

Double Edge to Immigration in Uma Parameswaran's plays (*Sons must die and Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Tree*)

Dr. Lakhwinder Singh Gill

Professor, S.R Govt College for Women, Amritsar, Punjab, India

Abstract

Uma Parameswaran is one of those playwrights who have migrated from India to other country but India continues to live in their thoughts. Whether it is *Sons Must Die* or *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*, India dominate Uma Parameswaran's vision as a playwright. In *Sons Must Die* the reference is to Kashmir, the Indian region, where thousands of lives are lost but there is no visible solution to its problem yet. The playwright is of the view that the Kashmir issue may be taken from any angle, but the fact remains that the youth is dying – whether one dies as a terrorist or as a soldier it is the loss of India. This loss of the sons of India perturbs the playwright sitting in Canada. On the other hand, *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* refer to the Indians who have migrated to India with the hope of better future. Physically they have left India but psychologically they could not. As a result, metaphorically speaking, their leaves may look green but, in fact, they are rootless. First generation that migrated with the hope of bright future of their sons and daughters are caught between two different cultures- Indian culture which they cannot leave and Canadian culture which they cannot adopt. This clash of two cultures tortures them: Indians they are not now, Canadians they cannot be.

Keywords: Uma Parameswaran's plays, Double Edge

Introduction

Uma Parameswaran, born and educated in India, migrated to Canada in 1960s. Living in Canada she has tried her hand at poetry, short story and playwriting too. Whatever genre she may choose to write in, India and Indianness always permeate in her writing. As she admits, "What I find intriguing is that I have been living with these characters a long time and that they keep trying to find their medium, now on the doors of poetry, now of the stage, and now of fiction". The plays of Uma Parameswaran become all the more relevant as she has the firsthand experience of leaving her home country with a view to find roots in Canada, in her works we find Indian Diaspora doing the same and grappling with the subsequent hard realities. Aspirations, dilemmas and nostalgia of this migrant community find recurrent expression in her writings. The void between what this community dreams and what it actually encounters on the foreign land is a matter of grave concern for her. She is not only concerned with the plight of Indians living in Canada but also with that of those left behind. The agony and the sufferings of the people living in India influence her vision as a playwright. As she has experienced life on an alien land, her account of the Indian Diaspora becomes all the more realistic. In this article an attempt will be made to trace the idea of Indian ethos in her two plays *Sons Must Die* and *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*.

Sons Must Die, with the chorus comprising Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, is set against the backdrop of Kashmir that was soon after the partition of India. Ostensibly, the play deals with the Indo-Pak conflict over Kashmir and the human casualties caused by it. But at the deeper level the play gives horrid picture of India facing loss of the youth and the resultant disillusionment or hopelessness at the Kashmir front. It also laments over the upsurge of violence in the name of race and

religion in the contemporary India. Though the play deals with the historical event of independent India, it has current significance too as the geographical issues amongst Indian states are still taking toll on the lives of hundreds of people every year. The young man of India is dying sometimes as a soldier and sometimes as a terrorist: either way the loss is of Mother India.

The three mothers in the play Meenakshi, Zohra and Prem Behn become the representatives of three different attitudes of an Indian mother to the Kashmir issue. The three young men, on the other hand, are basically three different attitudes of the youth to the same problem: should they die defending their country or live to realize their personal dreams of life. Thus the dilemma of the Indian youth becomes the dilemma of the playwright.

The three women presented before us in the play come from the different parts of the sub-continent. All are unfamiliar with the geographical and political importance of Kashmir but the common thing between them is that they all have lost their sons in Kashmir. Their maternal sensibility transcends all political boundaries as they view war only as a horror. Meenakshi, Zohra and Prem Behn, the three mothers, come to Kashmir to look for their sons who sacrificed their lives to safeguard their motherland. Meenakshi and Zohra are of the view that human sacrifice in Kashmir is of no use as India has already enough land of its own. It is pointless, feel they, to make such a huge sacrifice for the unproductive land like Kashmir. Meenakshi holds:

Fighting for a region we need not have
 Though ours by right it may be.
 My country as it stands commands the sea
 Land, air, oh why do they want more?...
 Enough have we of riches

Enough of troubles. We need no more...
 O what amounts we stake for this!
 Lives, human lives, sons' lives, O India
 Is this enchantress worth sons' lives? (17-18)

To Zohra, on the other hand, what matters is the religion and it is of least importance who rules in Kashmir. So there is no question of war as the people living in Kashmir are Muslim (and not Hindus). She thinks:

