



Cultural assimilation and diaspora: A study of Uma Parameswaran's selected works

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Abstract

Diasporic writings throw light on the issues like the pain of being homeless, cultural crisis, dilemma of choosing the language and landscapes. Uma Parameswaran brings forth the problems with the experiences of South-Asian- Canadians in Canada. She focuses on the problems that destroyed the immigrant community in Canada and displays the personal and psychic trauma, a sense of loss and nostalgia, despair, dislocation, dislocation and memory of the past. She emphasizes the need of immigrants to choose their home by constantly adapting themselves to the new homeland.

Keywords: diaspora, culture, immigrant, identity, displaced etc

Introduction

Uma Parameswaran – a poet, playwright, novelist and short-story writer -was born in Madras (Chennai) in 1938 and grew up in Jabalpur, India. She is a first generation immigrant from India to Canada. She began her career as a newspaper reporter in India and later became a famous author of several works which gained awards like 1999 New Muse Award, Canadian Author Association Jubilee Award (2000). Uma Parameswaran's works represent the voices of the immigrants who have shown their resistance against discrimination and the denial of their rights. She has devoted much of her works and efforts in the literary field to create an identifiable South Asian Canadian Diaspora.

Diasporic Literature is a vast concept that includes all those literary writings associated with native culture and background written by the authors outside their native country. The term 'Diaspora' originally refers to the Jews who had been exiled from Babylon and forced to leave their native land on the pains of death. In ancient Greek the word diaspora means a scattering or sowing of seeds. The exiled Jews were forced to scatter far and wide for their survival. The word diaspora also refers to any ethnic population living outside their indigenous place, sharing common bonds and subsequent developments in their culture and ethnic identity. Jasbir Jain reflects the true essence of diasporic literature and says, "home and nation, and schizophrenia and nostalgia are the preoccupation of these writers of these writings as they seek to locate themselves in the new culture" (45).

Some of the most notable diasporas of this era have been the African diaspora, the South – East Asian diaspora, the Polish diaspora and the Arab diaspora. South Asian Diaspora comprises Indian, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Tibet while South-East Asian diaspora includes Japan, China, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Indian Diaspora is different in two facts from the Sri Lankan diaspora, the Pakistani diaspora and the Bangladeshi diaspora. The connotations of forced exile and the fear of death can't be associated with the Indian diaspora. Right from the outset skilled and semi-skilled workers, highly educated, qualified and skilled professionals have been migrating with the intention of

material, intellectual and professional benefits. Secondly, there exists within Indian territorial borders, a more fascinating inter-state diaspora. Indians have been migrating to various parts of the world from ancient times. The earliest emigration of Indians may be traced for the purpose of trade and spread of religion with other civilizations like the Greek and the Mesopotamian. There are also instances of the Buddhist monks spreading the religion across the South and South- East Asia.

Above all the educational system in the post independent India followed the British and American educational systems. This system attracted people with the opportunities of job abroad. This migration was mainly to the developed nations of the West.

Indian diasporic literature is one of the most talked about and discussed topics in world literature today. Displaced communities and their settlement in an alien land play a dominant role in it. From skilled workers to well qualified Indian citizens wishing for a better life in other countries, all come under the scope of Indian diasporic literature. After the independence of India the Indian diasporic community has become sensible, and it comes as a result of their acceptance by the West. Major Indian diasporic writers include V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Homi K. Bhabha, Uma Parameswaran and many more. The search for home and the transformation of the identities are an integral part of Indian diasporic literature. The eternal theme discussed by them is the sense of displacement. They dealt not only with a geographical dislocation but also with a social-cultural consciousness of displacement.

V.S. Naipaul stands tall amongst all Indian diasporic writers. The sense of 'Homelessness' comes naturally to him and it is the main thing with which most of his writings are discussed. In his novel *A House For Mr. Biswas*, the protagonist's search for his own house is a search for belongingness. Another diasporic writer Salman Rushdie's works *Grimus*, *Shame* and *Midnight's Children* deal with the plight of alienation. The protagonist in *Midnight's Children* journeys through India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and yet there is no place for him to settle down. Thus relocation is the root cause of alienation in his works.

