

This is a pre print version of the following article:

Reconfiguring Place and Identity in Roma Tearne's Narratives of War and Refuge / Buonanno, Giovanna. - 33:(2014), pp. 249-262. [10.4324/9781315884370]

Routledge

*Terms of use:*

The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

07/05/2026 03:22

(Article begins on next page)

## Reconfiguring place and identity in Roma Tearne's narratives of war and refuge

*Giovanna Buonanno*

In the fiction of Sri Lankan English writer and visual artist Roma Tearne the journey of migration undertaken by several characters from war-torn Sri Lanka to Britain, in the hope of finding sanctuary, mirrors the author's own migratory trajectory and experience of displacement.

Born to a Sinhalese mother and Tamil father, as a small child in the early 1960s Tearne left her native island "with all its tropical beauty" (Tearne 2009:83), as unrest originating in the conflict between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority intensified and escalated into full-blown civil war. As Minoli Salgado has pointed out, the literature produced by either resident or diasporic Sri Lankan writers in English has been shaped by the fraught history of post independence Sri Lanka, that since the 1950s has seen "the dramatic decline of Ceylonese or multiethnic Sri Lankan nationalism in favour of Sinhala linguistic nationalism along with the sharpening of Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism" (Salgado 2007: 9), leading to complex ethnic divisions and an armed conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils which was officially ended only in 2009.

The flight from Sri Lanka is often evoked in Tearne's fiction as a traumatic moment of rupture, generating a deeply distressing quest for home and belonging in her characters who, as they struggle to forge their new, mobile identities and settle in Britain, constantly question the eligibility of their host country to offer them refuge and provide them with a new home.

Tearne's body of work reads as an ongoing, complex reflection on pressing issues such as identity, belonging, home, loss and refuge: as her stories unfold between past and present and across continents and multiple locations, "the recurrent themes are the devastating impact of the war on domestic lives and the redemptive power of art" (Hickling 2009 online ).

In her debut novel *Mosquito*, Tearne depicts the violence of the civil war – inscribed forcefully in the title which recalls the deployment by Tamil insurrectionists, known as Tamil Tigers, of "mosquitoes" or female suicide bombers - which provides the backdrop for the unfolding of a tale of love, loss and reparation. Theo Samarajeeva, the protagonist of the story, a middle-aged writer returning to the island after having lived many years in Britain, falls in love with Nalini, a young and talented painter but their union is constantly threatened by the dramatic conflict disrupting the island.

In *Bone China* Tearne writes a family saga that was admittedly inspired by her own family history (Weelwright 2008, online review) and spans two countries and three generations, privileging the perspective of the female members of the De Silva family, an upper middle-class Catholic Tamil family. The first part of the novel is set in Sri Lanka and centres around the matriarch Grace, who,

under the growing threat posed by the civil war strives to keep the family together and preserve the decaying family home, in the face of progressive economic hardship and social decline. In the second part, the narrative focuses on one of the De Silva's boys, Thornton, and his wife Savitha, as they struggle to make a home in Britain for their little daughter Anna Meeka. In the English part of the story the author partly retraces the early years of her own family as newly arrived immigrants in London, as she offers glimpses of Savitha's life in the metropolis, where she feels isolated and is often overcome by homesickness. Loss and nostalgia are overpowering feelings and are tempered by the healing power of memory: Savitha recreates a Sri Lankan atmosphere in her flat and preserves her customs by cooking with typical Sri Lankan ingredients whose "smells were of home" (Tearne 2008: 191) and takes pleasure in handling the precious bone china representing the family heirloom, that she had been given by her mother in law on the eve of her departure for Britain:

She went back to pouring tea into their lovely bone-cups. But it was not simple. Later on even though she was busy, there was plenty of time for her homesickness to return. She sat working... a small exotic seabird, stranded on a narrow spit of land. Her wings closed.(Tearne 2008: 214)

The papery bone china magnifies Savitha's own vulnerability and symbolizes the fragile existence of displaced people who resemble delicate, brittle objects

Holding the tea-rose cups high up to the light, Savitha felt as though she was cradling her own fragile existence. Fiercely, stacking the lily-of-the-valley tureens, she decided, I will never stop using them.(Tearne 2008: 214)

