The EcoGothic and Contemporary Sri Lankan English Literature: Reading Ecophobia in Patricia Weerakoon's *Empire's Children* and Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*

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Abstract

This paper aims to read two contemporary Sri Lankan English novels—Patricia Weerakoon's *Empire's Children* (2015) and Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* (2007)—as EcoGothic texts that use gothicised architecture and landscape tropes of the sea, the forest, the beach, and tea plantations to highlight the intersections between human exploitation and environmental degradation in post-colonial Sri Lanka. By drawing on the theories of the EcoGothic and associated concepts such as Ecophobia, I examine how the EcoGothic is manifested in the selected novels through a close connection between nature and the (dark) history of a place immersed in colonialism, civil war, terrorism, and capitalist commodification. *Empire's Children* portrays how the colonialist's fear of tropical landscapes generates monocultures, exploitative behaviour, and conflict. The paper further argues that *Mosquito* portrays how the civil war turned nature into a location of monstrosity, as the government paid more attention to war and defence budgets rather than the local environment and human welfare. The use to which certain landscapes are put in post-colonial Sri Lanka during the civil war creates an ecophobic narrative about them. Through the EcoGothic, the writers overturn popular conceptions of tropical islands as idyllic and show these landscapes as sites of fear and the uncanny, and as palimpsests of multiple histories of political and ecological violence.

Keywords: EcoGothic, Sri Lankan English fiction, Ecophobia, Roma Tearne, Patricia Weerakoon

Introduction

This paper aims to read two contemporary Sri Lankan English novels—Patricia Weerakoon's *Empire's Children* (2015) and Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* (2007)—as EcoGothic texts that use gothicised architecture and landscape tropes of the sea, the forest, beaches, and tea plantations to highlight the intersections of human exploitation and the exploitation of natural resources in post-colonial Sri Lanka. Literary scholars such as Maggie Kilgour, Terry Castle, David Punter, and Fred Botting have highlighted the difficulty in categorising the Gothic as a coherent genre. Terry Castle (2005) highlights how the Gothic allows a way to connect with the past through the dominant trope of architecture in the eighteenth century. The Gothic was often identified as a

genre of writing characterised by "intense fear of the 'uncivilised' past and the interest in the transgressive areas of social and psychological life that are suppressed because they are deemed offensive" (Ancuta and Valanciunas 2021: 3). Andrew Smith and William Hughes's argument for the EcoGothic as a distinct branch of the Gothic stems from his assessment that the Gothic as a genre has always been "ecologically aware" (2013: 1), since it associates nature with estrangement, dystopia, culture, and horror, presenting it as a space for crisis. Therefore, the Gothic mode is often used by writers to address anxieties about nature and the environment.

In the Sri Lankan context, the Gothic is often used to comment on the social and political tensions of the region. For instance, Punyekante Wijenaike's novella *Giraya* (1971), which tells the story of a young daughter-in-law of an "elite, English-speaking Sinhalese family, living in a feudal manor" (Mohan 2015: 29), is one of the first texts to use the gothic trope of a feudal house (the *walauwe*)[1] to explore questions of gender in postcolonial Sri Lanka (Mohan 2015; Bhattacharjee 2021). More recently, Michelle de Krester's *Hamilton's Case* (2003) also explores the Gothic tropes of ancient *walauwes* that "echo with ghosts and other 'presences'" (Perera "Sunday Times"), suicides, and infanticides to tell a "detective" story about a murder of an English planter in Ceylon in the 1930s. Apart from these, critics like Sharae Deckard have identified EcoGothic motifs in the works of writers such as Jean Arasanayagam and Romesh Gunesekera.[2] Thus, the Gothic creatively intersects with postcolonial questions of gender, caste, race, ethnicity, and colonialism in myriad contexts.

My reading of the two contemporary Sri Lankan English texts from the EcoGothic perspective demonstrates how the question of the environment intertwines with the writers' preoccupation with British colonialism (in *Empire's Children*) and the civil war (in *Mosquito*) that afflicted Sri Lanka (from 1983 to 2009).[3] One of the constant preoccupations of contemporary Sri Lankan writing in English is the civil war and the trauma that emanates from it; the writers trace the transformation of Sri Lanka from a "locus amoenus", a place of safety, to "locus horribilis," a place ruined by war. Landscape tropes such as the forest, the beach, or the sea in Sri Lankan literature are not mere settings or metaphors for the island but highlight the possibility of reading them for their own sake — "an ecological referent in their own right" (Kuchta 2020: 2). Todd Kuchta, in his reading of the Sri Lankan novel *Reef*, says that "since the ravages of climate change are hitting the global South first and worst, we should expect to find traces of the Anthropocene registered with foresight and heightened sensitivity in the archive of postcolonial literature" (2020: 2). In this regard, the EcoGothic has become a vital trope to explore the connection between environment and

colonialism, postcoloniality, war, and military territorialisation and de-territorialisation in the texts I examine here. By drawing upon the theories of the EcoGothic (by scholars such as Smith, Hughes, and Deckard) and associated concepts such as Ecophobia (used by Simon Estok), I examine how the EcoGothic is manifested in the selected texts through a close connection between nature and the (dark) history of a place immersed in colonialism, civil war, terrorism, and capitalist commodification. In countries like Sri Lanka, "land-hunger," expulsion from land, resettlement, and expropriation of land and its resources have been primary grounds of conflict and, therefore, as Tariq Jazeel observes, "Sri Lanka's racialised politics of difference is inseparable from a spatial politics" (2009: 127). My reading of the texts shows how in the context of historical events such as colonialism and the civil war, certain landscape tropes are represented as sites of fear and terror. These representations move away from the pastoral and picturesque narratives about tropical landscapes represented in many colonial narratives. [4] Within the framework of the "EcoGothic," *Empire's Children* and *Mosquito* exhibit ecophobic tendencies as the texts portray how the colonialists' fear of tropical landscapes generates monocultures, exploitative behaviour, and conflict. Texts like *Mosquito* further portray how the civil war turned nature into a location of monstrosity and fear, as the government paid more attention to war and defence budgets rather than the local environment and human welfare.

