

Asserting the Diasporic Identity in Uma Parameswaran's Oeuvre

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Abstract

Uma Parameswaran is a versatile writer-critic who has attempted to capture the trauma and dilemma of the diasporic self. Drawing on her first hand knowledge of the white collar, professional and academic diaspora in Canada, she attempts to voice their dilemmas and confusions, and above all, their feeling of rootlessness, their fear that having been uprooted once, they will never again be able to take root anywhere, despite their best efforts. The angst of the diaspora, striving to retain their identity even as they struggle to assimilate and become one of "them", forms the core of Uma Parameswaran's oeuvre. She has coined the term "saclit" to denote the literature produced by South Asian Canadian Diaspora, and has also written numerous critical essays on the subject. She explains: "The literature of Canadian writers born on the Indian subcontinent.... is varied in content and form, but common to all of them is a passionate faith in their own voice that is raised to express their Canadian experience" (SACLT 3)

Keywords- *Diaspora, Indian Mythology, Indo-Canadian Identity, Red and Assiniboine*

I. Introduction

In a world that is fast shrinking into a global village, social, political and geographical barriers are being annihilated. Newer and faster means of travel and communication are being invented every day. Human mobility across national and continental boundaries has increased on a scale that could never have been dreamed of even a decade ago. Nationalities merge to create new, hyphenated identities. Cultures intermingle to give rise to multicultural activities. M G Vassanji, the Indo-African-Canadian writer speaks of the

... Movement (in the Third World) from village to city, transition from the traditional to the modern, in most cases the Western, with accompanying feelings of exile and alienation. This movement continues in the exile and immigration to Western countries, propelled by adverse conditions at home and lure of better prospects abroad (2).

Santhosh Gupta points out one of the consequences of this development:

This global movement has led to the emergence of a new narration of travel, dislocation, displacement and uprooting.... In these narratives, new themes, new anxieties and searches have been expressed that reflect the traumas and tensions of the displaced as they strive to recover a sense of self or construct a new selfhood. (Jain 36).

Questions of selfhood and nationhood constantly become problematic for the “immigrant-in-exile” (Vassanji 2). The self that was once considered permanent and changeless, now seems fragile and ephemeral, buffeted by so many cross-currents that it defies definition. This has led to the formation of a diaspora of dislocated people, people who are voluntary and involuntary exiles, alienated from their homeland, creating imaginary utopian homelands, unable to properly take root elsewhere even as they long to take advantage of the freedom by their new habitat. They are haunted by a sense of not belonging, of never arriving at a destination that is final (Jain 37)

II. A Temple on the Red and Assiniboine: Voicing the Diasporic Self

The memorable works in poetry, drama and fiction authored by Uma Parameswaran epitomize the life of typical middle class Indian Immigrants in Canada. As Arun Mukherjee puts it, “Ethnicity and race have become important theoretical tools in the analysis and categorization of Canadian literature over the last decade” (24). This enables readers and critics to identify features unique to each ethnic group. One of the most striking features of Parameswaran’s oeuvre is the fact that characters, incidents, and even dialogue is repeated in these works, spanning genres, thereby giving us a sense of continuity and veracity, and creating the illusion that she is writing about the real people and real episodes. Judith Kearns comments in her introduction to *The Door I Shut Behind Me*,

that she found Parameswaran's "treatment of the theme of Indo-Canadian experience in different genres particularly intriguing", especially as of the writing was "interconnected by theme and by recurring characters" (v). Parameswaran deals with every possible aspect of immigrant experience including education, career, religion, friendship, sex, marriage, parenting, family conflicts and generational conflicts.

Parameswaran's long poem sequence, *Trishanku*, borrows from Indian mythology the concept of "Trishanku", a place that is neither heaven nor earth, as powerful symbol for the diasporic space. The poems in the sequence, as Kearns and McGifford explain in their introduction to *Shakti's Words*, "unfold over a twenty-year span, as a sequence of sixteen distinct voices, belonging to interconnected and recurring characters, which respond to a new land" (xi). The diaspora, suspended between two lands and two cultures, alienated from both, seem to belong nowhere, Wry humour merges into poignant nostalgia as the impossible struggle to adapt and yet retain one's identity continues. The form of the sequence enables Parameswaran to touch upon different aspects of immigrant existence from birth to death. Plays like *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* and *Dear Deedi, My Sister* as well as the novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree*, focus on the same issues and characters from different angles. "New Canadians" from different generations and from different backgrounds share similar concerns. Ties of family and friendship are tested in the fire of the new environment.

