

The Geopsychic Hyphen: Spectral Homeland Pull in *Brixton*

***Beach* by Roma Tearne**

Ashmi K. Raj

Research Scholar, Reg No: 241131102038

Department of English and Research Centre

Nesamony Memorial Christian College

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli

Marthandam, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr. Tibi Thomas R.S

Associate Professor of English

Department of English and Research Centre

Nesamony Memorial Christian College

Marthandam, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Roma Tearne's novel *Brixton Beach* explores the “Geopsychic Hyphen”, which is a mental pull of the diasporic people towards their lost homeland, even amid its harsh realities. The Sri Lankan Tamils displaced by the Sri Lankan civil war had no other option but to settle in foreign lands. This paper examines how the characters in the novel who fled Sri Lanka because of the conflict live with haunting memories of their homeland in Brixton. While acknowledging Vijay Mishra's theory of diasporic memory, this paper prioritises the geopsychic hyphen as its core analytical lens. The study highlights the invisible pull of homeland memories and the physical exile into a mental trauma and connection. It further traces gendered trauma as it passes across generations, highlighting intergenerational transmission. It shows the women's quiet endurance and creative outburst, revealing the intensity of the homeland pull. It also portrays how art is

being used as a tool to portray the geopsychic hyphen, offering self-expression amidst parental breakdown and cultural loss. On the whole, the study takes diasporic research into a new platform by focusing on geopsychic hyphen, revealing how literature showcases the spectral pull towards the homeland and personal identity.

Keywords: Geopsychic Hyphen, Sri Lankan Civil War, Trauma, Art, Diaspora, Homeland.

The Sri Lankan civil war was the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). During British rule from 1796 to 1948, Sri Lanka was called Ceylon and it was a home to Sinhalese. During that time, Britishers brought Tamil people in rover to work in tea estates in Ceylon. Ceylon got independence in 1948, and in 1972, Ceylon was transformed into the Republic of Sri Lanka. According to David Feith, two waves of Tamils were brought to Sri Lanka. The first wave of Tamils was brought during the war between Sinhalese and Chola Tamil. And, the second wave of Tamils were brought as laborers. However, the conflict began when the Sinhalese became the majority and the Tamils became the minority. During British rule, more universities were constructed in the Northern Sri Lanka, around Jaffna. So, in education, the Tamils outshone the Sinhalese. After Independence, new laws were framed by the Sinhalese government favoring the Sinhalese. More laws were implemented by the Sinhalese government to curb the rights of the Tamils. These unsatisfactory experiences led to the establishment of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who fought against Sinhala soldiers. The twenty six years long conflict broke out on July 23, 1983, when thirteen Sinhalese soldiers were killed by LTTE. There was a series of wars and over one lakh people died, and more than eight lakh people displaced to other parts of the world especially to the UK, Canada and Australia.

The novel weaves around Alice, who has a Sri Lankan mother and Tamil father. She grew up in Sri Lanka near the beaches and the sea became the part of her daily life and identity.

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka gave rise to the Civil War and the half ethnic people are the one who was pointed out by both the Singhalese and the Tamils. Alice's mother Sita, being a Singhalese married Stantley, who is a Tamil clerk. This cross ethnic marriage made Sita to face a lot of struggles, as her husband is a "Tamil". The stigma of being a Tamil and the violence faced was understood by Alice even as a child. Even though they were in Jaffna, Sita advised Alice to speak in Sinhalese, just to protect her from violence. When Alice's aunt May married Namil, she heard an elder saying "Aunt May is so lucky that Namil is a Singhalese... Not like your dada" (37). This made Alice understand that being Tamil brings unwanted issues to them. As she is a half Tamil, she is being marginalized even at school. She had heard her friend saying "Your mother married a Tamil, that was the problem" (86). Sita faced extreme violence when she lost her unborn baby, as she was denied treatment by the Singhalese doctor, pointing husband is a Tamil. All these incidents made the family flee Sri Lanka. The novels possess the autobiographical elements of the writer herself. The author, Roma Tearne is a Sri Lankan born artist and also a writer, who lives in England. She moved to South London in 1964, with her Singhalese mother and Tamil father. She says that she visited her old home for research on a new work and the house brought her nostalgia about her past. That inspired her to write about a woman who searches for her lost past. She along with her art work has written books like *The Road to Urbino*, *The Swimmer*, *Bone China*, *Mosquito*. The paper analyses geopsychic hyphen, which is the homeland pull among the refugees.

Geopsychic hyphen refers to a conceptual framework in postcolonial and diasporic literature, which describes the psychological and emotional bonds tied to geographic displacement. This psychological term "geopsychic" is derived from the words "geo", meaning place, and "psychic", meaning mind. It examines the interconnectedness of geography and the psyche and also analyses migration trauma and spatial cognition in literary texts. The word "hyphen" refers to the liminal space in identity fracture, representing the in-between space

occupied by people who have multiple cultural identities. Sri Lankan migrants in Britain experience a persistent mental tie to their homeland, landscapes, and memories, etc., even as they adapt to the new country. They often struggle with profound mental pre-migration trauma. They also face a major challenge, namely, the persistent emotional pull toward their homeland. This “homeland pull” manifests as nostalgia, grief, and geopsychic longing. These mental conflicts give rise to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among migrants. In the novel *Brixton Beach*, Stanley, Sita, and Alice move to London with the expectation of beginning a new life and building a new future together. However, all three have ties to their homeland in different ways. Even though they are physically present in London, their minds are wound around Sri Lanka. Raja, who is the brother of Stanley, works only to support the LTTE financially. Even though he has been working in London for years, his mind is deeply rooted in his homeland and also to the freedom of his own people. But Alice's situation was entirely different. She was the one who had dreamt a lot about her life in Britain. But in Brixton, she couldn't live the life she expected. Her heart was deeply rooted to her homeland, the sea, driftwood etc. The lines “She has travelled the ocean and tried to understand this alien place, but she was still struggling, she thought in pain, astonished by the years of effort (345)” and ““I've haven't been back for thirty-two years” she admitted “I’ve been carrying that stretch of beach around with me for a long time”” (369), deeply shows the geopsychic elements. Even though the years have passed, their minds still wander on the shores of their own land. Alice found happiness in painting the elements of sea and her homeland, as it reminds of her roots and her grandpa Bee.