In *Brixton Beach*, Tearne's third novel published in 2009, Alice Fonseka is a sculptor living in London and is tragically caught up in the bombings of 7 July 2005 which Tearne revisits with sharp and excruciating details, ultimately offering a reflection on the impossibility of finding refuge in England, as already anticipated in her previous novels. Through a series of flashbacks, the novel moves away from the contemporary London setting and recounts Alice's early life in Ceylon detailing the events leading up to her parents' decision to move to London. As a child on the eve of her departure from Ceylon towards her new life, Alice is gently introduced by her doting, artistic grandfather Bee to the challenge of making a new home in England the face of uprooting and displacement:

‘Listen, Putha,’ he had told her, trying very hard to be fair...‘this is your first home, you were born here. That’s a powerful thing, don’t ever forget it. But it may not be your last, you understand. And that’s all right, too. It will be beautiful in England even though the difference will surprise you. You’ll just have to search for it.’ (Tearne 2009: 82)

And Alice’s search for an inclusive sense of home is mainly assisted by her art, as she manages to conflate the apparently very separate worlds of England and Sri Lanka in her London home through her art, fulfilling her grandfather’s prophecy that Ceylon would never leave her.

In *Brixton Beach* Tearne juxtaposes the horrors of Sri Lanka she had escaped from as a child, and present day terror, thereby setting the plight of diasporic, displaced people against a broader global framework of contemporary migrancy, exile and global political unrest, a trait that is distinctive in this novel and is arguably strengthened in *The Swimmer*, her following novel published in 2010, which will be the subject of more in-depth analysis in this article.

From this brief overview of her writings, it could be argued that Tearne’s fiction as a whole belongs, on the one hand, to an expanding, but already established tradition of British-Asian and South Asian diasporic writing in English engaging with postcolonial migrancy and the British colonial legacy. Within this literary trend, women writers have articulated in their work the transnational experience of South Asian women in the diaspora and tackled from a distinct gender perspective crucial issues such as patriarchy, racism, domestic violence, generational clashes and the quest for “home”. As a challenge to the invisibility of South Asian diasporic women on both the social and the literary stage, their work reflects an ongoing search for “alternative homes or makeshift shelters (...) enabling invisible imaginative spaces and histories to emerge”, as Susheila Nasta has argued (2000: 84).

Tearne’s work is also part of the emerging and equally thriving canon of Sri Lankan literature in English which has only more recently began to attract sustained scholars’ attention<sup>1</sup>. However, by capturing the complexity of war and refuge in her writing, as she strives to intersect the histories of contemporary England and Sri Lanka, Tearne’s narratives clearly usher in a “passage to globalism” (Roy 2013), reflecting the complex relationship between Britain as a former colonial power and the formation of diasporic British Asian identities, against the backdrop of contemporary global mobility, while raising questions of individual agency within a global framework.

---

<sup>1</sup> On Sri Lankan English literature see in particular Salgado 2006 and Ranasingha 2013. Tearne herself has offered a reflection on the difficult task of both resident and diasporic Sri Lankan writers to engage with the fraught history of their country in an article for *the Independent* published 7 May 2010

Tearne's choice of confronting the interrelated, vexed questions of migrancy, refuge and hospitality in the context of an increasingly intolerant Europe, facing the impact of forced migration in the age of globalization, emerges in the novel *The Swimmer*. This work can be read as an exploration of changing visions of Englishness and England at a time of growing intolerance towards and fear of the illegal immigrants wishing to claim asylum in the country. Over the last decades England has reflected from its insular, somewhat off-centred position "the European crisis" of Fortress Europe that Sandra Ponzanesi describes in terms of the erosion of "a self explanatory identity" "rooted in (...) increased postcolonial awareness (...) and the rise of new forms of racism. (2012: 675)

The crisis of Europe has been critically investigated by writers and artists who have dealt with contemporary forms of global migrancy: as Gabriele Griffin noted a decade ago in her study on contemporary black and Asian British women playwrights, writers who had long been concerned with questions of migrancy and diaspora, started to be progressively drawn to stories revolving around refugees and asylum seekers, bringing to the public's attention the stories of those who are "living diaspora now". Griffin addressed the production of gendered narratives on stage featuring asylum seekers and refugees, as proof of the commitment of black and Asian women playwrights to reflecting in their works

the changing reality of migration histories and diasporic experiences, [...] [and the ] experience of uncertainty, humiliation, invasion of privacy and process of abjection that the refugee/asylum seeker undergoes. (2003: 224)