Simon Estok first proposed the term "ecophobia" in 1995 "to denote fear and loathing of the environment in much the same way that the term 'homophobia' denotes fear and loathing of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals" (Estok 1996: 213). Estok refers to David Sobel to suggest that ecophobia could also mean "a fear of ecological problems and the natural world" (Estok 2011: 3), adding that the fear of oil spills, rainforest destruction, whale hunting, acid rain, the ozone hole, and Lyme disease would all fall under this category. Ecophobia indicates how human beings are propelled by their selfish interests to treat nature with contempt and ravage it for their utilitarian purposes. Dawn Keetley and Matthew Sivils argue that the EcoGothic inevitably intersects with ecophobia as not only ecophobic representations of nature are "infused, like the gothic, with fear and dread, but also because ecophobia, is born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world. And control, or lack thereof, is central to the gothic" (2018: 3).

I suggest that Patricia Weerakoon's and Roma Tearne's novels engage with ecophobia and the EcoGothic in two ways. First, Weerakoon's *Empire's Children* highlights that the ecophobic temperament of the colonialists leads to a fear of tropical landscapes and their people, reducing them to commodities for amassing profit. Second, the novels highlight how the use to which certain

landscapes are put in post-colonial Sri Lanka renders these spaces fearful and uncanny, generating ecophobia. By this, I mean that the capitalistic, nationalistic, and materialistic lens through which Sri Lankan landscapes are seen by the colonialists or ethnic groups of post-colonial Sri Lanka renders the soil an eerie and horrible place for the people — a place of "gothic entrapment," from where there is no escape. Therefore, as critics such as Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte assert, in the postcolonial context, the Gothic may not always have tropes or images of the monster, or the supernatural, or the ghost, or the alien, but may be manifested in the form of "ghosts or monsters" of memory and experience that "haunt the nation/subject from within and without" (2009: vii). Thus, in the two novels I examine here, the Gothic is manifested in such representations of the landscape that foreground a connection between the fearful landscapes and the ecological crisis of the island.

Tea plantations in *Empire's Children*

Weerakoon's *Empire's Children* is a heart-wrenching account of life in Sri Lanka's plantations after the nation's independence, when the plantations were still in the control of the British but were also witnessing resistance from the labouring class, which eventually led to the nationalisation of the plantations. The story is set in the 1950s and 1960s and is narrated from the perspective of three characters—Shiro, Lakshmi, and Anthony—who represent three distinct classes of people in the plantations. Shiro, a Sri Lankan Tamil, is the daughter of a tea-maker in the plantation company Oriental Produce, established during the British colonial period in the 1930s. Lakshmi, the daughter of a Tamil indentured labourer from India, is Shiro's caretaker, a role she has played from the age of ten. Anthony Ashley-Cooper, only a few years older than Shiro and Lakshmi, is the heir of the Company, along with his brother William. The imagery of the tea plantations in the novel connects Sri Lanka to the colonial processes of transculturation that arose from the colonial acquisition of land, and "the brutal reorganisation of social and ecological relations that took place with the advent of plantation, dispossessing indigenous peasantries, importing indentured labour, converting vast tracts of land to cash-crop monocultures" (Deckard 2015: 37), which led to ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. It presents the colonial tea-plantation monocultures as an ecophobic enterprise that stems from the British colonialists' understanding of themselves as superior and in control of the wild landscapes of Sri Lanka. The tea plantations testify that the British understand their relation to the tropical colonial landscapes as a god-given right to dominate and shape them the way they like. Anthony, when he lands in Sri Lanka, assumes a god-like persona. When a mahout, an elephant

rider, and his elephant salute him on his way to the plantations, he says, "The largest animal in Sri Lanka salutes the visiting white god. He could get used to this" (16).

The landscapes in Weerakoon's *Empire's Children* allude to Sri Lanka's colonial history, where the colonialists emptied large tracts of land—uninhabited and fecund—to turn them into a tea country.[5] The initial wilderness that the colonialists arrived at was terrifying for them, one they believed was overshadowed by savagery and the lack of a moral, psychological, and geographical order. The colonialist perception of the tropical landscape and its inhabitants as fearful and loathsome in the novel turned the tea plantations into a site of unhealthy socio-ecological relations that gave rise to an unpredictable landscape, where people from one class and ethnic group are dangerous to the other and where man is hostile to nature, and vice versa. The tea plantations are presented as a site of oppressive hierarchies, with the White owners at the top of the hierarchy and the "coolies" at the bottom. The Tamil natives worked as "jobbers" or *kanganis* who controlled and supervised the coolies. Placed in watertight categories, there is hardly any possibility of friendship or mingling among the people belonging to these groups. Shiro, as a child, looks at the plantations as an escape and a romantic place. She is ignorant of any other way of life and gleans solace and inspiration from the natural world. She does not recognize the boundaries of class and caste and is constantly reprimanded for crossing them. Her mother warns her:

> *Aiyoo mahal*, you mustn't chat to those Indian coolie women. You will begin to talk like an Indian. You are a Jaffna Tamil girl; you must speak *chethamil*, the pure Tamil that belongs to your people. (Weerakoon 2015: 3)

