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Uma Parmeswaran's *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*: A Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Uma Parmeswaran was born in Madras, India in 1938 and was raised in Jabalpur. She did her graduation from Jabalpur University and post-graduation in English from Nagpur University. She was a Fulbright Scholar and did M. A. in Creative Writing from Indiana University. She did her Ph. D. in English from Michigan State University in 1972. Her research areas are Literature of Romantic period, Post Colonial Literature, Gender Studies and South Asian Canadian Literature. She holds the prestigious position of the Regional Representative, National Council of the Writers Union of Canada. She started her career as newspaper reporter in India later she went to Canada. There she introduced various aspects on Indian culture not only to the Indo-Canadian youths of Winnipeg but also to the people of other countries. Her plays were published in Canada as well as in India. She has tried to show many aspects of diasporic sensibilities. She has been taking keen interest in bringing forth Indian culture and heritage to the students of Winnipeg for the last many years. She has presented the cultural values of Indian diasporic families in her most of her plays. Though she lived in foreign countries yet she could not forget her own culture and tradition. Now she is regarded as one of the most prodigious authors who have written on the cultural aspects of diasporic families of India. She has written plays from the cultural standpoint. Her plays depict the plight of the people in economical and emotional situation of the immigrant families who migrated to Canada in the latter half of the 20th Century. She has presented the cultural the alienation, assimilation and marginality. The objective of this research paper is to analyze her plays from cultural perspectives of the families living in Canada and the problem of their life in adjusting themselves in a new environment.

Keywords- *Assimilation, Alienation, Tradition, Culture, Rootlessness*

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Uma Parmeswaran is one of the well known diasporic writers. Diasporic writers are those who migrated to other countries from where they write both about their cultural assimilation and reconciliation of themselves with the host country. Migration began with the dawn of civilization, as man was required to move from one place to another in search of livelihood whether it was done willingly or forcefully. The paper explores the cultural perspective of the Canadian Diasporic writers who have settled there. There have been many diasporic writers in several parts of the world. They have written in different genres of literature like poetry, novel, drama, criticism, short story, travelogue, screen play and essay. However, few writers tried their talent in dramatic representation of diasporic people. Uma Parmeswaran, a poet, playwright, novelist and short story writer, is one of them. She has written plays about the diasporic families. The play, *Rootless but Green Are Boulevard Trees*, is about the culture, assimilation and alienation of immigrant people in a foreign land. In the play of Parmeswaran there are many characters having such problems. Savitri's character in the play, *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*, is very important to show the traditional values of India. She is wife of Sharad. She is more traditional than her husband in cultural manners. She behaves like a traditional Indian woman inside the house but when she goes out of the house, she behaves like the native people of Canada. She shows every signs of a traditional Indian woman in a foreign culture. Throughout the play, the playwright gives importance to the family bondage and emotional ties among the family members, which is the gist of Indian family culture. She has described the cultural aesthetic sustenance and substance from her past Indian culture in her play. In this play she attempts to grab better of the two worlds. Generally all of her one act plays recall any Indian past culture with its myth, legend and culture of homeland.

The play, *Rootless but Green Are the Boulevard Trees* is the story two families divided into three acts which reveal the cultural feeling of the characters, rootlessness and the other problem of diversity and adjustment of the two nations' culture. The play is about three generations. The first generation is of the parents who have migrated to Canada in their thirties. For them conflict of cultural diversity was not as intense as to the second generation who are in their twenties. They have spent some years of their life in India on account of which they feel the conflict and tension in the harmonious settlement in the new country. The third generation consists of the young siblings who are in their teens. The children have Caucasian friends and are engaged in activities outside Indian

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community. They feel alienated from the host culture because they think Canada to be their own land that is not so while the second generation does not think so. They maintain their native cultural heritage in themselves. How they preserve their homeland culture and activities, is depicted in the play by the playwright. The characters find that for the survival they must redefine themselves and accept each other as they have become. It does not mean leaving their past behind entirely, but it means that they must put down the 'roots' just like a tree, to thrive. Their family bond assists them all as they go forward. The kind of problems they face in the host land while cherishing the culture of the native land. They have to compromise with the environment and culture of the new country. By doing this they become a part of the host culture. The issue of assimilation –which is intermingling with the host culture with native culture, is described in the play. The alienation they feel in alien country and the plight of self- estrangement of the third generation of children and the family, what they undergo, is very clearly depicted in the play. Each of the characters is dealing with the disruption caused by immigration. Sharad, the father, trained as a scientist, but makes his living in Winnipeg as a real estate broker. His wife Savitri, is exhausted with the demands of her job as a teacher and demands of her family. She depicts the plight of the immigrants and the pangs of alienation symbolically by the suffering of bird as a bird feels uncomfortable in new environment in the same way she feels the same.

Uma Parmeswaran in *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* opines that the people always think of their own ethnic community, their native land, wherever in the world they are. As she infers that they will retain their culture, religion and a deep regard for the mythology of the home land in themselves. The objective of this play is the analysis of the immigrant people in different events, situations and experiences. The play is about the East Indian family living in the suburbs of Winnipeg. Savitri who is the chief protagonist, has a way of living and attitude to the host culture, which indicates that she is still dominated by the Indian culture of her past life. She struggles to keep her spirit alive, which is full of Indian traditional culture, by correlating the Indian tradition with modern Canadian culture. She strongly believes that we carry our Gods and traditional culture within us wherever we go in the world. The fact that she wears Saree inside her house puts kumkum and looks after the family at dinner time shows that she is still dominated by Indian culture. To some extent she is adopting the host culture. She does not prevent her daughter nor allows her husband to prevent her daughter to date with her white boy friend as some traditional Indian women have done that. She lets her use her car freely. For parents sacrificed their status for the betterment of their children, yet Sharad is often nostalgic for his past life and thinks about

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his decision (“...if an Ontario poplar can’t grow and survive in Manitoba soil, what chance does they have?”) He is confident that they will retain the best of their family and cultural values of native land.

