a postcolonial perspective. By presenting Sri Lankan immigrant Ben bringing life into the British heart and body symbolized by Ria, Roma Tearne seems to invert the traditional postcolonial hierarchy marked by a colonizer's so called civilizing superiority bringing values into the colonized land and society. As she thus crosses old traditional binary oppositions through this theme of regeneration, Tearne also boldly links this reversal of hierarchal paradigms through significant 'interracial' unions. The reversal of expectations, literally and metaphorically performed through the novel, is indeed enabled by the part played by Ben, who determines Lydia's birth and existence. Ben's union with Ria, which defies all traditional and cultural Sri Lankan communitarian boundaries, is celebrated through an emphasis on their sensual and transcending relationship. Their subversive couple, especially from a traditional Sri Lankan perspective, reinforced by the 18 year gap between them, becomes the place for a literal and metaphorical fusion of monolithic cultural oppositions. Ria's vivid description of 'the in, out, the long, beloved torso, lowered, lifted, lowered, the delicate, blunt, long caresses' seems to represent this fusion on both levels (pp. 97). Besides, this importance of interracial and transcultural communion is reinforced by the subversive union between the aging Sri Lankan mother Anula and the divorced British Eric. Recalling the 'blind loving' she experienced with Eric, Anula, in between her grief and lust, overcomes imprisoning conventions, and unexpectedly realizes:

Grief had unhinged me. What happened next was beyond comprehension. There was no shame [...]. When he touched me I felt a rush of excitement in my throat. I had not realized how physical, how taut my feelings were [...] It is astonishing how need transcends all else [...] Desire, anguished and fearless, overflowed in me [...] One part of my brain screamed, at last he was alive (pp. 166-7).

Beyond the subversive aspect of this interracial union from the point of view of traditional conventions around Sri Lankan monogamy beyond death, the clear emphasis on a freeing and regenerating process seems to follow Tearne's theme of reversal. Anula seems to

free herself through a transcending process, which may symbolize a metaphorical rebirth marked by this significant scream in the last sentence whose climax ends on the meaningful adjective 'alive'.

The process of being brought back to life is also further developed through the double embedded textual reference to Ria's poetry. Recalling the first recognized poem she wrote when she was still young, Ria seems to reveal in advance this very transcending union around both themes of degeneration and regeneration:

The story was about a fossil that had water poured on it, bringing it back to life to reveal a previous existence (p. 49).

C/. A trans-generational process of 're-membering'

Despite each occupying a distinctive part of the narrative, the three female narrators seem to be united around this idea of being brought to life through this regenerating process. As each of them represents a different generation, they are also linked by their lineage epitomized through Lydia. Those three textually divided, or dislocated, narratives, which end up being united at the end, might represent this very same theme of unity within dislocation developed before. As the first generations, embodied by Anula and Ria, are marked by loss and brutal separation, the second generation, through Lydia, by gathering the different narratives, symbolizes a process of 're-membering.' An idea of recollecting and continuity through a trans-generational memory around the emblematic Ben, is revealed through the character of Lydia. After she thought that she was 'a donor baby', 'belonging nowhere', she discovered her 'parentage [...which] at last made [her] feel whole', and thus embodies an individual and collective memory (pp. 271, 258). But even more importantly, this living memory is represented along with a need for a psychological process. Since Lydia's narrative

is framed by her sessions of psychoanalysis, it may well convey the idea of an individual memory, as well as a more collective one, that has to be dealt with, whose dislocated discourses have to be united, in order to get closer to a truer individual and collective identity.

This idea of 're-membering' and psychological process, that reveals Roma Tearne's intention beyond the mere fiction, thus encapsulates both notions of recollecting scattered memories, re-building reconciled individual and collective identities on the ground of a continuing work of memory. This perspective of an important work of memory, of *re-membering*, in order to transcend any monolithism, interestingly implies the idea of *return*, which represents a particular perspective of Roma Tearne's novel that I would like to develop further.