The idea of racialised "othering" that runs through the narrative is predominantly based on the fear of the Whites for the natives and vice versa. To add to the complexity, the Sri Lankan Tamils looked down on the Indian Tamils who migrated from South India. They were wary of the corrupting influences of the Indian Tamils on the "pure" Sri Lankan Tamil culture. Smith and Hughes highlight how, in the colonial context, the "uncanny" is associated with "images of otherness" (2003: 4), something that is the opposite of "homely" or "heimlich". It incorporates "a confrontation with racial otherness, an otherness that is both strange, distanced and exotic, and yet a site upon which racial, psychological and sexual anxieties are projected" (Smith and Hughes 2003: 3). Alexandra Warwick also suggests that in "colonial Gothic", both landscape and people (Indigenous or otherwise) are seen as uncanny, "beyond the possibilities of explanation in European terms" (1998: 262). Such "otherness" ignited feelings of fear among the colonisers for the native people. As a *bildungsroman*, the story depicts Shiro's (and also Lakshmi and Anthony's) growing awareness of the grim realities of the plantations and what they must endure to make their friendship work. The plantations give

way to a darker and fearful environment that is connected to the physical exploitation and psychological trauma of the coolies. In the novel, the natives and coolies are treated with a sense of apathy and disgust. For instance, the White masters consider the natives untrustworthy and dangerous and as savages to be dominated and controlled. Even a more humane soul like Anthony initially despises the tropical landscape and its people. When he lands at Ceylon for the first time, the sight astounds him:

> …So this is Ceylon.
>
> A mirage-like haze rose from the ground. Brown-bodied natives with black hair and needy dark eyes, dressed in coloured skirt-like garments, scurried like so many gaudy insects towards the plane. What a dump. *What the hell am I doing here? Stupid question. Checking out my little part of the British Empire in the colonies, of course! … Is this what I'm going to have to breathe for the next few months? I think I'm going to be sick. Someone get me an oxygen bottle!... Can't these stupid natives talk without yelling?* (Weerakoon 2015: 12)

Anthony's use of the imagery of insects to define the natives signifies the latter as not only the other of humans but also rejects their humanity. It also highlights the racist monstrosity that Anthony imposes on the people of Sri Lanka. Through the insect imagery, the natives are portrayed as the embodiment of the insect's predatory instincts that trigger ecophobia in the colonizer. Anthony feels out of place in Sri Lanka — a sterile, dark and humid landscape befitting the insect-like natives. The swarm of insect-like natives highlights a "frightening strength in numbers" (Hollingsworth 2001:195) that threatens the numbered colonizers. Such a strong sense of ecophobia for the tropical landscapes intensifies and justifies the inhuman behaviour of the colonialists towards the people of Sri Lanka and their environment. The British repulsion toward the coolies, the weather, and the landscape suggests how the fear of the unknown can be remedied only by a desire and need for control. The British view the plantations as a space of potential horror, a fear rooted in stereotypical conceptions about the place. At the hotel where he stays, Anthony feels he saw "a flash of resentment" in the native doorkeeper's "deep black eyes" (17). In *Empire's Children*, the British subjugation of the landscape and its people is a result of the ecophobic sentiment of the Ashley-Coopers and their desire to maintain their plantation regime.

The tea plantations emerge as sites of corruption and decay where the British reign free and the coolies are submissive like animals. The crux of the novel is Lakshmi's rape by William, which crushes Lakshmi's dream of escaping the rut. Lakshmi's rape is emblematic of the plight of coolie women who are sexually exploited and kept as "sex slaves" by the white plantation owners, turning the plantations into a place from where there is no escape. After her rape, Lakshmi is forced to

become a *vesi* (prostitute) and her son, Daniel, is forcefully given away for adoption. At a more allegorical level, Lakshmi's rape suggests the exploitation of the land and its subjection to a colonial reorganization of nature, a process that leads to the annihilation of both human and extra-human life. The plantations represent a feminized nature attacked by patriarchy—capitalism, technology, and industry— a violation that is echoed through Anthony's sarcastic words as he accuses his father of exploiting life at the plantations: "Rape the entire bloody plantation but keep the Ashley-Cooper coffers filled with blood gold" (150). As the attack on nature and the coolies progresses in the novel, the environment becomes more frightening. The reorientation of Lakshmi's life from being a coolie girl to an upstart native Tamil (owned by her masters) and then crushed to the position of a *vesi*, resembles the journey of the land subjected to multiple re-territorialisations; its body turned into a palimpsest of multiple histories of violence. The plantations of Sri Lanka trace a history of ecological violence back to colonial times that continued through the eras of independence in 1948, nationalization during 1972-1973 and subsequent re-privatization, and later by the reorganizations of society-nature manifested during the civil war and the ongoing conflict over territory, labour, and resources. Before the British, the Portuguese had introduced coffee, coconut, and cinnamon in Ceylon. A fungal parasite called "coffee rust" affected the coffee plantations, leading to the rise of tea plantations after 1850. Introducing tea plantations in the Sri Lankan landscape involved burning native trees and impoverishing the earth. Deforestation affects the ecosystem as animals and birds, dependent on these trees and plants, get affected and gradually become extinct. During the colonial period there was large-scale deforestation to accommodate coffee and tea plantations. The Oriental Produce company in 1957, that has "grown into the largest and most prosperous tea company in Sri Lanka with branches in Africa" (Weerakoon 2015: 13), reflects a similar process from its creation by Anthony's grandfather, Sir Thomas Ashley-Cooper, "in the early years of colonization" (13).

Owing to their "greenness", tea plantations are often seen as natural landscapes suggesting an idyllic existence. E. Valentine Daniel (1996) notes how in the tourist brochures, the tea estates are (deceptively) projected as a picturesque garden and a place of beauty. In *Empire's Children*, Anthony, as he reaches the up-country town of Diyatalawa and beyond, is mesmerized by the picturesque beauty of the place:

> It was as if an emerald green carpet had been thrown over the undulating hills to welcome him. Mud roads curled through the hills like dusky brown ribbons. Anthony felt a frisson of excitement. So this was it. Tea—his father's legacy, soon to be his. (Weerakoon 2015: 26)

