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Roma Tearne profile

By Julie Wheelwright

The Independent (2008)

Roma Tearne, *Bone China*, (Harper Press, £16.99, 400 pages, hardback)

Roma Tearne gives me a wry smile over our lunch at a local bistro near her Oxford home. 'You know,' she says leaning confidentially over the onion soup, 'You didn't ask me anything about the civil war.' For a moment I blanche before she laughs. 'What a relief, I get so tired of being asked about the obvious.' Sri Lankan-born, Tearne's family left Colombo in the early 1960s when the former British colony had already seen a series of violently-suppressed uprisings that left many civilians dead.

The conflict, which escalated into a full-blown in civil war between the Tamils and the Singhalese in 1983, is the background to her first novel, *Mosquito* and plays a central role in her latest book, *Bone China*. In both novels Tearne's characters are shaped by the war in their homeland. Whether she writes about a suicide-bomber, an immigrant torn apart by longing for the past or a Sri Lankan matriarch whose children flee the country, all are affected by forces beyond their control.

But Tearne has the gift of scratching beneath the surface of the big headline events to reveal the war's subtle and devastating effects on families. In *Bone China* she explores three generations of the de Silva family who see the decline of their tea plantation in the political limbo between independence after 1948 and the rise of a Singhalese government that imposes draconian language laws. Three of the de Silva sons head for Britain, their idealised land of refined literary culture.

What they encounter in 1960s London, however, is indifference and disappointment. As Savitha, wife of Thornton de Silva observes, 'We are nobody . . . we are displaced people.' Life for the family left back home in Colombo is little better as Grace and her alcoholic husband Aloysius struggle to survive against the increasing violence and hatred towards the Tamil minority. They pour all of their hopes into the next generation, their only grand child Anna-Meeka.

At the book launch for *Bone China* Tearne says she tackled the issue about the autobiographical elements in her novel head-on. 'The story of the de Silva family evolved from traces of real incidents and real events,' she says. 'The feelings my parents had of their terrible sense of loss stayed with them until they died.' For Tearne's parents who never

returned to Sri Lanka after their emigration in the 1960s, the civil war was played out in microcosm between their families.

Her Tamil father was a poet who wrote for a local newspaper on which her mother, a Singhalese, was a journalist. They secretly corresponded for years knowing that because of their religious and ethnic differences a relationship was forbidden. Finally they met and fell in love. ‘My mother eloped in the middle of the night in this very dramatic way,’ says Tearne, ‘My father met her on the station platform in Colombo wearing his dark glasses and looking devastating.’

But by crossing this divide, Tearne’s parents were made outcasts. ‘How naïve of them to think that their families would accept them,’ she says, a hand fluttering up into the spring sunshine. Her mother’s family disowned their daughter and her father demanded that after his death, she would be banned from coming within a mile of his grave. ‘My uncles, her brothers whom she adored would have nothing to do with her.’

The rupture even affected Tearne who as a child spoke English, rather than Singhalese or Tamil to her parents since it was their *lingua franca*. ‘I got caught right in the middle of it so neither side wanted to have

anything to do with me,' she says. Meanwhile Tearne's father was struggling to find work because he belonged to the Tamil minority.

'My father was being persecuted and both families hated each other and hated the fact that they had married.' Her parents decided to immigrate to Britain, the country of George Elliot, Yeats and hope. Or so they thought. She remembers vividly her father weeping when his UK visa was denied. 'I was seven or eight. He was this very beautiful man and tears were pouring down his face. He said, "I don't want Roma to grow up like this."'

But when the family finally left on a rough 21-day ocean crossing and their Tamil relatives following them over the years, the families remained unforgiving. 'My mother's family felt betrayed when she left. Not only had she married a Tamil and was bringing up a child speaking English who was going to the dogs but she left, like a rat sinking a ship,' says Tearne. 'She was therefore in their eyes, financially and emotionally better off.'

All of these elements are reflected in the fictional relationship between Savitha and Thornton who settle in Stockwell, South London and attempt to carve out a life. They feel a poignant loss of status and excluded from

that golden world of literary culture. But their ten year-old daughter Anna-Meeka who goes to the local state school, has little trouble fitting into British society. Tearne admits that this too reflected her own experience.