III/. SHIFTING IDENTITY(-IES)

An identity would seem to be arrived at by the way in which the person faces and uses his experience

(James Baldwin in *No Name in the street*)

1/. A symbolical and structuring journey: a paradigm of dislocation and ambivalent relation to home

A/. Travelling, in-betweenness, estrangement

The idea of dislocation, that greatly contributes to determine the main characters of *The Swimmer*, may be viewed through the significant theme of *the journey*. The book being divided into three parts, it indeed may be interesting to note the way the second and central one, devoted to Anula's point of view, is framed by spatial landmarks of her trip from Suffolk to London. Each chapter thus begins with specific landmarks such as 'Horsefair bus station [...] Trumpington. Traffic jam somewhere in Cambridgeshire [...] Towards Stansted' (pp. 123, 155, 173). Those indications serve as a starting point for the narrative process engaged by Anula, whose story we discover, literally, 'along the way'. The fact that this specific Sri Lankan character holds the narrative prism while travelling may in fact reveal a major aspect of Roma Tearne's use of migrants' representations.

Anula's journey appears to reflect two possible, yet paradoxical, meanings associated with the journey, namely both to escape this British land suggesting both hate and love to her, and also to go back, to return home, in Sri Lanka, where persecutions and horror in a familiar setting await her. This contradictory position of enunciation, particularly expressed in Anula's statement 'arriving has been terrible, leaving will be worse', may thus be significant in the way it expresses the specific

feelings of in-betweenness and estrangement often associated with migrants' experience (p. 141). By giving voice to this Sri Lankan woman, away from her homeland, and within this paradoxical context, Tearne therefore delves into this idea of '[discrepancy, displacement and differentiation]' ('décalage, du déplacement et de la différenciation'), and she also elaborates a reflection '[around the distension created by a remoted link to the homeland]' ('autour de la distension créée par le rapport lointain à la terre natale'), that the writers of the Carribean diaspora had initiated.³⁵ The feeling of estrangement and subtle change linked to the migrant's experience of dislocation within the journey, besides being probably inspired by Tearne's own memories of her sea-voyage to Britain, is repeatedly expressed throughout the novel, especially through a significant image used by Lydia later:

Then with a clatter of wings a flock of geese flew over the river. They did this every day in spring and early summer. Then they stopped in the autumn and returned again the following year. Well, I remember thinking, a group of birds returned, but were they the same ones? (p. 235).

The use of such an image, characterized by its unresolved ending, conveys a necessarily specific approach to the journey and its representations when it comes to writing about migrants' experience(s). This framing choice of the journey experienced by a Sri Lankan migrant thus complexifies traditional postcolonial representations, such as that of the journey being viewed by many diasporas as 'a manifest repetition of colonialism' ['une répétition manifeste du colonialisme'³⁶]. The British topographical landmarks structuring Anula's journey and discourse, as well as the closeness created by Tearne between her readers and this Sri Lankan's inner feelings, may be viewed as reproducing this very postcolonial paradigm through a crude

³⁵ Bénédicte Alliot, 'Avant-propos' in *Écritures et Représentations des Diasporas*. (Paris, Cahiers Charles V, Université Paris 7 – Denis-Diderot N°31, 2001), p. 8.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 8.

contrast. Echoing the ‘long journey’ that Ben had mysteriously mentioned to Ria in the beginning, Anula’s central journey however conveys a certain idea of freedom (p. 61). It seems that by using public transport, which symbolizes a fusion of the individual and the collective, Anula best finds the words to express all those feelings associated with the mourning of her son. She also finds the courage to voice her most honest and contradictory feelings over her love affair with a British man. The challenge of putting this discourse at the heart of her novel may be representative of Tearne’s attempt to link a specific state of in-betweenness of both feelings and space to a more complex relation to ‘home.’