Anthony's gaze suggests his visual control over the land; however, such a gaze blurs him to the presence of human figures in the landscape. Bermingham (1986) and Barell (1980) show how the conventions of the picturesque work in favour of capitalism; it legitimises private land ownership, and the labourers who are exploited in such landscapes appear as timeless and distant objects in the landscape — they merge and become part of the scenery. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) also observes that colonial landscapes are often imagined as romantic settings for the individual explorer, but are regularly emptied of the rival human presence. Weerakoon subverts such romantic representations of the plantations and creates an uncanny world by refiguring the coolies as an integral part of the plantations. She foregrounds the human figures and presents them as Gothic "spectres" in the landscape exemplified through descriptions such as the grotesque smile of a coolie woman "exposing her chipped teeth, stained red with the betel leaf she was chewing" (2) and women with "ebony black eyes" (16). The novel highlights how the coolies are still subjected to extreme deprivation, malnutrition, overwork, and slave-like working and living conditions in the plantations despite slavery having been abolished throughout the British Empire in 1834. The coolies were often reprimanded and even beaten by the *kanganis* for not doing their job properly. The *kangani* emerges as a fearful figure in the plantations, as Weerakoon describes him as a personification of terror:

> The single man in the group stood on the mud path by the tea bushes. '*Ange pore. Inge pore*', he shouted in the guttural Tamil dialect of the Indian estate labourers. He was dressed in an old flannel shirt and a faded brown pair of trousers. A towel, wrapped turban-like on his head, announced his status as *kangani*. He stabbed his finger this way and that to places the women had failed to pick. They darted around on their calloused bare feet. Their fingers flew over the bushes, striving to pick the mandatory twenty pounds of fresh leaves that would assure them a full day's wage. (Weerakoon 2015: 2)

The *kanganis*, as intermediaries between the plantation management and the workers, also represent the presence of colonialism in post-colonial Sri Lanka. The *kanganis* are therefore gothic tropes in the novel to suggest the plantations as extreme sites of fear characterized by trauma, anxiety, and misery for the poor labourers.

Tea making is a labour and capital-intensive business that requires a "large continuous supply of freshly plucked tea" (Talbot 2002: 713). Also, "it has to be harvested year-round, so [it] requires a stable labour force, rather than seasonal migrant labour" (Deckard 2015: 42). As it is mostly women who are employed as the tea-pluckers to pick the choicest delicate tips of the fresh shoots with their "nimble" fingers, Weerakoon establishes the tea plantations as gendered spaces that run on the exploitation of women. Anthony's uncle explains the logistics of the tea business to him:

> …coolie women, Indian labour … They are the backbone of the industry. Efficiency depends on them working fast. But quality depends on their ability to pick just the two leaves and the bud … we're always trying to improve, of course. (Weerakoon 2015: 26)

The presence of the tired and sunken coolie women in the plantations disrupts the picturesque colonial discourse about plantations. The feminized tea plantations represent the White man's encounters with the wild landscapes of Sri Lanka—deadly, alluring, and transgressive—over which the White man exerts his control.

The beauty of the plantations is juxtaposed with the hard labour of the coolies. Tea making further involves the hazardous use of pesticides, painstaking plucking of the leaves, and then withering, fermenting, rolling and drying them with machines, and finally packaging. In this exercise, the "uncanny quality" (Elaine Gan et al. 2017: G2) of the pesticides seeps into the labourers' systems and the land, rendering them unhealthy and infertile. In the novel, the coolie women spend long hours on the plantation, "striving to pick the mandatory twenty pounds of leaves that would assure them a full day's wage," (Weerakoon 2015: 8), exposing them to harmful pesticides that affect their health. Lakshmi's sister is persistently unwell and keeps coughing all the time, highlighting health issues like asthma, common among the labourers exposed to pesticides through their work and environmental exposure. The changes in the environmental conditions of the tea plantations also increased the instances of tropical diseases such as malaria and cholera that primarily affected the labourers and their families. The damp soil, water logged and badly maintained drains in the tea plantations became the breeding ground for mosquitoes. The ruthless practices of the plantation owners harm poor people attached to the soil, alter plant species, and deposit toxic pollution onto the earthways and soils, resulting in "ecophobia" among the workers. It alarms Lakshmi to realise that she is trapped in the plantations and that her fate does not differ from her mother's, who looked double her age because of the hard work and exposure to harmful elements — "Lakshmi's mother had greying hair and stooped walk, she looked so much older" (10). Lakshmi visualises that in twenty years, she too would look just like her mother; "she suppressed a shudder and quickly dashed a tear from her eye with the back of her hand" (10). But, unfortunately, no alternative is available to those who want to escape from the plantations. Lakshmi's mother's words, "you will never ever be anything other than a coolie—they will use you, and then throw you in the drain when they are done," (10), are a haunting reminder for Lakshmi of her claustrophobic entrapment in the plantation. Thus, the plantations become an ecophobic site of "Gothic entrapment" for the labourers.

Weerakoon uses the trope of dingy line rooms as a Gothic trope, incorporating the typical Western Gothic trope of architecture in the story, to suggest how the British shaped the island's landscape and conscripted its people into servitude. The line rooms emerge as symbols of marginalization and dehumanization and show how the dynamics of power are built into the physical landscape of the plantations. Home for the coolies emerges as a gothic space where the poor labourers cope with their frustration by abusing their wives and children. Lakshmi's father is addicted to *ganja* (marijuana) and beats his wife and children.

The line rooms suggest an unequal division of spaces based on the feeling of revulsion for the coloured people—the underclass—who are considered a source of pollution. Estok suggests that ecophobia is often related to how the White people associate "pollution" and "disgust" with Black people, "where the polluting person, and his or her physical space, is unacceptable, disgusting" (2011: 85) and "the polluting person is always in the wrong" (2011: 85). He says that disgust is involved in configuring ecophobia and the imagination of hostile geographies. The association of disgust and filth with the native people inspires the British to transform their landscapes completely. Anthony covers his mouth and nose with his hanky as he passes the line rooms, calling them "filthy stables." Anthony's uncle refers to the coolies as "filthy people":

> I'm sorry to have to subject you to this, son. These are what we call the line rooms. The indentured Indian labourers—coolies—live here. We have given each family a room. There are common toilets and taps. They are sturdily built rooms. Well ventilated. But the coolies have no sense of hygiene and the place is filthy. I'll explain this all to you later. I've applied to your father for the money to en-route the main road so that it doesn't go past this area. (Weerakoon 2015: 27)