Since the turn of the millennium a sizeable number of works produced in Britain has contributed to the literary and visual representations of refugees and asylum seekers, testifying to a steady engagement of artists and writers with the public debate on and fear of - allegedly bogus - refugees invading Britain/Europe, by dramatising "the anguish, the pain and loss, as much as the discovery of new possibilities caused by the experiences of migration, exile and flight" (Schlote 2012: 78)

As already suggested by Griffin, refugee characters feature prominently in the works of writers of bicultural background, like Tearne herself, who have largely contributed to draw the contours of a multicultural literary Britain, as well as to "the internationalization of English literature" as suggested by Bruce King (2003)<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Schlote (2012: 78) lists a number of recent works across various media and literary genres dealing with the plight of refugees. Among a growing body of fictional works on this issue by established black and Asian British writers see in particular Tanika Gupta, *Sanctuary* (2002), Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea* (2001), Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore* (2003) and Benjamin Zephaniah, *Refugee Boy* (2001).

These works can be read as indictment of both the harshness and inherent contradictions of immigration and asylum laws in Britain, as well as an attempt to take issue with the political and legislative context of Britain with reference to the position of refugees, particularly as regulated in the late 1990s: this was the decade paraded as “Cool Britannia”, a time of supposedly proactive multicultural policies that, however, also managed to crystallize the debate around the figure of the asylum seeker by triggering media panic on the tide of unwanted, destitute others pouring in the country.

Imogen Tyler has pointed out that the number of deportations increased dramatically at the end of the 1990s and the conditions of those living in the detention/removal centres scattered in the country were undeniably worsening, in the face of New Labour’s rhetoric of rebranding Britain for the new millennium as a welcoming country. As she suggests:

Each year, the British Government holds increasing numbers of asylum-seekers in dehumanizing detention facilities in breach of numerous international laws. (...) British asylum laws have produced an ‘illegal’ population who are denied the status of subject-citizen. The experiences of detention depicted in humanitarian reports reveal a limited and edited view of this ‘abject diaspora – a deportspora’ (Nyers, 2003: 1070), the underside of the cosmopolitan face of Britain – that ‘world in one island’ which the British government is so keen to capitalize upon and brand. (2006: 187)

Tyler’s scathing critique of the treatment of refugees in Blair’s Britain is instrumental to mapping out the emergence of Fortress England and locating it precisely at the moment of the international launch of an inclusive, tolerant image of the nation under New Labour, marketing Britain as “one of the most exciting places in the planet, the world in one island” (qtd in Tyler 2006: 185). However, the conundrum of British hospitality under the New Labour administration emerges in a 2004 speech by Tony Blair when the Prime Minister claims that “we will neither be *fortress Europe*, nor will we be an *open house*” (qtd in Gibson 2006: 694)

It is interesting to notice that at the turn of the millennium, a substantial body of works emerged as a response to the rebranding of England as a beacon of modernity, contributing to reveal pockets of exclusions within the “world in one island” and investigating the tension between “fortress Europe” and “an open house” As critics have argued, works produced at the start of the millennium suggested ways in which the fear of refugees invading Britain welded with the panic and mounting intolerance triggered by the 9/11 events (see Gibson 2006, Ponzanesi 2012).

In literary texts, as well as in films and visual art produced as a reaction to the New Labour moot, contradictory rhetoric of tolerance and inclusiveness, refugees and asylum seekers are portrayed as figures that are posited beyond the law of the nation. They embody new subaltern subjects, often confined to temporary and undefined internment in a “camp” situated beyond or in the proximity of the national borders, in those no man’s lands or new incarnations of the colonial “contact zones” (Pratt 1991) that reflect the residents’ insecure and fragile condition; or, as in the case of Tearne’s *the Swimmer*, they live hiding in precarious dwelling, shunning society for fear of deportation. In this way, they illuminate the “half-life” lived in the interstitial spaces of a “disseminated nation” that, in the words of Homi Bhabha, emerge out of “the scattering of the people [...] in the nations of others” (Bhabha 1990: 291).