B/. Transitional home(s) and eternal return(s)

As Anula’s introspection progresses alongside with her journey, the text moves on to more and more considerations on dilemmas regarding both notions of ‘home’ and identity. It seems that the moving frame of her thoughts significantly expresses an evolving and shifting relation to home and herself. This interlinking of the journey and an attempt to locate home is often alluded to in the text. This is the case with Eric, who notably stands as the figure of the emblematic British mediator in the story, declaring: ‘People carry their home in their heads. It’s how things are now, and we have to live with this change. To find home wherever we travel is a gift’ (p. 171). By revealing the importance of the journey in the migrant’s construction of a relation to home, Tearne might be interestingly examining this specific irreversible aspect of the journey, the very moment determining a shift in the sense of belonging to a distanced homeland, hence the beginning of a more complex reflection on home. This process, besides being symbolized by the very physical movement implied in the journey, seems to

become the starting point of our migrating characters' ambiguous 'homelessness.' By focusing her narrative within this precise 'state of transit between different worlds' that Anula speaks about, Tearne underlines the immediate and determining impression of 'no return' directly associated to it (p. 171). The way Ben's journey from Sri Lanka to Britain is described highlights this irreversible process towards an impossible return:

[...] he had travelled, across endless land, feeling even more mortal and insignificant as he went. Like the swimmer he was, he had moved further and further from the shore, until at last he understood the meaning of 'no return'(p. 61).

As Ben later defines himself as 'a person lost in transit', the text seems to exploit those transitional representations more and more, as if a truer reality of migrant's experience could thus be revealed (p. 89). From this point, it may be interesting to compare Roma Tearne's use of a process of transition, linked to the notion of 'no return', to Homi Bhabha's statement:

The liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one; there is no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently enjoined in the 'survival' of migrant life.³⁷

The theme of the return and all the dilemmas associated to its impossibility crucially appear as a determining aspect of migrants' experience. Yet, the etymology of the common and relative nostalgia that migrants paradoxically either 'over express' or seem to constantly avoid, notably illustrated through Anula's ambiguous evocation of Sri Lanka, carries this powerful notion of return – *nostos* meaning the return and *algos* the sadness and suffering of it, in ancient Greek –. As the emblematic travel stands as

³⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, Routledge, 2004), p. 321.

a turning point in a migrant's life, the same moment of displacement ends up being a key element of Roma Tearne's writing. Seeing the central place given to this theme, the powerful phrase of Anula saying 'I was returning to a country that was a foreign place' may be a way of voicing Tearne's own concern with this 'over imagined' return to Sri Lanka, a return which she has so far not considered (p. 261). In fact, this is particularly where her work as a visual artist may be relevant in comparison with *The Swimmer*.

Introducing a photographic project she strikingly entitled 'Maps from Nowhere', Roma Tearne explained, in a statement written to the gallery director, that her creation was first motivated by the theme of loss and then clearly combined with the idea of a determining journey.

It is about a journey I may or may not undertake back to my home in Colombo, a journey that has been more than forty years overdue. It will not be easy to go back. My family is dead, my relatives untraceable, there is a war on in Sri Lanka, dengue fever is rife, as is malaria. And, even if I do go back, what can I hope to discover?³⁸

In digressing from her literary work, I hope to demonstrate how Roma Tearne's specific use of those themes of travelling and returning in fact pervade her visual work. By linking her work as a visual artist to her work as a writer, such a combination of loss and an (un)representable and representative journey back home may show how *The Swimmer* stands as the most striking achievement in her literary career. Furthermore, this artistic project, which may well illustrate *The Swimmer*,

³⁸ Roma Tearne, in *Exhibiting Photography*, by Shirley Read (ed. Focal Press, <http://www.mac-on-campus.com/LearningCenter/EducationalArticlesandBookExcerpts/12587.aspx>) (Accessed 28/01/11).

reveals different sorts of journeys that are representative of migrant experience and literature, beyond the merely spatial transitional position.