Amitav Ghosh's works deal with the colonial period of indentured labourers. Ghosh's works take shape in the historical descriptions of the first generation of workers who left their native land never to return back, to settle in a foreign country where they would never again find their true selves. While Ghosh dealt with the historical accounts of the immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri presented the crisis of identity and belongingness. Her characters especially Gogol Ganguli in *The Namesake* (2003) tries his best to break free from the shackles of Indian traditions in order to be accepted by the American world. One of the most widely known writers of Indo-canadian literature is Bharati Mukherjee. Her work *The Middleman and Other Stories* focus on the issue of migration, the status of new immigrants and the feelings of alienation experienced by expatriates as well as Indian women. Homi K. Bhabha's works are widely recognized for their emphasis on hybrid identities, diasporas, migrancy and border-crossings.

Uma Parameswaran's works are a reflection of assimilation and integration reflected in her works. It is true that to assimilate with the culture of a host land is a difficult task but Parameswaran's characters are true representative of assimilation. Her characters want to establish their identity rather than fall back upon the nostalgia and old memory. Parameswaran represents her stories in the framework of diaspora studies which comprise her western experience with the Indian realities. As an immigrant she is clear and conscious regarding her own identity and therefore all her writings reflect the sense of alienation and rootlessness which are most relevant for the Indian diaspora.

R. Vedapalli rightly comments about Uma Parameswaran's diaspora in her article, "Quilting a New Canon: A Study of the Selected Plays of Uma Parameswaran":

Uma Parameswaran describes the different phases of immigrant experiences in her works. The first phase 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 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 (176)

She presents the lives and experiences of Indian immigrants as they struggle hard to adjust and cope with the new atmosphere of the host land. The immigrants in these situations are compelled to feel that they belong neither to their homeland nor to their host country. Parameswaran's novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* and her poetry collection *Trishanku* reflect the 'in-between' condition of the immigrants. Uma Parameswaran in her works emphasizes on putting down roots and accepting herself a part of the dominant culture, while simultaneously preserving of one's ethnic, cultural and mythological moorings in the homeland. Her works reflect identity, another fundamental concept to the study of diaspora. Parameswaran deals with issues of ethnic and racial identity. The instinct for survival as an ultimate moving force can be studied obviously in Parameswaran's works. While Jayant in *Rootless But Green are the Boulevard Trees* says, "it's a strange, eerie feeling, all those discreetly questioning eyes that make me ask endless questions"(103). Adjusting with social, political, economic and psychological changes is a great challenge. To adjust oneself with the host culture creates emotional and psychological problems. All immigrants, according to

Parameswaran, are not ready to change their nature to become friends with the Whites. As far as Uma Parameswaran is concerned, the immigrant spaces are homogenous; it depends on how they change themselves according to the new environment in an alien country. After reading *Dear Deedi, My Sister* it can be expressed how immigrants feel disillusioned.

In the host land they face humiliation many times and they feel rootless when two boys in *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* where Jyoti is at Romona's house, shouted "Paki, Paki house" (95). It is Jyoti's first encounter when somebody makes them remind their identity. Paki in Canada is an expression of racist abuse, it emphasizes that the person addressed has the status of the 'other', making difference more visible and practically prohibiting the will to integrate into the host society as this is a proof of enmity towards foreigners and migrants.

Parameswaran has created an insight into the views and attitude of the natives towards the migrants. She has shown dynamically the shifting concepts of 'home and displacement' in the successive generations of migrants. She throws light on the diasporic sensibility of the immigrants. It basically highlights the feelings of rootlessness, alienation, search for better future and assimilation. Dislocation and search for better future make them feel isolated.

The present study attempts to interrogate the issue of marginality from the perspective of the immigrants struggle to maintain their identity while the issues of nostalgia and in-betweenness assail their psyche. It makes a slight departure from earlier attempts looking at the question of the immigrant attempting to merge into the mainstream. This study tries to look at the forward vision put forth by Uma Parameswaran in order to provide some kind of a solution for the establishment of a unified, coherent migrating culture. The main objective of the study is to examine the immigrants' journey from the inhabitation of interstitiality towards firmer grounds overcoming the problems of identity-crisis and hybridity. It will analyze the state of the global Indian Diaspora evaluating and focusing on the search for identity in the lives of immigrants. In this process, the immigrant reclaims his/her identity and reconciles his/her self by emulating cultural difference eventually transforming it.

But a critical study of Parameswaran's works hint at the phenomenon of transnationalism as a solution to this problem. Reconciliation and merging with other cultures will certainly make them transnational in the world.

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