"Filth", associated with the coolies, becomes a precondition for difference and exclusion from the social circles of the privileged — the Whites and the native staff. They are constantly associated with evil, and the only way to discipline them is by using force and subjecting them to physical and sexual servitude. In the novel, the line rooms are juxtaposed against the beautiful bungalows of the Whites and cottages that house the native staff:

> They (Lakshmi and her family) had one room in a room of five – the coolies' line rooms. The rooms were always damp and smelled of smoke, stale sweat and rancid curry. It was all so different from the large, sweet-smelling rooms in the Tea-maker's house where her friend Shiro Chinnamma lived. (Weerakoon 2015: 9)

The line rooms emerge as an "uncanny" home, with the spectre of malnourished skeletal bodies of the indentured labourers and their family members. They represent fear, anxiety and a sense of entrapment within one's home. Given that the Tamil-origin labourers were not given electoral,

property, and citizenship rights for many years after independence, these rooms highlight the impossibility of creating another home for themselves elsewhere. The labourers enter a never-ending debt relationship with the *kanganis*, making their escape from the plantations even more difficult.

The coolie women are further considered a source of moral pollution that threatens the patriarchal hegemony of the Whites. Dinner parties at the Ashley-Cooper manor at Bakewell are never complete without "explicit and bawdy" (19) stories about coolie women. Mrs Ashley-Cooper constantly warns her sons about the plantations that ruined her husband: "The tea plantations charmed your father. Take care that the same doesn't happen to you" (19). This again suggests the gendering of the plantations, which blurs the lines between the coolie women and tea plantations. The coolie women emerge as dangerous female figures that from a patriarchal point of view symbolise "the dark, chaotic, irrational and wild side of femininity" (Stott 1992: 38) with the power to corrupt any man. In the same way, Weerakoon invests a powerful ominous and seductive quality to the high-country, expressed through Anthony's eyes:

> A wide valley stretched before them, backed by a broad-shouldered mountain range. The lower regions of the mountain were swathed with brilliant green bushes. From its upper flanks, dark, ominous rock faces clawed upwards towards the sky. Distant waterfalls cascaded down the rocks. Hardy trees and bushes clung like mountain goats to almost vertical slopes … The thunder of plunging water filled his ears. The water billowed out, fanned by a brisk breeze. Anthony felt the sting of icy drops on his face. (Weerakoon 2015: 25)

Anthony is deeply drawn to the high-country, and his encounter with the landscape is represented as both horrific and transformative; its uncanny quality overwhelms the visitor. The landscape has an agential power to ignite both fear and fascination. The tea plants' transgressive nature, that in the absence of control threatens to grow into full trees, creates a clear association between the overpowering nature of the plantations and the "bewitching" coolie women. Anthony's uncle explains to him how tea plants in their natural state are robust forest trees that could grow up to ten meters, thereby overwhelming the landscape. Therefore, pruning is very important: "He pointed to the smooth-topped tea bushes that reached right up to the edge of the road. 'Don't look like individual plants, do they? Decades of pruning to keep them waist high and regular plucking of the bloom makes the top grow together" (26). Thus, Anthony's uncle highlights the fact that the tea trees have been thwarted in size to restrain them from overtaking the landscape. Such ideas reaffirm the traditional associations made between nature and femininity, which suggests ecophobia from the patriarchal perspective and justifies domination of both women and nature.

The physical and psychological degradation of the labourers intertwines with the ecological degradation of the plantations. There is a connection between how the new inheritors of the plantations, like William, treat the place as a site of cheap sexual pleasure and how the plantations are turned into a site of mis-managed chaos. Anthony looks at life in the plantations from a more humane perspective and tries to restore the balance. However, his efforts are primarily disturbed by his father's never-ending greed and his brother's immoral activities, as he treats coolie women like "filthy" objects who can be used and disposed of at will. The number of illicit children keeps growing in the plantations, demanding attention and justice, subverting the myth of British progress and civilization. Anthony and Shiro find out that characters like Lakshmi, Jega, and Daniel are all "illicit offsprings" born out of sexual liaisons between the British and the coolies. These hybrid gothic bodies—"the Ashley-Cooper bastards roaming the plantations" (150)—scream injustice and pave the path for violence and resistance.

Towards the end of the novel, the Ashley-Coopers' business suffers, threatened mainly by the chaotic situation the Whites have created by messing with the natives. The workers' threat of rebellion looms large in the background as the natives nationalise the plantations. The resistance of the natives can be compared to the subversive power of the plantation itself, its dual nature of being beautiful and dangerous. Weerakoon writes how the plantations are outwardly like an "emerald green carpet" (26), with "brilliant green bushes" (25), but the sloppy roads and frequent landslides also made the plantations a precarious place — "Thundershowers were common in the hill country and the damp ground was slippery from last night's rain" (2). The overall deceptive quality of the plantations points towards the precarious and fearful side of the plantations, showing how its apparent beauty and peace only provide cover to its turbulent underbelly. Thus, the plantations emerge as a troubled and frightful place highlighting the damage done to people, cultures, and the landscape by British ecophobia.

The Sea, the beach and the forest in *Mosquito*

The association of nature with the racial politics and war in Sri Lanka is further amplified in *Mosquito*, where sites like the sea and the forests evolve as "liminal" and contested sites between the State and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in post-colonial Sri Lanka. *Mosquito* is the love story of Theo Samarajeva, a 47-year-old writer, and a 17-year-old girl named Nulani Mendis, a painter. Their love blooms amidst the civil war in Sri Lanka, and the war shatters their innocent, sincere, and beautiful relationship. Theo is attacked and kidnapped by the army for being outspoken

and sympathizing with the Tamils, and Nulani is forced to leave the country. In the novel, the natural landscapes cannot be isolated from the political and ecological experience of the nation. Theo returns to Sri Lanka from London and settles into a beach house to collect materials for his second novel. The beach and the sea are constant images in the novel and Tearne also takes the readers through the island's dense forests. Theo is captured and taken captive and kept in remote regions of the forest, first by the Sinhalese army and later by the Tamil Tigers. The novel suggests that there is an integral relationship between ecophobia and the use to which nature is put in post-colonial Sri Lanka. In the novel, nature develops as an uncanny and horrific site, where to venture in could mean putting one's life in danger.