2/. Travelling and recollecting Memory(-ies): return and its dialectical approach

A/. 'The Past is a foreign country': the migrant's journey and its temporal dimension

The topographical indications at the beginning of each chapter told by Anula appear in the text in direct contact with very precise time landmarks. This combined positioning within time and space underlines the diary-like approach to this specific part of the book. The reason for such an approach may be viewed through one important effect produced by the style of diary entries, that is to 'oscillate between returns to various points in the past and returns to moments nearer the narrative present.'³⁹ The crucial idea of the return, as shown earlier, in migrant representations, seems thus to be taken further and emphasized through the specific narrative style of Anula. The whole of her discourse reveals its richness by being based on a meaningful analeptic structure. By distancing herself, not only in space but also in time, in order to deliver her story to the reader, this character may therefore symbolize the important temporal dimension associated with migrant representations of home and return. The repeated analeptic structure in each chapter creates a constantly shifting time frame

³⁹ Vera Mihailovich – Dickman (ed.), « Return » in *Post-Colonial Writing – A Cultural Labyrinth*. (Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V., 1994) p. 43.

that seems to express the different and ambivalent kinds of ‘imaginative returns.’⁴⁰ Those different kinds of returns, notably embodied by the narrative structure itself, may be relevant in the case of *The Swimmer*, as it precisely coincides with a corresponding ‘narrative situation of a character – Anula – at a *reflective* turning point in life.’⁴¹ The comparison between Ben and Anula’s actual journeys – one going from Sri Lanka to Britain and the other travelling the other way round – might highlight this notion of a shifting timeframe that constitutes Roma Tearne’s writing of the return. Whereas her son’s journey had been depicted as ‘travelling through nothing but unbending time’, Anula, watching new passengers getting on, ‘wonder[s] to what far-flung corner of the earth they might be travelling’, declaring then ‘I will never travel this world again [...] From now on I can only go backwards in time’(pp. 61, 137). This new kind of return embodied by Anula may thus be representative of what lies beyond Roma Tearne’s writing of the return, which is a specific work of memory.

A ‘representation of the nation as a temporal process’, as Homi Bhabha puts it, can be found in the very structure of *The Swimmer*, which might indicate an attempt at ‘inscrib[ing] the ambivalent and chiasmic intersections of time and place that constitute [a] problematic ‘modern’ experience’ powerfully reminiscent of the migrant experience⁴². From this crucial idea of a specific relation to time in migrant representations, critic Isabel Santaolalla has interestingly argued that:

We call these people “migrants” or “exiles”, and can imagine their more probable sense of loss and yearning for a return to the familiar land. And yet, multitudinous as movement in space is, it is visibly surpassed by one of a

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 42, 48.

⁴¹ Gay Raines, “Return” in fiction’ in « Return » in *Post-Colonial Writing – A Cultural Labyrinth*.(Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V., 1994), p. 48.

⁴² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (London, Routledge, 2004), p. 202.

different kind: movement in time. This journey no one can avoid: we all are “migrants” from our past.⁴³

The first book mentioned by Ria in the beginning, *The Go-Between*, famous for its opening sentence ‘The Past is a foreign country’, may well announce the idea of a complex migrating process through time that Roma Tearne chooses to develop in the central part of her novel. By thus interlinking time and space in her writing, Roma Tearne, beyond the mere accessible plot, asserts herself as a representative writer of the contemporary Sri Lankan diaspora. Indeed, Minoli Salgado, in her essay entitled ‘Nonlinear Dynamics and the Diasporic Imagination’, argues that:

‘a form of temporal reversal is a key feature of the diasporic imagination [...] dislocation creates the conditions for the imaginative desire to negate time, reverse it and enact an endless return to the past. [...] as if the irreversible transition involved in the act of migration and settlement opens up imaginative possibilities for the migrant writer who wishes not so much to reverse time but to step back in time, embarking on a journey or [...] enacting a ‘feedback loop.’⁴⁴

