

THE AB/USE OF 'HISTORY' IN ROMA TEARNE'S *BONE CHINA*

SUPOORNA KULATUNGA

UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA,
SRI LANKA

Abstract

In the opening paragraph of his 1992 text 'Imaginary Homelands', Salman Rushdie speaks of an 'old photograph in a cheap frame' (9) that leads him to arrive at the realisation of the significant role 'the past' plays in the creative imagination of an expatriate writer as expressed in the words 'the past is home, albeit a lost home...in the mists of lost time' (Rushdie, 9) (my emphasis). With this as a point of departure, this paper attempts a discussion of the manner in which Roma Tearne, a Sri Lankan expatriate writer living in England, engages with 'the past' (or 'history' in Tearne's words) in her novel Bone China. Along with an analysis of the ways in which the dramatis personae of the novel deal with their preoccupation with 'history', there will also be a gauging of Tearne's own employment of 'history' both as a narrative device and a theme which feeds into the overarching themes of 'home', nostalgia, and loss.

Key words: history, the past, home, loss, nostalgia, narrative device, expatriate

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Bone China, Roma Tearne's semi-autobiographical novel published in 2008, encompasses the saga of the de Silvas, a once affluent Tamil family headed by Aloysius and Grace de Silva. From the onset of the story in 1939, the reader sees how the fortunes and misfortunes of this family go hand in hand in with the larger history of Sri Lanka. For instance, it is Aloysius' compulsive alcoholism and gambling which by and large causes the family's loss of much of its wealth including Grace's ancestral bungalow the 'House of Many Balconies'. However, the larger historical events leading up to independence in 1948 also have a significant contribution to their fate because Aloysius, who was once an estate manager, claims that '[he] is no longer necessary to the British' even though they were as 'useful as sandbags' during the heyday of colonialism at 'keep[ing] civil unrest at bay' (Tearne, 6).

The rest of the story unfolds in this manner where the larger history of the island permeates the narrative and also the personal histories of the de Silva children—Jacob, Christopher, Thornton, Alicia and Frieda—whose involvement in and reactions to the tumultuous history of their country vary from one another. Alicia and Christopher, for instance, suffer severe personal losses due to the increasing ethnic tensions. Alicia loses her Sinhalese political activist husband in a riot and Christopher has to witness the death of his paramour Kamala which causes him to remark 'there is no justice of any sort...the government is terrible. Wealth and religion an endless corruption have ruined my life' (Tearne, 134).

Apart from Thornton, whose bohemian and naive personality makes him adopt an attitude of mild bemusement at the events, all the de Silvas feel the gravity of the events so much so that the children are forced to migrate to the United Kingdom in search of better prospects. But when his daughter Anna-Meeka is born, even Thornton feels the gravity of the situation. His wife Savitha observes that 'history frightened him. He did not want it to repeat itself' (Tearne, 175) when he expresses a superstitious unease at seeing his daughter play the piano as it reminds him of his sister Alicia and her tragic fate mentioned earlier.

It is when the second generation de Silvas leave Sri Lanka and start their lives as working class immigrants in England that 'history' gains its most profound significance. Coupled with bittersweet feelings of homesickness, loss and longing which are very

common concerns in the expatriate ethos, the de Silva children react to it in anger and sorrow. Christopher's letters to home are filled with 'an inexplicable longing' (Tearne, 140):

Now that I am here I can see how wonderful it really is in Ceylon...Our country has so much to offer, its past is so rich and vibrant. All we do is destroy it. Believe me, there is nothing here for any of us. I don't belong here and never will. There is no point in any of you coming. Better to stay and fight for what is ours. (Tearne, 140) (author's italics)

His brothers, too, cope with such feelings of nostalgia and loss but it is Savitha, his sister-in-law, who presents the most poignant summation of their relationship with 'history' after going to a garden party at the Buckingham Palace:

For history, thought Savitha, history was what made you what you are. History was what made you feel at ease with yourself. History gave you solidity, a certainty, in everything you did. She had thought they were escaping to a place they could call their own, but now, she saw, this could never be...They had no history left, for carelessly they had lost it along the way. (Tearne, 315) (author's italics)

This insight on Savitha's part is quite in keeping with her character as an educated and more discerning individual and also the special role she is assigned by her mother-in-law Grace as the 'custodian' (Tearne, 211) of the titular bone china. These delicately ornate pieces of ceramic ware are ostensibly family heirlooms of great value, yet they are imbued with a deeper significance. Functioning as the most recurrent motif in the novel, the bone china symbolise among other things, the 'history' of the de Silva family. Grace salvages them from the House of Many Balconies before it is sold and calls it her 'only legacy' as she gives them to Savitha before she departs to England. There, the china gains an additional layer of significance as a link Savitha has to her beloved mother-in-law at 'home' and also a reminder of the increasing fragility of this link as generations go by, seen in the manner which Anna-Meeka quite carelessly breaks a bowl.