In *Mosquito*, Tearne presents the beach as a liminal and unpredictable site that often restricts freedom. While on the one hand, the beach and the beach house represent an idyllic existence, suggested through activities the characters enjoy, such as painting, writing, going for walks, and cooking, these sites also emerge as eerie and inhospitable spaces as the sea and the beach were often used by the army to lynch people who were suspected of being members of the LTTE. Sugi, Theo's manservant, frequently brings news about such violence:

> There's been some kind of trouble further along the coast … Someone told me the army drove their jeeps on the sands, chasing a group of men. And then they shot them. They were all young, Sir. Nobody knows what they had done …The army left the bodies on the beach, and the local people cleared the mess. (Tearne 2007: 27-28)

The beach is also constantly under the surveillance of the army, and the curfew imposed by the army in times of emergency further restricted the free use of the beach by the common people.

During the civil war, the sea and the beach were two of the most guarded places in Sri Lanka. The LTTE rebels haunted the beach and the sea, forming unique groups such as the Sea Tigers. The Sea Tigers used the sea to launch attacks, smuggle weapons and other equipment into Sri Lanka, and terrorize the Indian Ocean with suicide boats and special forces attacking the Sri Lankan Navy. The Sri Lankan Navy also arranged massive patrol vessels to keep a check, and during an emergency, curfew was imposed on the beach. In her article, Jessica S. Lehman discusses how the ocean was an actor in the war in Sri Lanka, elaborating that "the ocean serves as a nexus for many and various relations and discourses on power, politics, security, economics, families, wealth, conservation, and more" (2013: 488). During the armed conflict, the ocean played out as a "battleground" as "some of the deadliest and most protracted battles in the thirty-year civil conflict were fought in the coastal regions of the North and the East, which comprised two-thirds of the country's coastline" (Lehman 2013: 493). Lehman further explains that the lagoons of the ocean often acted as a threat to the Sri

Lankan Armed Forces, who suspected that their dense vegetation could provide cover for the LTTE. Therefore, as Edmonds-Dobrijevich suggests, the ocean emerged as an "archetypical site of the sublime and horror" (Lehman 2013: 493) that can never be entirely governed (Connery "There was no more sea"). In many representations of the sea and beach in Sri Lankan writing, these spaces emerge as gothic sites of fear and violence. In *Mosquito,* these spaces also foreground growing ecological horrors because of the use of these spaces as dump yards for dead bodies and the overall neglect of the environment during the war. Tearne establishes the direct impact of the war on ecology when she further describes how the jungle was reduced to ashes when the army used the site to burn the corpses of people they had killed:

> A soldier leapt down and took out a can. He began to pour petrol over the bodies … The whole jungle seemed on fire, awash with the sour smells of tamarind and eucalyptus, and something else, something rotten and deep and terrifying. (Tearne 2007: 71)

The flames that burnt for a long time impacted not only the plants and trees but also the animals; Tearne writes that "somewhere, in some impenetrable corner of the jungle, an elephant was preparing to charge" (72), disturbed by the flames and heat. Such gothic representations can also be connected to ecophobia. As Estok (2018) suggests, linking nature with terror leads to ecophobia since we look at nature as the agent of terror rather than at anthropogenic forces as the cause for natural imbalance.

In *Mosquito*, the uncanny and gothic characteristics of nature are implicated through the violent use of these landscapes; for instance, the sea, the beach, and the river are represented as a dump yard for dead bodies, and the forest is represented as the hub of militants and state forces who have created hidden camps in the opaque jungles. One of the primary characters, Sugi, is also murdered on the beach. This turn of events in the story builds an intimidating fear in readers of the landscapes of Sri Lanka. Sugi's bloated body is recovered from the beach. Similarly, dead bodies are recovered in the eastern province—"bloated and stinking like cattle, with stiffened limbs" (130). An LTTE leader explains the phenomenon to Vikram, a new LTTE recruit:

> "First they were raped," he told Vikram, "then we were brought in to shoot them."
> "Who were they?" asked Vikram.
> "Muslims."
> The boy told Vikram that the dead amounted to 270. They were people who should not have been living here, it was not their land, it was Tamil land. And their husbands and sons were all in the Singhalese army. The Tigers had turned their sub-machine guns on them, sending bullets buzzing like bees. And then afterwards the rains had washed the bodies into the river. Later, the boy told Vikram, the bodies had surfaced, bloated and stinking like cattle, with stiffened limbs. Some soldiers still thought the place was

> haunted with the souls of the dead, others, that Muslims had no souls to speak of. (Tearne 2007: 129-130)

The comparison of the bullets to bees to express the horror of the common people being hunted down and killed by terrorists suggests the human fear of insects. That humans look at bees as a mass of tiny creatures capable of stinging (humans) allows its use as a metaphor to highlight the monstrosity of the terrorist group. The bees embody the idea of predatory attacks and evoke a sinister entity that reflects ecophobia through their buzzing sounds and mobile swarms. The association of terror with the non-human and natural spaces creates a sense of suspicion of nature where nature is seen as the source of terror; it is perceived as what makes the conflict possible. For instance, the beach and the sea are perceived as convenient places to hide traces of violence, as the sea would swallow everything. Tearne complicates such representations of the sea by presenting the sea as a much more complex entity. In *Mosquito*, the sea is an elusive and symbolic space. Sometimes, it depicts the characters' inner state of mind. For instance, "the sea still scrolled restlessly up the beach" (110) while Theo walked restlessly on the beach with Nulani. At other times, the sea has a more foreboding tone: "It rained in the night but towards dawn the mist began rolling in from the sea" (97). Tearne writes that "the sea was like a mirror," (1), suggesting it reflects what one shows it and gives back what one gives it. The sea swallows the dead bodies; however, it also uncovers violence as it drives bloated dead bodies to the shore from its uncanny depths.