Parameswaran makes liberal use of Indian myths, folktales and beliefs, along with internationally known ones, in order to bolster her argument in her works. The 'Poet' in *Trishanku* talks of the "miscegenation of cultures/White and brown" and asks:

Shall I hang myself in the sky
As Trishanku did of old?
What new Elect shall I lead
To what Sinai to bring down
What law? (*The Road I Shut Behind Me* 22)

The intermingling of the Indian myth of Trishanku with the ascent of Moses to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God during the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt confers universality on the problem of diasporic identity. It is perhaps appropriate to remember at this juncture that the Jews who formed the original 'diaspora', and were scattered all over the world following successive waves of persecution, spread over centuries, managed to retain their religious and cultural identity wherever they may have settled.

The strangeness of the land, its geography and customs, proves another of the threads interwoven into Parameswaran's poem sequence. The section where Sharad remembers his ancestral

home and how his father would perform puja early in the morning, facing the rising sun in the east, ends:

But here the sun rises southeast
And the planets are all a-kilter
And all my words questions. (*The Door I Shut Behind Me* 44)

The same bewilderment finds expression in the section “Tara’s Mother-in-law” which begins:

What kind of place you’ve brought me to, son?
Where the windows are always closed
And the front door it is always locked?
And no *rangoli* designs on porch steps
To say please come in?
How can you expect Lakshmi to come, son?
You think she’ll care to enter
Where the same air goes round and round?

.....

You think she’ll bless this food
Three days old
You store in cans and ice-cupboard? (*The Door* 66)

The old woman proclaims “I cannot breathe this stale air” (66). The poem ends with her plaintive plea:

Open the windows, son
And let me go back
To sun and air
And sweat and even flies and all
But not this, not this. (*The Door* 67)

Though Canada has had an official policy of multiculturalism for many decades now, racial discrimination is still a strong undercurrent in Canadian society. It rears its ugly head in so many subtle ways, often cowering down the self-confidence of the visible minority. In the play *Rootless but Green* are the Boulevard trees, Sharad, an atomic energy scientist who immigrated to Canada in order to give a better life to his family, and who is now working as a real estate broker, avoids travelling by bus because it upsets him to find “All those alien faces staring at or through you. . . .Makes me ask myself, What am I doing here? Who are these faceless people among whom my life is oozing away? Each so self-contained... looking at me as though I shouldn’t be there” (82). And his wife Savitri replies, ‘That’s why I got myself a car. So I wouldn’t have to ask myself questions that perhaps never

can be answered" (82). This dialogue, with a few minor alterations, is found in Parameswaran's novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* (30), and also in *Trishanku* (The Door 50), highlighting the intense feeling of alienation and aloneness in a crowd, that is an integral part of immigrant existence.

Interestingly, their nineteen year old son Jayant retorts, "When I take a bus downtown I love it" (82), revealing the casual way in which the younger generation merges into mainstream Canadian society because they have fewer inhibitions, fewer memories and lesser desire to preserve their ancestral reports. Jayant protests when his father keeps referring to "our people" and "our country", reminding him that Canada was now their country. But Sharad keeps harping on the impossibility of a tree taking roots in an alien soil. When Jayant cites the example of full grown tropical trees transplanted to a nearby apartment block which are flourishing without any problem, his father counters by pointing to the poplars that they had planted in their own yard which had begun to dry up. Sharad reminds him of their neighbour's comment that the poplars would not flourish because they were from Ontario, and were not native to Manitoba. Then he adds bitterly, "And if an Ontario poplar can't survive in Manitoba soil, what chance do we have?" (*Mangoes* 31)

But even the younger generation are sometimes forced to come out of their ostrich-like attitude to racism, as when Jyoti, visiting an Indian home, is confronted with two small boys who had come to make a collection, who shout "Paki house" (*Mangoes* 121) as they are leaving. The fact that she was able to force an apology out of them is little consolation.

Jyoti . . . drove away, her mind in a turmoil. The incident deeply disturbed her. It was her first encounter with overt racism. Oh, she had heard of it, of course... there was no doubting that racism existed. She had read of it, and discussed it in her sociology courses, but this was her first encounter with it face-to-face She couldn't even begin to sort out the feelings that had rushed through her... the uncontrollable spasm of fear and shock at the word 'Paki' flung at her. There was something about the encounter that frightened her far more than the actual incident warranted. (124-5)

Traditional religious rituals often provide a sense of continuity and solace in times of crisis. For example, sacred Gangajal is hoarded in Hindu immigrant households. A section of *Trishanku* describes a desperate dash made by a distraught man through the winter snow in order to get some Gangajal to anoint a dying person. But Sharad's sister Veejala, an eminent Professor in Astronomy in a Canadian University, declares that heritage was crutch and adds, "If there's a crutch handy... you'll use it whether you need it or not And all that baggage from the old country is just a crutch. All that weight upon our backs. We have to strike roots here" (*Mangoes* 48). It is perhaps significant that at the end of the novel, Veejala resigns her University job and decides to return to India, leaving her husband and children in Canada.