When analyzing the concept through the lens of geopsychic hyphen, the diasporic theory by Vijay Mishra is inevitable. According to Mishra, diasporic memory is a mental emotional construct where displaced subjects reconstruct an imagery homeland through nostalgia, memory and trauma, rather than mere physical migration. “The fundamental

rootedness in Sri Lanka was experienced as something essential to who they are, cannot be removed, and remains with them despite their bad experiences in Sri Lanka” (Jane 46). This links them to their homeland, and makes them realize that they are split from their homeland. They build a “dream home”, full of nostalgic elements from their homeland. In the novel, Alice says “To be an immigrant is to be sandwiched between two worlds” (376). Diasporic memory is not just remembering facts- it's the emotional pieces of homeland that stick around after moving. Alice, in the novel, named the home “Brixton Beach”, just to remind the childhood days she has spent on the shores of Sri Lanka. The house reminds of her grandparents' home back in Sri Lanka. She even painted her bedroom with deep aquamarine turquoise paint which reflects the nostalgia which she carries in her mind.

.... you put it to your ear and all you heard were the half-understood sounds of the sea: waves, voices, the wind. The walls of the kitchen were hungry with a series of small paintings. All of them were very beautiful. All were of the sea.

“But the sea is everywhere!” he said in amazement. “I grew up by it”, said Alice. “It's inside me, I suppose, wherever I go. The horizons, the greys. (374)

It could also be found that, due to forced migration some may feel geopsychic rupture. Geopsychic rupture is the psychological disconnection of an individual with a specific place, often triggered by forced migration or war. Usually, the geopsychic rupture is the result of extreme geopsychic hyphen. Sita, during the initial days of her migration had a feeling of geopsychic hyphen. It got exceeded at a point and finally it reached a state of geopsychic rupture. The loss of her parents, the birth of her nephew or the pathetic life of her sister did not move Sita. She turned completely silent and lived in solitude till her end.

Integrated diasporic memory of Vijay Mishra is also one of the concepts which is associated with diasporic memory. It defines the transmission of collective trauma or transmission of the effects of trauma across generations which often defines the hybrid identity

The generation which follows experiences spectral echoes, which creates an anxiety towards the country which they have never known. The extreme anxiety may lead to hatred towards the country. At this point, the hyphen gets broken and the non-hyphenated mentality blooms. Alice and Ravi are the characters who get affected by intergenerational diasporic memory. The profound silence of Sita due to geopsychic rupture, and the separation of her parents due to the influence of the war affected Alice. She chose art as a medium to dump her trauma. Meanwhile, when Alice became a mother, she unknowingly tried to pass the geopsychic hyphenated mentality to her son Ravi. But the constant pestering of his mom irritated him. He admitted that he has nothing to do with an unknown country, and he claims himself as “English”.

“You’re insane”, he groaned. “You and your bloody memories have nothing to do with me! I belong here”.

At other times he would shout:

‘The people in that place make me sick. Your country has nothing to do with me. Don't you understand. I'm English.’ (363)

Diasporic art plays an important role in connecting the past with the present experience of the refugees. It acts as a bridge to the diaspora to hold on to their cultural heritage. Art acts as a tool to express their suppressed trauma and longing for their country. It also acts as a medium to give life to the past memory which remains lifeless in their mind. “Mostly the diasporic artists use visual symbols, colors, and themes to reflect the heritage of the community and evoke the memory of their homeland” (Jamil 34). They incorporate their cultural references in their artwork and they create a sense of continuity and belonging. Jamil states that, artists incorporate symbols unique to their culture, such as sacred plants, traditional patterns or religious motifs, to represent their heritage (34). The painting of Alice which incorporated the sea is the perfect example of diasporic representation through art. This art often transforms personal memories of the artists and their collective experience into a universal language and

this concept about their homeland can be transmitted to their audiences. Alice learnt painting and sculpture from her grandfather Bee and even from her childhood, she had seen him painting on Sri Lankan landscape. From her grandfather, she has possessed the talent of painting. After migrating to Sri Lanka, she favored art over words to express her breakdown in a new country. When there was a competition in school, she made a sculpture named “Catamaran” which expressed her geopsychic hyphen. It portrays that even though years have passed, she is still living in the memory of her country. Even the newspaper announced it by understanding her insights.

.... Although the Ceylonese girl has been living in Britain for four years, her memories of her homeland are still vivid. ‘The Catamarans on the beach were very old,’ she says. Wrinkled and scratched, the wood shows glimpses of painting and repainting over many years. There are a lot of stories in the woods,’ Alice adds, ‘From years and years ago’ (280)

By analyzing the novel ‘Brixton Beach’, it could be concluded that the novelists have masterfully portrayed the geopsychic hyphen that binds the Sri Lankan diasporic characters to their war-torn homeland. By analyzing through the concepts of Vijay Mishra, it could be understood that the novel expresses geopsychic memory, which reveals the spectral homeland pull towards their own country. Also, it is found that the extreme geopsychic memory can lead to geopsychic rupture. Moreover, the novel shows intergenerational trauma transmission, which shows endurance of women and also expression of hardship and trauma. The novel also portrays art as a healing machinery and also the spectral pull of a diasporic individual towards their own country.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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