This backward dynamic which characterizes Tearne’s novel seems all the more to stand as an important aspect of Sri Lankan migrant’s experience and representations since it associates the theme of the mourning and grieving process with the narrative ‘re-membering’ of the past’ through Anula’s analeptic voice. The idea of a necessary connection to the past within a grieving process decisively characterizes what can be called ‘Roma Tearne’s work of memory’. In the first part of the book, while Ben determinately states that ‘the war can’t stop because of all the people who have been

⁴³ Isabel Santaolalla, ‘A Fictitious Return to the Past. Saleem Sinai’s Autobiographical journey in *Midnight’s children*’, in « *Return* » in *Post-Colonial Writing – A Cultural Labyrinth*, edited by Mihailovich – Dickman Vera, (Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V., 1994), p. 163.

⁴⁴ Minoli Salgado, ‘Nonlinear Dynamics and the Diasporic Imagination’ in *Diaspora and Multiculturalism, Common Traditions and New Developments*, Edited by Monika Fludernik (Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V. Cross/Cultures 66, 2007), p. 188.

hurt by it. [...] Too many people have been killed, too many people have been left behind who remember those who have died', Tearne's own call for a true acknowledgment of her home country's past, through a crucial return to re-member the past of the civil war, can be heard (p.89).

B/. Re-collecting and re-creating Memory(-ies)

As both time and space are interlinked within the 'returning' discourse of a travelling Anula, this central narrative of re(-)membering becomes the metaphor for a travelling memory. This dynamic of the memory within a narrative production, as opposed to a monolithic past or repressed history, reveals an important aspect of Roma Tearne's project. Both esthetical and political, it is based on honestly dealing with her country's past, and is directly linked to creation, or rather, re-creation.

In order to truly understand this idea of 're-writing memory' in Roma Tearne's novel, it is relevant, once again, to pay closer attention to her work as a visual artist. Since 2002, Tearne, as an artist and filmmaker, has engaged more clearly with a specific work which is originally based on found objects. In an early project, entitled 'Investigating and Accessing Narrative and Memory Through Artistic Practice in a Museum Context', her particular approach aims at 'discovering the secret and fragile histories found in public spaces, objects and photographic archives.'⁴⁵ This view of creation as a 're-creation from the past' is an idea that specifically reappears in *The Swimmer*. The most representative illustration of this idea is to be found in the passage when Ben gives Ria a present which turns out to be a necklace he has made himself,

⁴⁵ 'Roma Tearne page' on 'Authortrek' website: http://www.authortrek.com/roma_tearne_page.html (Accessed 28/01/11).

using bits of shells and broken birds' eggs he has collected along his epic journey from Sri Lanka to Britain. Confessing, on this occasion, his particular interest in collecting broken things, he explains that 'collecting [is] part of preserving memory' (p. 72). This particular emphasis on collecting and assembling or 're-collecting', may thus be viewed as being in tune with the specific return implying a dynamic of both space and time symbolized by Anula's narrative. Ben's re-creation being based on 'broken things' might also be significant of Tearne's work of memory linked to the grieving process over those who have been 'left behind' – in both time and space – and who later in the novel are best represented by Ben, whose ashes have been scattered on a British riverfront. This 're-creation of the self in the world of travel' is said by Homi Bhabha to be linked to a 'performance of identity.'⁴⁶ This direct link between a dynamic of re-collecting memory and a representation of the migrant self might shed light on Roma Tearne's concern with a quest for identity based on memory. In the same passage mentioned above, the fact that the necklace is given from Ben to Ria might also symbolically testify to the notion of a transnational or transcultural transmission associated with this work of memory, where the quest for identity ends up being characterized by both its hybridity and uniqueness. As this symbolical episode of the gift is marked by both movements towards past, and both creation and transmission, the central theme of the journey and its different returns as shown before might thus be further underlined, especially through their dialectical approach. The very movement implied in the journey, reinforced by Anula's narrative being constantly reconnected to spatial and temporal landmarks, may indeed symbolize a specific dialectical relation between history and identity which constitutes this work of