‘What I wanted more than anything else was straight hair, naturally I wanted it to be blonde and I wanted to speak with a cockney accent which I managed to do,’ says Tearne who now speaks a perfect RP, all traces of Estuary English long ago rinsed from her speech. The accent was just another way to fit in among her peers and their families who were incredibly accepting of her. ‘I thought Brixton was paradise – I really thought it was wonderful.’

Ironically Tearne saw her parents as ‘huge snobs’ who found the adjustment to living in Britain much more difficult. ‘I didn’t want to be like them,’ she says. ‘It was the old, old story of children rebelling but they took it so terribly personally because to get here had cost them so much.’

But Tearne did, inevitably, encounter more than just ‘open-hearted generosity’ as the child of immigrant parents. After graduating from the local comprehensive in Stockwell she took up a place at a teacher training

college in Rugby where she studied English. But when she wrote an essay on Charles Dickens, a lecturer accused her of plagiarism because, he said, ‘if I could write like that I wouldn’t be at this university, I’d be at Oxford’.

Tearne was so appalled that she dropped out and soon after married her husband Barrie Bullen, an English professor. It wasn’t until her youngest child was a toddler that she went back to university and rather than reading English, studied painting at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. Since then she has steadily sold her work, had exhibitions at the Royal Academy, won a prestigious Leverhulme Artist in Residence at the Ashmolean Museum and currently holds a fellowship in the visual arts at Brookes University in Oxford.

Recently Tearne has rented a studio down the road from her home where she plans to begin painting again. ‘Since I started writing fiction four years ago, I haven’t painted, she says. ‘I’m longing to physically touch the paint and to stretch a canvas.’ But, she adds wistfully, ‘I might not have anything there, I might not be able to work on my next novel and paint at the same time.’

But there is a strong connection for Tearne between the themes of loss, longing and the mysteries of memory that are central to her fiction and to her visual art. She is currently working on a project about found objects and a photography exhibition on the memory of the diplaced for Impressions Gallery in Bradford drawing on the south London neighbourhood where she grew up.

Back at Tearne's home, she produces an album of photographs which show the house in decay, the garden which was once her father's greatest pride, now blousy and over grown. It is a vivid and deeply sensual illustration of the loss and longing Tearne captures in her fiction. 'The writing and the visual work,' she says, 'they're constantly working together and it's obviously something I'm preoccupied with.'

Even *Bone China* grew from a painting and Tearne's desire to work on her themes in another media. A few months after her mother's death in 1993, she painted a woman with her face hidden and only the back of her head visible. One night, as she coming home, she saw her painting through the window. 'I thought, that's my mother and I cried for the first time since her death.' It was her mother's idealised image of home that contrasted sharply with her family's rejection and the violence of the civil war that moved her to begin writing.

But she set aside this first story aside and instead began *Mosquito,* a novel about a middle-aged Sri Lankan writer who falls in love with a 17 year-old artist. Her first novel, set on the island where Nulani, the young artist has lost her father and where a young orphaned boy is training as suicide bomber, dealt much more directly with the civil war.

For Tearne, however, there is something more elemental at work than just the way that political violence and racial hatred has distorted lives. ‘I’d already discovered from writing *Mosquito* that what I’m really interested in is the slippage between the gaps of daily interaction – the things we don’t see – and the half-hidden suppressed truths, the lies we tell ourselves.’

As a child she felt constantly in the dark, having to guess at the real source of the pain that her parents carried with them. Even now, she says, her parents' families in Sri Lankan stubbornly cling to their sense of betrayal. After *Mosquito* was published last year she rang her Singhalese relatives to tell them. 'There was complete and utter indifference,' she says. 'The bitterness is still pretty endemic.'

Roma Tearne biography

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Roma Tearne's parents, a journalist and a poet, emigrated from Colombo, Sri Lanka with their ten daughter Roma to South London in 1964. On graduating from Stockwell Manor Comprehensive Tearne attended a teacher training college in Rugby before marrying Barrie Bullen, an English professor at Reading University. After training as a painter and completing her MA at Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, her work has been exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts and in 2002 she became a Leverhulme Artist in Residence at Oxford's the Ashmolean Museum and is currently a fellow at Brookes University Oxford. Her first novel *Mosquito* was short-listed for the Costa First Novel Award and the 2008 Kiriyama Prize. A mother of three, she lives with her husband in Oxford. Her third novel will be published next year.

Julie Wheelwright is the programme director of the MA in Creative Writing Nonfiction at City University.

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