Jimmy Packham and David Punter suggest it is essential to examine the sea by considering its "non-human scale and depth" with "the prominence and pre-eminence of the uncanny non-human forms inhabiting the ocean" (2017:16). The depth of the ocean suggests "a site haunted by the accumulation of history, in which past blends with present, and where spatiality and temporality become unmoored from and exceed their traditional (or terrestrial) qualities" (16). In *Mosquito*, the imagery of the dead bodies suggests how "the sea illuminates the dead, the depths make visible what would otherwise be concealed within them" (Packham and Punter 2017: 19). The depth of the sea appears as another world housing the haunting spirits of those killed during the war. The sea in *Mosquito*, therefore, also exposes human violence, expressed through the haunting imagery of "bloated dead bodies" on the shore.

It is interesting to note how Tearne further connects ecology with war through the imagery of the mosquito (and malaria):

> …it was time when the swarms of mosquitoes appeared, thick as smoke and deadly as flying needles … It was a mosquito's paradise. They floated their dark canoes on these

> ponds among the lotus flowers and the water lilies. Waiting for the night. (Tearne 2007: 77)

The war led to a collapse of the government, and the army, who were otherwise responsible for spraying DDT to contain the spread of malaria, was engaged in the war. Tearne explains the uncanny growth of mosquitoes on the island through various images. For instance, Theo always lights a mosquito coil to ward off the mosquitoes, Nulani's mother dies of malaria, and the terrible rains that led to water logging "in coconut palms, in ditches and stagnant tanks" (77) provoked a malaria outbreak across the island. The mosquitoes take on a monstrous quality with agential qualities in the narrative. In *The Gothic* (2004), Punter and Glennis Byron explain the word "monster" was traditionally used "to demonstrate" or "to warn": "From classical times through to the Renaissance, monsters were interpreted either as signs of divine anger or as portents of impending disasters" (2004: 263). The mosquitoes serve as a warning, heralding a complete ecological collapse because of the war where nature, through the mosquitoes, aims at a complete mastery over humans, surpassing any human attempt to contain them. Parker also points out how the EcoGothic plays around with "a clear and immediate sense of nature's revenge" (2016: 217). The mosquitoes show how nature strikes back in an unnerving way, causing terror and death on the island. The terror of the mosquitoes is highlighted as being distinct yet as equally unnerving as the terror of war. Tearne creates an uncanny world immersed in violence, disease, and death as she compares the grotesque and fearful anopheles mosquitoes with female LTTE suicide bombers:

> In Colombo, the mosquitoes were back. Thin, fragile and deadly, they coated the walls of buildings in their thousands, filling the waterlogged coconut shells, turning the surfaces of everything they alighted into a living carpet. They fed on the flesh of rotting fruit, sucking out what remained of the honeydew nectar. Arriving with the mosquitoes was a new breed of women from the north of the island. Like the mosquitoes, they came with the rains. But unlike the mosquitoes, the women were full of a new kind of despair and a frightening rage. Their desire for revenge was greater than their interest in life. They had been trained; a whole army of psychologists working tirelessly on them had shaped their impressionable minds. The female mosquitoes' purpose in life was the continuation of their species, but the suicide bombers cared nothing for the future. (Tearne 2007: 253)

The comparison of the terrorists with the mosquitoes lends an ecophobic dimension to the text. The simultaneous arrival of the female LTTE cadres and the female mosquitoes is further marked by their huge numbers and their monstrous capacities. Just as the female suicide bombers plan for more attacks on the island, they facilitate a perfect environment for the mosquitoes to breed and transform the landscape through disease and death by creating lots of dilapidated spaces. As the mosquitoes

attack more and more people, the environment becomes even more frightening. Thus, the activities of humans are intertwined with those of the non-humans and the Gothic is manifested through the fear of the predatory instincts of both the female LTTE cadres and the mosquitoes.

The Gothic is further manifested in the novel through the trope of the forest that connects it to the escalating ecological crisis in Sri Lanka because of militarization, violence, and lawlessness in the country. John Wylie observes that postcolonial writers often replace the "European landscape aesthetics such as the sublime with a poetics of the ugly and the unrepresentable" (2007: 9). In Sri Lankan fiction, the forests are often depicted as sites of refuge for the LTTE, state-militarized zones, or places of escape, highlighting its disorienting and dangerous nature. Neloufer de Mel (2007) points out that during the civil war in Sri Lanka, the army was given paramount power over civilians under the pretext of maintaining law and order. Such unchecked powers led to government-sponsored killings, kidnappings, rape, disappearance, arbitrary detention, and other kinds of crime. In *Mosquito* the army headquarters is located in the middle of a dense forest and "the running river through parts of the jungle" (178) "provided a natural barrier around the low-slung concrete building that was the army headquarters" (178). Theo was kidnapped by the army and driven into the forest through "rough dirty tracks" and fecund vegetation:

> Brilliant tiger-striped orchids sprouted everywhere. Lilies grew wild, choked by the scented stephanotis, and huge creepers tangled with trees. Birds rustled in the dense mass of leaves, their cries echoing across the valley. Everywhere, in every pocket of light, there were small clouds of tiny butterflies hovering above the flowers, slipping through the hard scalloped leaves of the *belimal* trees. (Tearne 2007: 178)

Tearne writes that the "forest was teeming and heaving with life" (178) alluding to the agential properties of the forest, which created a frightening atmosphere for Theo as well as his kidnappers. The ruggedness and the fecundity of the jungle functioned as a hostile and gothic labyrinth that restricted the free movement of the people.