Seen in this light, these narratives project an alternative vision of the nation and of national identity from its margins while elaborating on the insecure, unstable condition of migrant/exiled characters. The pain of exile along with the hope for a new home and identity is evoked by the characters’ negotiation with the loss of legal and geopolitical reference points and by highlighting the way they are reduced to what philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life” (1998) In the exposure of the bare life of refugees, literary inscriptions and visual representations are crucial, as they on the one hand, draw attention to the dehumanized conditions of living in a state of suspension, while on the other tend to provide a counternarrative of the widespread depiction of “the tide threatening to breach national borders” (Tyler 2006: 192).

Narratives centring on refugees often revolve around some recurring motifs that will be teased out in the following analysis of Tearne’s *The Swimmer*, such as the question of the ethical responsibility of hospitality, the relationship between hosts and strangers and the ways in which the idea of nation, home and belonging become increasingly problematic for both arrivants and “hosts”. Another recurring motif is represented by the critique of both the role of institutions and the handling of human lives, problematizing the idea of England as a desirable destination and a safe haven.

Furthermore, they offer a revision of space and place through the presence of the “infrahuman”, who is stripped bare of any status or security and therefore becomes a “disquieting element”, “breaking the identity between the human and the citizen” (Agamben 2000: 21). The locations explored are often quintessentially English settings, such as the secluded spaces of the English countryside or the cosmopolitan London setting, embodying the epitome of contemporary metropolis of which refugee narratives represent the “underside”, in sharp contrast to “glossy tourist representations” (Gibson 2006: 699).

Ian Baucom has reflected on the “identity endowing property of place”(1999: 4) and the way Englishness has long been constructed in terms of local narratives before being displaced by racial

narratives. In his critical exploration of Englishness and the locations of identity the critic suggests that:

Englishness has been generally understood to reside within some type of imaginary, abstract or actual locale, and to mark itself upon that locale's familiars. Over the past 150 years the struggles to define, defend, or reform Englishness have, consequently, been understood as struggles to control, possess, order and dis-order the nation's and empire's spaces" (Baucom 1999: 4)

Contemporary refugees account arguably contribute to mapping out "spaces of instability within the geographies of Englishness" (Baucom 1999:4) and show that a locale endowed with the nation's character is mutable as it is "occupied by living subjects as they visit, inhabit, or pass through it, leave their estranging marks upon it (...) and in so doing reveal England as continuously discontinuous with itself." (1999: 5).

The setting of refugee narratives often involve areas that function as borders and mark out the nation's limits. These liminal spaces bear the imprint of "non-places" as defined by sociologist Marc Augé who argues that non-places (non-lieux) produced by capitalist "supermodernity" lack personality and identity and are devoid of any meaningful human relations: they function as "transit points and temporary abodes" proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (...) where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing (...) a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary" (Augé 1995: 78) Non places comprise places sprung out of capitalist supermodernity, such as shopping malls, airports, hotel chains, that is places where individuals mainly perform their role as customers or passengers, but they also include peripheral locations, such as border Customs, refugee camps in which as Ponzanesi suggests "migrants and refugees are contained before they get, or are refused, full access to society with its rules of hospitality and exclusion" (2012: 676). As she further argues, "these non-places are zones more of stasis than of transit, of entrapment more than consumption, and of exploitation more than resistance" (Ponzanesi 2012: 689).

Refugee narratives prominently feature non-places bearing the mark of solitary anonymity and, as will be shown with reference to *the Swimmer*, as they are filled with the presence of refugees, non places become the sites of "instability within Englishness", Baucom describes, but also, as Ponzanesi suggest, third spaces that "manage to undo notions of belonging and hospitality from within, claiming a space and a place (...) by transforming the outsider/insider relations and making of those non-places locations for alternative belonging". (2012: 689)

The complexity of seeking refuge and granting hospitality along with the dehumanizing “hostipitality”<sup>3</sup> of institutions dealing with unwanted guests/strangers as enemies, emerges forcefully in Tearne’s novel, which also dramatizes the tension between space and place and calls for a redefinition of identity and place: in *the Swimmer*, unlike the author’s previous novels which favour the metropolitan setting of London, often offset by the (memories of) tropical locations in Sri Lanka, the main setting is the little town of Orford, a coastal town in Suffolk surrounded by countryside, “a sleepy village of some beauty abutting the marshlands on one side and the estuary on the other” (*Swimmer* 3).