⁴⁶ Homi K Bhabha., *The Location of Culture*. (London, Routledge, 2004), p. 12.

memory. It would then mean that a quest for representing migrant identity is necessarily associated with a metaphorical dialogue with memory and history, which would thus be synonymous with a transformative representation of Sri Lankan migrants' identity in Roma Tearne's literary work. The dialectical approach symbolizing her vision of a transformative process of Sri Lankan representations seems to decisively appear when she states 'It's all about memory and forgetting – but a society has to remember before it can really forget.'⁴⁷

C/. Routes and roots

By structuring her text along subversive 'nonlinear dynamics' (which, to Minoli Salgado, contribute to characterizing a specific diasporic imagination), Tearne draws our attention towards a transformative testimonial approach. Beyond the first impression of rupture that the journey might imply, she chooses to symbolize it as a transformative process of *reflection* on identity, associated to both spatial and temporal shifting – or 'migrating' – of the self. Minoli Salgado precisely talks about that 'nonlinear trajectory' of migrants 'experiencing the contingency and crisis of travel and displacement' which, she says, using Paul Gilroy's formulation, 'challenges the certainty of "roots" with the contingency of "routes".'⁴⁸ A celebrated nonlinearity of migrant representations would thus be justified by the idea of a shifting relation to home as well as a shifting identity that Roma Tearne includes in her 'travelling narrative'. Towards the end of the book, Anula strikingly uses this image of her

⁴⁷ Review (23/05/2010) by P. Simon on the *Morning Star* website
<http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/index.php/news/content/view/full/89517> (Accessed 17/11/2010).

⁴⁸ Minoli Salgado: "Nonlinear Dynamics and the Diasporic Imagination" in *Diaspora and Multiculturalism, Common Traditions and New Developments*, Edited by Monika Fludernik. (Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V. Cross/Cultures 66, 2007), p. 189.

specific journey in relation to a change in herself, to a transformative and relieving grieving process, that might illustrate Tearne's call for a 'decompartmentalization' of Sri Lankan identities and a release of the past. She thus talks of 'a long slow and painful journey to understanding', explaining how she had 'to come to terms with who [she is], how this war has shaped [her]' (p. 260). This precise statement of a necessary and specific journey voiced by Tearne through her character might be clarified by Salgado's awareness linked to displacement. In her conclusion to her book *Writing Sri Lanka*, she indeed claims that 'it is only by breaking away from the teleological determinism of a prescribed history, of recognizing that the value of origins may lie in the ability to transcend (and thereby question) them, that we can truly gain a sense of who we are and where we might rightfully belong.'⁴⁹ Bhabha's use of a specific argument developed by Frantz Fanon who 'recognizes the crucial importance [...] of [...] retrieving repressed histories'⁵⁰, might well be demonstrated within Tearne's literary achievement. The crucial transformative process of relation to both past and self within the journey, thus enacted in *The Swimmer*, stands as a striking evolution of Roma Tearne's work whose rich treatment of Sri Lankan migrants identity comes to represent a powerful contemporary Sri Lankan diasporic voice. Roma Tearne's particular approach to notions of memory and identity, as she writes away from her homeland, could also importantly raise the question of the determining position and positioning of a diasporic writer such as Tearne.

⁴⁹ Minoli Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and The Politics of Place* (London, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2007), p. 166.

⁵⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, "Unhomely lives: the literature of recognition" in *The Location of Culture*, (London, Routledge, 2004), p. 13.

3/. Roma Tearne and her 'ex-isle'

A/.A sense of both exile and home: alienation vs transcending freedom?