The ultimate embodiment of 'home' and all its positive attributes to the de Silvas is Grace de Silva. She is, for the most part, in the eye of the storm of 'history' of both her family and country. Indeed as her young Tamil lover Vijay observes she is 'history' itself for 'he felt as though he touched all the despair of the island, all their collective troubles, their desires, their confusions, here on [her] lovely, warm and unlined body' (Tearne, 45). 'History', however, batters her as she loses Vijay to a race riot. Yet, she withstands these trials and tribulations which causes Savitha to note after her death that, 'without [Grace's] influence the de Silva family was disintegrating. In spite of a drunken husband, in spite of the war [she] had kept them together...' (Tearne, 331).

As the characters of her novel engage with 'history' in the multifarious ways discussed above, Tearne herself appears to employ 'history' in ways that merit analysis. Claiming to be writing a semi-autobiographical novel in several interviewsⁱ, Tearne who, according to the blurb introducing the author, '*fled Sri Lanka at the age of ten*' (my emphasis) appears to fulfil an 'urge to reclaim' (Rushdie, 10) her own lost 'history'. As reiterated throughout the discussion, when charting the history of the de Silva family in the traditional linear trajectory of a realist novel, Tearne uses events of Sri Lankan history to frame the narrative.

However, it is quite interesting to note the specific historical events which she showcases in her story. There are occasional allusions to the greatness of Sri Lankan history as seen in Christopher's letter quoted above, yet for the most part, the 'history' which is highlighted is that of the ethnic tensions which unfortunately have been a part of the Sri Lankan socio-political and cultural landscape ever since colonial times. As a daughter of a family with fraught ethnic relations, Tearne herself was a victim of the ethnic conflict which caused her to migrate in the first place. But, in portraying this 'history', Tearne merges several historical stages of the ethnic conflict into one which is marked exclusively by violence. For instance, historical episodes which occurred only after 1983ⁱⁱ is said to have been present even before the murder of Prime Minister S W R D Bandaranaike as there is news of a 'Tamil boy who had died...in the centre of Colombo [who] had strapped some explosives to his chest and blown himself up at the Fort' (Tearne, 202).

As mentioned before, the existence of ethnic tensions for the most part of modern Sri Lankan history is an undeniable fact. Yet, unlike what Tearne seems to suggest, the nature of the conflict was not marked by violence in its entirety. This leads the reader to question Tearne's motive in doing so, particularly in a novel which subscribes to the realist tradition where such leaps of faith are generally not seen. Unless it is sheer ignorance on Tearne's part (which is doubtful in this age of information technology), it could be argued that this 'fictional license' is largely informed by another significant theme, which views Sri Lanka essentially as a 'poisoned paradise' (Tearne, 103)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Almost every character in the novel suggests that the "ravages" of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and political corruption has destroyed the island paradise that was once the seat of a prestigious history. However, the strongest evaluation of the country along these lines comes from the British colonists and even more disturbing these views seemed to be affirmed by Grace, the most likeable character in the novel in a recognisably Orientalist turn of phrase:

Sitting in the taxi, going home, she felt the heat spread like an infectious disease. It carried with it an ugly undercurrent of destruction that hovered wherever one went in

the capital. It was not good. The British, sidelined by choice, watched silently. Waiting. Those who loved this island, and there were many who did, were saddened by what they saw. But most of them, Grace knew, had predicted the elephants would soon be out of the jungles. (Tearne, 70-71) (my emphasis)

Tearne does not allow space in the novel to counter this assumption. In fact it builds up to allow for the denouement of the story where Anna-Meeka, the rebellious granddaughter of Grace de Silva (with whom Tearne claims to identify) is able to '[see] the things that had been mislaid, the history that had been buried and the memories no longer spoken of...were somehow given back to her' (Tearne, 400) only through her love for 'a remarkable Englishman' Henry Middleton.

So, her semi-autobiographical/historical novel *Bone China*, Roma Tearne does attempt to weave a fairly poignant story of a family who are battered by larger events of society as they negotiate with "history". Yet, her [ab]use of "history" also leads the reader to wonder whether she is merely reinforcing the project that many expatriate writers are accused of undertaking, which is of aiming to please the Western metropolitan reader by portraying their 'homes' as 'poisoned paradises' in order to make a strong bid for expatriation and assimilation.

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ⁱ This includes the interview titled 'A Real Mynah Called Jasper' conducted by Paul Sellars which is contained in the appendix of this edition of *Bone China*.

ⁱⁱ July 1983 (known today as 'Black July') marks the most devastating anti-Tamil pogroms and riots in the history of the island.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is interesting that Tearne's debut novel *Mosquito* (2008) painstakingly portrays Sri Lanka as a 'lost paradise'.