The families of Sharad Bhave and his sister Veejala Moghe, and their circle of friends, form the core of Parameswaran's play *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*, as well as her novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree*. The topic of diasporic identity is a favourite topic of discussion among the younger generation. Parameswaran uses the frequent get-togethers of the youngsters at the Bhave house to air different viewpoints of the immigrant experience as seen from the point of view of the younger generation. Some favour total integration, but others speak of retaining the old, while adapting to the new. Many feel that only by sticking together can they confront the threat of racism. When the newcomer Dilip says "You should make every effort to merge since you're here to stay" (*Sons* 37-38), Vithal Moghe, who is something of a rebel and who into always speaks of militating for one's rights, retorts passionately:

They don't want us to assimilate. They want us out. We'll be squashed like bugs soon. All these years we thought that isolation was coming from us, but now that we are trying to merge we know exactly how they feel. They never wanted us and now we are a threat... We have to stay separate from them and stay together within. That's the only way. (*Sons* 98)

Rajen cynically explains that the much publicized multicultural policy of Canada only ensured that different groups of people were ghettoized. But Vithal asserts that ghettoization would ensure unity and strength, as in the case of Jews. In the play *Dear Deedi, My Sister*, Ilago, a little boy from Philippines says:

When the snow comes, Ma,
I'll get less brown won't I?
It would be nice to be white,
More like everyone else
You know? (*Sons* 65)

Another related topic that engages the attention of the young people is the question of dating and marriage. The men complain the Indian girls seem to prefer white men. The awkwardness of trying to retain Indian customs and at the same time behave as whites of their age do, create yet another trishanku. Sharad's daughter Jyoti is engaged to Andre, a white boy. Andre gains the approval Jyoti's parents because he seems to share Indian values. Sharad comments, "Andre is a decent boy. He behaves just like one of us. So respectful. And he looks like us too, with his black hair and eyes" (*Sons* 81). Vithal also has a white girlfriend, Donna, who is approved by Savitri for being "more Hindu than most of us" (*Sons* 104), and hence would make a faithful wife. Here we see the almost pathetic attempt of the older generation to convince themselves that their children are retaining

traditional Indian values in their choice of partners. It is significant that at the end, Jyoti breaks off from Andre and turns to Sridhar who had always loved her and Vithal breaks with Donna...

Vithal says during an argument with his Indian friends in the play *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*: “We shall build our temple at the confluence of the Red and the Assiniboine and then we shall say Okay, we are ready to assimilate”. This statement, taken along with Sharad’s remark that rivers and mountains have always fascinated mankind and that is why, in India we find temples on every hillock and riverbank, points to yet another means of assimilation-acceptance on equal terms.

Elsewhere Vithal asserts, “We’ve got to show them that we have as much right to be here as the pissed off whites who’ve bullied their way into this country these last three hundred years” (98).

III. Conclusion

Building a temple at the confluence of the Canadian rivers Red and Assiniboine is an often repeated metaphor in Parameswaran’s drama and fiction for the herculean task of forging a new diasporic identity that would preserve the essence of the old even as it merges in the new. In the novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree*, the flooding of the Red and the Assiniboine that threatens the peaceful life of Winnipeg, brings the community together and removes barriers in an unprecedented way. Jayant is one of the young men who work tirelessly, shoulder to shoulder with the others, to sandbag the river and divert the floodwaters. The waters of the river that threatens brown and white alike, and endangers harmony, may perhaps be seen as a levelling and unifying force, and thus becomes as sacred to the immigrant consciousness as the Ganga. The play *Dear Deedi My Sister* concludes with the extract from Sapna’s letter to her Deedi in India, “We must build our temple here, where the Assiniboine flows into the Red. And we shall bring Ganga, as Bhagirata did of old, to our land, our Assiniboine, and here shall be groves where Uma shall dance with Parameswara” (*Sons* 73). Thus we have Parameswaran playing on the mythological overtones of her own name to reinforce her notion of a unique diasporic Canadian identity, forged by those who have crossed the oceans, carrying their own baggage of myths and beliefs, and confidently asserting their selfhood in a new land. Savitri’s response to Vithal’s remark about building the temple is thought provoking: “Some day, I hope, Vithal and all of you will realize that we have already built that temple because we carry our gods within us and with us wherever we go” (*Sons* 105). Tom Wayman’s remark about the sequence *Trishanku*, may be taken as an assessment of her entire oeuvre, which is a “startling and powerful collage of the experience of uprooting and resettlement, of the intermingling of personal and social histories, and of many other human dimensions involved in transplanting an ancient culture to a new land” (*The Door* vii).

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