The forest in *Mosquito* is also the base for the LTTE. Tearne shows how militarism had become a dominant ideology in independent Sri Lanka and how people—women, youth, and children—were inducted into a martial survival model. Such extreme conditions are exemplified through the character of Vikram, a traumatized schoolboy who is forced to become a suicide bomber to avenge the murder of his parents and his sister's rape. Gerard, the LTTE commander, initiates him into the path of violence by constantly reminding him of his awful past and asking, "Don't you want to avenge your family, then?" (52) Tearne links the Gothic dimensions of Vikram's personality—he is reserved and anti-social—with his acquired liking for isolated places within forests like the Adia

Grove, a wasteland haunted by rumours of ghosts. Tearne writes that because of its eerie nature, "Adia Grove would never become popular" (108) and that "[o]nly Vikram frequented the place" (108). The uncanny dimensions of the grove are further accentuated through the grotesque images of dead bodies hanging from the trees "like a broken doll, swinging in the slight breeze" (109), "like a giant pendulum moving backwards and forwards, swinging to an invisible beat" (109), as the grove also became a lynching zone during the civil war. Tearne highlights the dense forests as extreme sites of fear characterized by festering bodies, detention camps, mysterious insects, deliriums, fever, and death. Such ecophobic representations of nature intersect with the EcoGothic as the non-human seems to equally contribute to the construction of monstrosity and fear in the narrative.

Tearne further elucidates the forest's malevolent nature through the images of the "insect-eating plant" and poisonous creatures and plants that threaten to consume anyone who messes with them:

> In certain parts of the jungle, there grows an insect-eating plant not found anywhere else on the island. If disturbed, its elegant leaves close down, like eyelashes. When this happens the butterflies or bees, flies or mosquitoes drawn to its scent, are trapped in its vice-like grip, killed in an instant. (Tearne 2007: 162-163)

Thus, Tearne highlights not only Theo's encounter with human forces of terror but also with the forest's overwhelming presence. The forests are spaces of lurking fear that overwhelm humans, even the terrorists and the army who try to dominate them. The fecund vegetation that Tearne describes as "mostly impenetrable and dense," (162) so much so that "the afternoon sun could filter (only) in a diffused way through the branches of the tree" (163) and the strange and poisonous insects, highlights a natural world twisting into an uncanny and monstrous figure. The narrative takes an anti-pastoral form as the text moves away from the romantic connotations of the landscape and instead presents Theo's encounter with the unknowable landscape that, because of the neglect and war, was taking monstrous proportions, capable of effectively destroying and turning Sri Lanka into an eerie place. Such narratives about a place could generate old fears about such landscapes and further generate ecophobia. Theo somehow escapes from the forest but the experience permanently unsettles him. He returns to the beach house and once again starts writing about the island. In his narrative, Sri Lanka emerges as a Gothic place—"the new novel continued to grow with a logic and rhythm of its own. It took its time, following a path of its own. The atmosphere of brooding darkness in a jungle of noxious violence and superstitions had developed in a manner that had nothing to do with him" (281). The mosquito develops into an apt metaphor for the island in his narrative — "Life in this paradise, he felt, was exactly as the beautiful mosquito that lived here, composed in equal parts of loveliness and deadliness," (281) reflective of Tearne's own preoccupation with the theme of

the transformation of Sri Lanka from a paradisical island into a place of danger and foreboding in *Mosquito*. As Susan J. Tyburski says, "in depicting the transformation of our natural environment into something monstrous, we come face to face with our alienation from nature" (2013: 150). Tearne's narrative, therefore, reflects anxieties about the changing Sri Lankan landscape and environment in the face of war and violence.

Conclusion

The two novels read through the lens of the EcoGothic and ecophobia in this article highlight the intersections of the political history of Sri Lanka with the ecological history of the island. The texts exemplify how ecophobia generates extreme cultures such as plantation monocultures, which are based on the exploitation of both the underprivileged people and the environment, and on the other hand, how the use to which spaces like the beach, the sea, and the forest are put in post-colonial Sri Lanka renders these spaces fearful and uncanny, generating ecophobia.

Weerakoon and Tearne revise and reorient Western traditions of writing, and their engagement with nature is informed by the history of Sri Lanka and the haunting evils of colonization, militarism, war, and the ruthless exploitation of the landscape. Through the EcoGothic, the writers overturn popular conceptions of tropical islands as idyllic and show landscapes as historical sites and palimpsests of multiple histories of violence. This reading, therefore, highlights the need to re-examine the relations between humans and their environment in postcolonial literature, especially contemporary Sri Lankan English literature, by foregrounding the intersections of the EcoGothic with postcolonial questions of race, class, gender, war, and ecophobia.

Notes

[1] *Walauwe* is a feudal or colonial manor house in Sri Lanka that represents the feudal social systems that existed during the colonial era. It is a common trope, often bearing gothic connotations in many contemporary works of Sri Lankan English fiction including Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Roma Tearne's *Mosquito*.

[2] See Sharae Deckard's "The Land was Wounded": War Ecologies, Commodity Frontiers, and Sri Lankan Literature."

[3] Sri Lanka, which was known as Ceylon before its independence from British colonial rule in 1948, was under European colonization from 1505. The Ceylonese elite, after the departure of the British, persisted with the colonial models of statecraft and the unitary form of Government imposed on them by the British, and failed to meet the demands of the Tamil minority. The Indian Tamils of Ceylon were disenfranchised which led to Tamil separatism and the emergence of groups like the LTTE, which resorted to large-scale violence. A

civil war broke out in Sri Lanka in 1983, which came to an end only in 2009 after the Sri Lankan Armed Forces defeated the Tamil Tigers.

[4] Sri Lanka is often referred to as a paradise or a picturesque place in colonial narratives. Melanie A. Murray in *Island Paradise: The Myth* traces the development of such perceptions in early narratives up to the nineteenth century and cites the examples of poems like "The Spell of Tropics" (1929) by Bunbury, "Islets Mid Silver Seas" (1929) by Clarke, and "Barbados" (1754) by Nathaniel Weekes to show how islands are looked at from an extremely romanticised perspective in colonial narratives.

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