It seems that the playwright has tried to show, by the title of the play which is a metaphor, that the protagonist Savitri who has her cultural roots in past India, is now rootless in Canada and yet she tries to flourish there by adopting the traditional Indian culture in host land. Probably Uma Parmeswaran did live through the experience, recognize the pangs of immigrant people and brings it to the literary expression, the phenomenon of rootlessness. Perhaps she has experienced it deep rootedly, the exquisite and subtle tension that went in shaping generation and continent. They basically feel the problem of assimilation with the host culture. For any Diasporic individual it is very essential for them to accept the cultural ideology of the host land. Then only they can fit in the environment of the host land. In the present context, Sharad’s expression “our people” (83) is quite significant to throw light on his nostalgic memories of homeland. His memories of river, temples and his people bring him out of the angst of alienation in the host land. When he says in the play,

I thought my people shall surely come again and we shall build our temple and sing our songs with all the children from all the different countries that make this their home.

Roots, son roots, I often think of our plantain trees back home. Each plantain tree leaves a young sapling, before it dries up ... It is a symbol of continuity and usefulness; you know how every part of plantain tree – flowers, leaves, trunk is put to good use. Can we really grow roots? ... If an Ontario polar can’t survive in Manitoba soil, what do we have? (22)

About the problem of assimilation Dilip suggest as how to adopt the alien culture. He quotes, “... this is your country, the only land you know... you have to try to assimilate ...The whites would appreciate that effort” (97). By adopting they become the parts of the host culture yet their roots are still grounded in their homeland which creates conflict in their mind and heart. They cannot avoid the fact of alienation in process of absolute harmony, frugality and mutual love that they face in alien land. The problem of assimilation is a serious problem of the immigrant people. Through this play the author wants to describe the phenomenon of transnationalism as a remedy to this problem. Reconciliation with other cultures will make them transnational in the world, the problem arises as

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they want to send their roots in host land, as they think Canada their own country and want to get assimilated with people of Canada.

Mrs. Vedapalli is right when she infers that “the immigrants have to unlearn what they have learnt in their own native culture and undergo the process in alien culture.”¹ R.Vedapalli rightly comments about the immigrant experiences in her article, “*Quilting a New Canon: A Study of the Select Plays of Uma Parmeswaran*,” as:

Uma Parmeswaran describes the different phases of immigrant experiences in her works. The first phase points out the nostalgia for the world they have left behind and the mixed feelings of wonder and fear at the new world they are now in. In the second phase, concentration is on family and career, due to their impulse to survive. The third phase shows an active interest in the activities of their own ethnic community and the final phase leads to participation in the larger political and social arena of the new country, through this intermingling of cultures, she attempts to affect a shift from a sense of rootlessness to a sense of community, from alienation to reconciliation” (176).²

With regard to preferring the native culture and home land one of the characters of the play *Vejala* who is the sister of Sharad says, “She has never felt comfortable in her new surrounding and has other personal problems” (47). Her unhappiness is reflected in her children. Her son Vithal is alienated from the other children in school and has failed in the examination, he faces great difficulty with the white people in adjustment with life and situation. She has nostalgic memory of her past nation as well culture. She prefers her native land to the host land that is why she says, “She would feel better wasting her life in her native country than wasting it in the backwoods of Canada”. (64) The intention of Uma Parmeswaran is contained in the highest degree of dual cultural sensibility in the play. The sense of rootlessness is very dominant in the character of Shridhar which is supported by Jayant, as he has the same ideology about the host culture in the play *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*. He says:

Jayant: Yeah, Rootless. Let’s face it, no one, but no one has roots anywhere because that is the things are in the 1979 AD. But we can stand tall, man. And live each day for all its goddamned worth and ours... (127)

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Regarding the importance of native culture Uma Parmeswaran has said in the preface of her play *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*.

It is an axiomatic fact that the Impact of early childhood and condition are more rampant during the formative period which makes an indelible impression on any human being's psyche. But when the person goes to a land entirely new cultural pattern, new ways of life and unfavorable working environment. He / she look at his /her past and get the feeling of nostalgia for that salubrious land, a kind of ethnic consciousness. This principle of lost land to their children born up or brought up in Canada fits completely. (178) 9

In the context of nostalgic memory of the past nation of people, the playwright says that her plays are about the correlating of the cultures of the two nations. Despite the specific references the characters make to India and their heritage, plus some references to dated events and expressions that are no longer in common usage, the challenges these people face apply to every group that has immigrated to this country in the past and in the present time. The challenges are of identity and adjustment which is the primary concern of the immigrant of past and present.

On the basis of the reading of the play and the observation of critical comments on the Diasporic family culture in the plays of Uma Parmeswaran it is clear that she writes about family culture, the difficulty in assimilation with the host land people. She depicts the dual culture of the people as well as the dual personality in the play, *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*. The play is an effective examination of all the issues that immigrant faces. It would be an effective catalyst for discussion in contemporary scenario. The play abounds in the frequent references to their native culture and event of home land. Her aim is to popularize Indian mythology, culture and music of Indian tradition among the western countries. The play did highly commendable service to Indian drama and culture. Uam Parmeswaran states that her plays belong to the connective phase of Indo-Canadian experience. Through the play she reveals to the western world the splendor and glorious culture of India. The play links the two nations the mythological India with the modern Canada. It establishes a relationship of culture between these two nations. The play is a landmark in its genres and in the life of the author too. She has written several novels plays and poems on the issues that are faced by Indo- Canadians.

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