This distinctive location whose signature is fluidity and permeability, as it is surrounded by the marshlands and the sea, allows the writer to explore the interrelation between identity and place in a close-knit community, as it struggles to redefine itself under the pressure posed by the arrival of illegal immigrants and the mounting intolerance of the local residents. In a short appendix to the novel, Tearne reveals that this choice of location for her story was the result of several trips to the area: inspired by a collection of old photographs of the place, she then nurtured the idea of braiding together the past of this rural part of England with its present (Tearne 2010b: 6-7). In the novel the present of the area is increasingly shaped by the arrival of foreigners, illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, in a way that resonates with Baucom’s sense of locale and changing landscapes of Englishness mentioned earlier.

What comes across as a quintessentially English, bucolic and secluded area in the heart of middle England that has on the whole resisted progress and yet faced a sense of both social and economic decline, is seen by Tearne under an “accented” light as she tries to capture the ‘interstitial’, simultaneously global and local nature of the area<sup>4</sup>. Her portrayal of rural England as an accented hybridized location, ultimately succeeds in disrupting a homogeneous narrative of locality and Englishness, while accounting for the emergence of new forms of racism, predicated on

---

<sup>3</sup> “Hostipitality” is a term coined by Jacques Derrida, combining the notions of ‘hostility’ and ‘hospitality’ pointing to the the aporetic nature of all acts of hospitality. According to Derrida, genuine hospitality is impossible to grant as the very notion of hospitality requires one to be the ‘master’ of the house, country or nation and hence in control. The host in order to be in the condition to be hospitable, must have the power to host (see Derrida 2000)

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘accented’ was used by Hamid Naficy in his 2001 study *Accented Cinema*, to define films produced by exilic and diasporic filmmakers as an aesthetic response to their experience of displacement, migration or diaspora. Naficy borrows the word accented from linguistics: an accent identifies the speaker as a foreigner or from a different social or educational background, and therefore becomes a mark of personality and identity. In Naficy’s work the accent is related to geographical displacement. The common denominator of accented films is that they reflect the cultural alterity and ‘double consciousness’ (Naficy 2001, 22) of their authors. Accented films tend to blend aesthetic and stylistic influences from the cinematic traditions of the filmmaker’s both home and adopted country. In the realm of cinema and by extension in that of fiction, the accent and the accented perspective of the writer/filmmaker shapes the structure of the text in terms of narrative, visual style, characters, plot and point of view (see Naficy 2001).

xenoracism, as suggested by Sarah Gibson. Drawing on the work of A. Sivanandan, Gibson points out that

“[the] move from the ‘black’ immigrant to the figure of the asylum seeker mirrors the movement from a racism predicated upon biological difference to a ‘meta-racism’ predicated upon cultural difference, to the current form of ‘xeno-racism’ or ‘asylophobia’. This move away from symbolic differences (racialised bodies and figures) to economic or cultural difference is concurrent with Britain’s appropriation of (some) others’ strange(r)ness as its own in its re-branding as a multicultural nation.(...)This new racism demonises the figure of the asylum seeker as an uninvited and unwelcome stranger. (Gibson 2006: 697)

The xenoracist side to Orford is described in the opening section of the novel that sets the social context and envelops the story in an atmosphere of mystery and fear as calves and dogs in local farms are found mutilated or with their throats slit and houses are broken into. These events are investigated by the police and covered by the press in ways that lead the local residents to believe the newly arrived immigrants in the area - already labelled as potential terrorists- to be the prime suspects, as the conversation between one of the main characters of the story, the writer Maria (Ria) Robinson and Heather, another resident of Orford who reveals her fears, shows: “First there’s the three calves” she said, ticking them off on her fingers (...) and now more animals have been killed. It’s obvious isn’t it? There must be a terror cell somewhere”, and even the more sceptical Ria admits feeling uneasy (*Swimmer*: 66-7)

Against this backdrop of social unrest outlined at the opening of the novel, *The Swimmer* chronicles the short-lived experience of Ben Chinnah, an illegal immigrant stranded in Orford while waiting to claim refugee status in Britain. Ben is a twenty-five year old Sri Lankan doctor of Tamil origin who, having fled from his native country and having undertaken a long, perilous overland journey across Asia and Europe, escapes a near death by asphyxiation cramped in a lorry on the last leg of his journey of hope and is first stranded on the English southern coast, as recounted in the following passage