First, it might be relevant to mention the way the opening part of the book is centered on Ria, who is a middle aged poetess living alone in her country house in the middle of a quiet Suffolk countryside. The fact that Roma Tearne uses the figure of a solitary writer – which thus echoes her very first novel, whose main protagonist Theo is a lonely widower and writer – may reveal, in the light of the previous demonstration, the way this specific author's position is closely interlinked with her writing. As Ria expresses recurrent feelings of both alienation and attachment to the place of the 'Eel house' where she lives and which she calls 'home', Tearne's own complex position as a Sri Lankan woman writer living in Britain as a fully integrated citizen might be highlighted at the same time. In fact, since this theme of alienation, first developed through the character of Ria, turns out to be a key element to understand the spirit of her novel, the juxtaposition of three different characters' voices, notably characterized by this theme, might be representative of Tearne's possibly triple sense of alienation. Neither residing in Sri Lanka nor born in Britain, she may be expressing, beyond this first 'double-alienation', a third metatextual feeling linked, generally speaking, to the alienating work of the writer. This particular complexity of position for a writer such as Tearne seems also to be underlined by Minoli Salgado who emphasizes 'the alienation and isolation of Sri Lankan writers in English.'⁵¹ Referring to an article written by Sri Lankan author James Goonewardene in 1974 and entitled 'Nationalism and the Writer in Sri Lanka', she describes the way he draws attention to 'the long-term consequences of mass or collective cultural

⁵¹ Minoli Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka : Literature, resistance and The Politics of Place* (London, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2007), p. 41.

isolationism and the attendant calls for cultural purity', but even more importantly, how it exhorts us to 'recognise that art has no national barriers [...], 'to strive for a creed of internationalism in art, while drawing specific attention to the plight of the Sri Lankan writer in English who is an 'exile in his own country.'⁵² Both the position and positioning of a writer such as Tearne are thus a determining factor in the reading of her novels, and her hybrid and challenging writing, in tune with her own identity, might be positively considered for the freedom it conveys. In an essay entitled 'De villes et d'exil', scholar Ada Savin explores the interconnection between writing and exile:

[...] tout en parlant de là où il se trouve, l'écrivain en exil fait aussi parler d'autres lieux, d'autres temps, d'autres langues. L'espace et le temps de l'écriture se dilatent, les langues s'entrecroisent et créent une œuvre polyphonique qui transcende toute frontière.⁵³

The way Tearne's act of writing is distanced in both space and time from Sri Lanka and her childhood experience there, beyond being expressed through many representations of dislocations as seen before, would thus be synonymous with a specific transcending prism that she could rightfully embody. Her first apparent complex alienation may therefore become an inspiring aspect of her style. Neither pure insider nor pure outsider, she epitomizes this constantly travelling mind that most artists endeavour to develop.

B/. Roma Tearne and her 'doubly liminal' world: an 'alter-native'?

In Uma Parameswaran's 'Dispelling the Spells of Memory', she argues that diasporic writing is 'doubly liminal', justifying that 'often diaspora writers are

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

⁵³ Ada Savin, 'De villes et d'exil' in *Villes d'Exil* (Collection edited by Ada Savin, published by L'Harmattan, Paris, 2003), p. 23.

outsiders looking in at the other culture, but they are also outsiders to homeland, looking in at a past of a space that has changed in their absence.’⁵⁴

The term *liminal* may thus – paradoxically perhaps – clear up the singularity of Roma Tearne’s writing. In her attempt at representing an (un)representable shifting migrant’s experience and identity, she seems to have been – both textually and metaphorically – constantly including as well as excluding herself from her text. As both engagement in creation and expression of alienation characterize her work, her hybrid fiction appears to be endlessly pursuing this very moment of shift, of connection between different times, spaces and cultures. Through this transcendent writing, reinforced by its artistic dimension, she seems to endlessly search for this interstitial passage which would best epitomize migrants’ experience. This ‘liminal’ place, at the intersection of foreignness and ‘home’, would first represent both ideas of exclusion and inclusion that are subtly intertwined in a migrant’s journey through life. Her specific Sri Lankan identity may thus reinforce those ideas since the literature of Sri Lanka has been said to be ‘subject to conscription on the basis of contested notions of belonging in which home and homeland stand as symbolic markers of inclusion and exclusion’⁵⁵, as Salgado demonstrates. Beyond the intersection of those two last themes, Tearne’s work can be characterized by a dynamic of exploration of her own complex exilic experience. This dynamic of her ‘liminal world’ could maybe best describe this powerful image of the old lost trunk, which used to contain her family’s memories, and which served as the starting point of her literary career. The precise gap determined by this loss, which seems to separate her from a mysterious history and