“He was frequently conscious of not wanting to die. Which was not the same as wanting to live, he said (...) England had come to him in this way. Cold air filled with the smell of seawater. He remembered breathing deeply, thinking he would never again take breathing for granted. And, turning, he had seen the sea” (*Swimmer*: 62)

Ben arrives in Suffolk where “he had found a farm and *burrowed down* in one of the outbuildings” (*Swimmer* 43, my italics). While burrowing down like an animal he is found by a farmer who offers him shelter and the promise of assistance with his asylum application in exchange of labour in the fields, picking sweetcorn. Shortly afterwards, Ben befriends Ria, a middle-aged writer who has estranged herself from family and society and has relocated in the area, a place that is full of nostalgic memories of the times when as a child, she used to spend her summer vacations with her relatives who lived there. Ria lives in a suggestive, albeit run-down house called “Eel House”, located on the edge of the village and separated by it by a river, which reinforces her sense of aloofness and isolation: as a single, childless woman earning her life as a poet she does not fit easily in the fairly traditional village life of Orford and is herself seen as non-belonging. Ria first catches a glimpse of “the swimmer”, initially mistaken for some kind of big animal, as Ben regularly takes to swim in the river near her house and eventually steals into Ria’s house in search of food.

Ben initially offers to do small odd jobs for Ria in the house in exchange for playing her piano and eventually they engage in a short lived, intense relationship until Ben is mistaken for a terrorist, chased and shot. He dies as a “infrahuman” as his application is still being processed and his asylum claim still pending, lost in the mire of English bureaucracy

Around the somewhat elusive figure of Ben “the swimmer”, Tearne weaves a multifocal narrative, as the novel is divided into three sections each narrated in the first person by a female character: the lover Ria, the mother Anula who arrives in Britain from Sri-Lanka after her son’s death and finally the daughter Lydia who carries the narrative forward to an unspecified time in the future, some sixteen years after the main tragic events retraced in the first two sections of the novel.

The use of multiple first person narrators as a narrative technique emphasizes the function of writing as testimony, strengthened also by the fact that each chapter reads as a diary entry, and favours a fragmented chronicle of the events through the interpolation of various voices that disrupt a unitary and linear story plot and point of view. As a formal technique, it is often deployed by writers balancing past and present and striving to piece together the fragmented and fragile lives of migrant displaced characters. Furthermore, the choice of a female perspective is consistent with Tearne’s work as a British Asian woman writer and with her previous novels which investigate issues of migrancy and belonging from a distinct female perspective.

The three sections also manage to reinforce the link between place and identity, as Ria’s narrative frames the English part of Ben’s story, whereas Anula’s retraces parts of Ben’s life in Sri Lanka culminating in his decision to escape to England and welds it together with his final destination and resting place on the Suffolk coast. The closing section revolves around Lydia’s realization of her

mixed-race heritage and the acknowledgment of her role in branding together two distant and yet intertwined stories, ultimately projecting Ben's and Ria's shared legacy into a utopian future.

In the section narrated from Ria's point of view, the author, by taking up the perspective of a middle-class educated English woman, focuses on the effect of displacement and migration on English indigenous characters. Ria, having entered in a relationship with Ben, gradually awakens to the life of migrants and refugees and first admits that before then, "she had never taken much notice of the things written about asylum seekers", but at the same time as she remembers being on a train journey and seeing a group of field workers in the distance somehow she had "felt they were all immigrants" (*Swimmer*: 64-5). Her acknowledgment of the bare life of the invisible others is a first step towards her offer of unconditional hospitality to Ben, that goes beyond the limits of law, rights and duty (Derrida 2000). Ria's narrative obliquely hosts Ben's in the form of reported, fragmented memories that shed light on Ben's life as a refugee crossing continents and reveal his fragility. As "the swimmer" he embodies instability and doom that is reinforced by the fact that he has almost no voice and only limited agency in the novel, with only a few short instances within the narrative where he offers glimpses of his precarious life and the reasons for having to flee his country: "It was becoming dangerous for Tamil men of my age to stay. The insurgents were rounding them up for their army. (...) So I left". (*Swimmer*: 44). . Ben "had witnessed too many things. I knew how the innocent civilians were treated, how medical aid was withheld from the hospital doctors. (...) I had seen too much and because of this our family was marked. It wasn't easy for me to leave" (*Swimmer*:59). And having finally escaped from Sri Lanka where "too many people have been killed, too many people have been left behind...", he is aware that "If I'm sent back, I will be killed (...) I am a person lost in transit" (*Swimmer* 89).

Ben's own scattered memories of his journey as a stowaway also increase his sense of insecurity, however, a natural sense of flow characterizes Ben's present and past life: to Ria he appears as "some exotic bird, inadvertently here on our northern shores" (75) and water seems to be his natural element, as he metaphorically emerges to a new life out of the river, which somehow strengthens his connection to Orford and Eel house, a locale that brings back to him memories of his Sri Lankan home:

"There was a canal near our house. When I came home after school I would find all sorts of things: small animal caught in traps, birds that had damaged wings" (*Swimmer*: 73)

In an section within Ria's narrative, framed between two journeys from Eel House to London and back, Tearne confronts the readers with the non-places of law and authority, as she details the woman's Kafkaesque encounter with the Home Office, a journey she had planned carefully, in

order to submit Ben's asylum application on his behalf, after having failed to reach the office via telephone or e-mail, in the hope of accelerating the bureaucratic process that seems to have reached a stalemate. The episode reads as a contemporary incarnation of the parable of the individual before the Law, emphasizing the inaccessibility and coldness of the office and the officer in charge and the distress of those who come to submit their applications. Tearne sharply differentiates the homeliness of Eel House in the countryside with the anonymity and alienation of the Home office in the metropolis. On the train to London, Ria notices newspaper headlines deprecating "SOFT TOUCH BRITAIN. JOBLESS IMMIGRANTS STAY HERE AND GET £715 POUNDS A WEEK", that trigger Ria's puzzled reaction: "How desperate would you have to be before you wanted to live in this hostile country?" (*Swimmer* 102)

Shortly afterwards an incident on the train anticipates her frustrating experience at the Home Office, as an elderly man on failing to produce his ID card, is rudely dealt with by the ticket officer revealing lack of respect and humanity, a sign that "there's something Kafkaesque about life in Britain nowadays" (*Swimmer* 103)

Joining the people herded in long queues at the London home Office, Ria feels a kind of empathy with fellow applicants but notices her difference from the rest: "Mine was the only white face amongst them. I had worn a cream linen dress, thinking I needed to be formal, but now felt uncomfortably out of place" (*Swimmer* 103) . The exchange with the young female officer at the desk strengthens her sense of the alienation of non-places, while making her realize how complex the asylum application procedures can be, resulting in her wasted journey for lack of the right papers: "The whole operation had taken only two hours but such had been the trauma of the experience (...) I suspected that, for most, leaving this no man's land was an impossibility" (*Swimmer* 106). On her journey back home Ria witnesses the arrest of a black man, reminding her of "a dog straining at the leash" (106) that is reminiscent of Ben's previous association with animal imagery and further reinforces the sense of alienation in Ria's encounter with law and authority in the non-places of the Home Office and during her journey.

If Ria's narrative retraces the short encounter of Ben with England, exploring the coldness of non-places along with various places of Englishness now given a new meaning thanks to the presence of Ben's 'bare life', Anula's narrative sheds light on Ben's Sri Lankan past. The juxtaposition of two worlds offers Tearne the opportunity to revisit one of her favourite themes, that is the fraught history of the Sri Lanka civil war, with details of how the warfare had made Ben's life as a young Tamil male dangerous. Anula's narrative feeds into the theme of the impossibility of refuge

previously explored in Tearne's work, as she retraces Ben's life in Sri Lanka as in constant danger:  
“

Anula brings her “accented” presence to the Suffolk countryside as she revisits through her foreign eyes the places Ben has inhabited in the last days of his life. Similar to Ria, in her association with Ben as a refugee, Anula moves between various non-places: the morgue where she sees the body of her son and several areas of passage and transit, punctuating her movements within England towards and away from Orford.