⁵⁴ Uma Parameswaran, « Dispelling the Spells of Memory » in *Diaspora and Multiculturalism, Common Traditions and New Developments*, Edited by Monika Fludernik (Amsterdam, Rodopi B. V. Cross/Cultures 66, 2007), p. Ix.

⁵⁵ Minoli Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka : Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place* (London, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2007), p. 11.

identity, can be seen as being at the heart of her artistic and literary search. This idea of a gap or of a liminal world, since it also represents the very idea of the moment of creation, reinforces this characteristic of Tearne's art and/of writing. Art can indeed be considered in regard to a gap between idea and form, this gap being then characterized by a space of vibration, of oscillation, where the idea can be lost or enriched, after a sinuous journey representative of this moment of creation, or of the 'forming' in opposition to the 'formed.' As a diaspora text often attempts at 'creat[ing] its own unique sense of locality in face of the experience of displacement', Roma Tearne's artistic exploration of her own exilic experience could in itself represent an alternative model of belonging where creation is central. More than interrupting the closure of boundaries, this very quest of the liminal, the untranslatable moment of creation might symbolize a politics of resistance in her work. As her text resists any clear-cut categorization and constantly seems to be questioning the very idea of stable identities, her haunting and ambivalent presence through her writing may embody another kind of affiliation characterized by its artistic openness which resists any closure within space or time.

Therefore, the mere reading of her book's title The Swimmer draws –or possibly drowns – the reader right into Roma Tearne's rich creative complexity. Implying this idea of travelling within the metaphorical space of the sea, which represents both unity and dislocation, its mysterious associated anonymity and determinacy (through the article 'the') take us on a journey in a liminal world where Sri Lankan past, present, and hopeful future are intertwined, thus conveying a transcendent dynamic of remembering, in tune with the dynamics of artistic creation.

CONCLUSION

In the course of writing this dissertation, I discovered that *The Swimmer* had been long listed for the 2011 Orange Prize for fiction. This represents a new step in Roma Tearne's recognition as a contemporary British writer. As a Sri Lankan born artist living in Britain, she has progressed towards a more and more specific approach to the theme of diasporic identity. Her novels, and especially her last one, reflect her intention to go beyond mere cultural and historical binarisms. By combining artistic and narrative devices, she has endeavoured to translate the Sri Lankan migrants' experience through a more honest hybrid prism. The liminal space which characterizes her writing, together with a sense of necessarily 're-membering', conveys to *The Swimmer* a valuable voice which should appeal to more than the Tamil diaspora. The Suffolk countryside and seaside of her novel, besides acting as a transnational bond for her dislocated characters, reveal a new vision of a transcultural work of memory that does not only stem from a haunting history, but which also highlights a continuous emotional presence made by art.

Such evolution of her writing came out to be further confirmed as I also discovered that Roma Tearne was in the process of making a film entitled *The Swimmer: a true story*. This piece, which was entirely shot on an iPhone and whose soundtrack was created by composer and sonic artist Paul Whitty, is not an adaptation. It indeed rather supplements the novel, as Roma Tearne explains in her blog. Set in Aldeburgh, on the Suffolk coast, this artistic project is about to be presented at this year's Venice Biennale from the 3rd June. With such continuing process of creation, Tearne definitely establishes herself as a mediator between art and literature, as well as England and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the way that she expands this art of her 'exile' – or 'the ex-isle of her heart' – thus hopefully opens new possibilities for more transformative voices to be heard.

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