Anula also mirrors Ria's and Ben's short love story as she experiences a brief romance with Eric, Ria's best friend in Orford, an elderly man who had also known Ben and helps to recollect moments of Ben's English life for his grieving mother, encouraging Anula to build a bridge between Sri Lanka and England when he explains to Anula:

“There have always been migrants in the world’, he said. ‘It’s one of the wonders of nature. But there’s a risk attached to the journey. Always. We don’t think of that.’ (...) He brought you here. This *was* his home, however briefly. It will be yours now. Forever. Because of him.’ (Swimmer 168)

England in Anula's narrative is “a country whose history had so completely been entwined with our; now, the resting place of my son ( *Swimmer* 143)

Lydia's short closing section can be read as a somewhat formulaic ending, as the appearance of a mixed race child as a strategy to bring the narrative to a closure features in several multicultural narratives, where children of multiple heritage symbolize the possibility of hope and new beginnings, often as a foil to the otherwise bleak stories of loss and exclusion. Lydia offers a final reflection on the main theme investigated in the novel that projects an unquestionably bleak view of Fortress Europe, as encountered years before by her father Ben.

“as to foreigners, illegal immigrants, asylum-seekers, they are a thing of the past. It's very simple. Anyone entering the country, any Western country, without the proper documentation is simply caught and shot. It's Home Office policy. Each nation looks after a small proportion of its own (...). Collective conscience is a thing of the past” (*Swimmer* 270).

However, her reunion with her grandmother Anula at the Arrivals hall of Heathrow airport brings the novel to a more positive ending: “I glance up at the arrivals board and in that moment (...) a lone woman comes out (...) She is very small. And thin (...) I see the future in her beautiful face.” (*Swimmer* 272).

As a final reflection, it can be argued that in the novel Ben's ill-fated encounter with Fortress Europe testifies on the one hand, the impossibility for Europe to provide a safe haven for those escaping war and persecution, due to restrictive legislation and growing xenoracism. However, through his short lived relationship with Ria, refracted in the intimate relationship between Anula and Eric and the final reunion between Lydia and Anula the novel also envisions the possibility of turning non-places into places of restored humanity in the face of intolerance and abjection, while disrupting a narrative of identity and place predicated upon exclusion.

## Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1998.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Means without End. Notes on Politics*. Minnesota: Minnesota U.P., 2000.
- Auge', Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London:Verso,1995
- Bhabha, Homi. "Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990. 291-322.
- Baucom, Ian. *Out of Place. Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Hostipitality" *Angelaki*, 5: 3 (2000), 3-18.
- Gibson, Sarah. "Border Politics and Hospitable Spaces in Stephen Frears' *Dirty Pretty Things*". *Third Text* 20:6 (2006) 693-701.
- Griffin, Gabriele. *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Hickling, Alfred. "A healing Art", *The Guardian*, 4 July 2009  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jul/04/brixton-beach-roma-tearne-review>
- Naficy, Hamid. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 2001.
- Nasta, Susheila. "Homes Without Walls: New Voices in South Asian Writing in Britain", in R. J. Crane & R. Mohanram (eds), *Shifting Continents/Colliding Cultures*, Amsterdam & New York Rodopi, 2000.
- Ponzanesi, Sandra. "The Non-Places of Migrant Cinema in Europe." *Third Text* 26:6 (2012): 675-690.
- Pratt, Marie Louse. *Imperial Eyes. Travel writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Ranasinha, Ruvani. "Writing and reading Sri Lanka: Shifting politics of cultural translation, consumption and the implied reader". *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48:1 (2013): 27-39
- Roy, Bidhan Chandra. *A Passage to Globalism: Globalization, Identities, and South Asian Diasporic Fiction in Britain*. New York, Bern, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2013
- Salgado, Minoli. *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*. London: Routledge, 2006
- Schlote, Christiane. "Dramatising Refuge(e)s. Rukhsana Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* and Tanika Gupta's *Sanctuary*". *Critical Essays on British South Asian Theatre*. Eds. Graham Ley and Sarah Dadswell. Exeter: Exeter U.P., 2012. 66-78.

Tearne Roma. *Bone China*. London: Harper Perennial, 2008

Weelwright, Julie. "Roma Tearne: The Enemy Within", *The Independent*, 18 April 2008  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/roma-tearne-the-enemy-within-810743.html>

Tearne Roma. *Brixton Beach*. London: Harper Perennial, 2009

Tearne, Roma. *The Swimmer*. Harper Collins, 2010

Tearne, Roma,. "Picturing Place". In *The Swimmer*.6-11.

Tearne, Roma. "Sri Lanka's Writers Must Remember and Speak Out". *The Independent*, 7 May 2010

Tyler, Imogen. "'Welcome to Britain': The cultural politics of asylum." *The European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9:2 (2006): 185-202.