But new lands, why new lands?
 Why Kashmir?
 People here are of our faith I know
 What matters who rules them so long
 As they bow to Islam. (19)

But the perception of Prem Behn, the third mother, is entirely different. As Kashmir is a beautiful part of our country and is an integral part of it, the fight for Kashmir is just and logical, feels she. No sacrifice is big enough to achieve it. That is why she is so proud of her son who laid down his life fighting for the cause of Kashmir:

Proud am I that my son is fighting
 For such a prize lovely valley
 Had I hundred sons
 I'd send them all to fight for thee, and consider it
 Sacrifice for such a treasure. (26)

Like the mothers the attitudes of the three young men who died fighting are also different. Minakshi's son dies satisfied as his childhood ambition of flying in a plane is fulfilled at last. He joined army not for any patriotic reason but only to have a feel of flying in the air. Kishore, Prem Behn's son, also believed in the theory of eating, drinking and marrying but in no case liked dying prematurely for any cause whatsoever. Nothing is more important for him than his own life:

I want to live
 Feel the blood of youth coursing
 Through my veins...
 To get the sting of winter's freezing cold
 To feel the Sun upon my face (32-33)

So his death, as a dejected young man, pains his mother too who first wanted him to embrace death calmly for his country. The play reaches its climax when the poet appears on the stage as a romantic but disillusioned soul. He is a commentator on the nightmarish reality of Kashmir. What pains him is the suffering of mothers who remain the worst hit in the entire scene. Unable to see the dying Kishore, the poet stabs himself saying Kishore be spared in lieu of which his life may be taken.

Depicting the sad reality of the armed conflict claiming thousands of innocent lives, the play makes a commentary on the current violence taking place on different parts of India. Innumerable terrorist and separatist movements have raised heads recently causing a lot of bloodshed. The play hints at the urgency of finding some solution to this perpetual violence. Ringing the alarming bell the playwright hints at the stark reality, that is, sons of the land will have to die if we fail to find some solution to this all pervasive violence of which no state seems to be free.

If violence in India catches the attention of the playwright in *Sons Must Die*, the physical and the mental agony of the fellow Indians living in Canada finds expression in *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Tree*. The metaphor of the leaves which are "green" and the tree which is "rootless" is highly suggestive. The title of the play connotes that the Indians Diaspora in Canada may look green but they are rootless in reality. They do not live in India but India lives in them in the form of memories. This play presents before us the three generations of an Indian family in Canada. The characters belong to three different generations. Their individual experiences project how they are torn between the pulls of their past and allurements of the future, Sharad, Savitry Bhave, Sharad's sister Veejla, her husband Anant Moghe represent the first generation of Indians living in Canada. These two families left India in their adult years for different reasons. Second generation is represented by the Bhave and the Moghe children in their early twenties. As they have spent first half of their life in India and the second half in Canada, the values they have imbibed are also the mixture of the two societies. Then Krish Bhave and Preeti Moghe, twelve and ten years old respectively, represent the third generation of Indians. They are deeply immersed in the Canadian culture. As they have never seen India, they know it only by its food, clothing, language, religion and social practices only. So it is not surprising that they have no emotional bond with India and its culture whatsoever.

The playwright also seems to suggest in the play that acculturation depends upon the age of the migrant and the length of stay in the country of migration. Indians leave their homes and their respectable jobs for Canadian immigration, but their past haunts them forever. The daughter of the man who was working as a scientist in India but left the job for Canada, feels, "It could have not been easy for him to move only after he was 35, and it was not a bed of roses, mowing the lawns, painting the houses and thousand mechanical chores which were done by servants in the luxury of family back home."

We see India and Indianness operating at the back of the minds of the migrants when we meet Savitry who still likes to wear *sari* and put *Kumkum* on her forehead. Her daughter's late night arrival at home disturbs her much. Sharad, her husband, hiding his own apprehension regarding the friendship of their daughter with a non-Indian boy consoles her thus:

Don't be a worrier, Savi. She's a good girl. And Andre is a decent boy he behaves just like one of us. Besides you shouldn't continue to live in the prudish world of our youth. The youngsters here are doing well. They have their own code of morals and they are more idealistic than we give them credit for. The disco craze is perfectly harmless a hundred youngsters swaying around. Group activities are the safety valves and thanks for our Winnipeg winters. Nobody can wander into the bushes (81)

Savitri rightly points out, "We conquered within and without wherever we go." Scrubbing the floor and polishing things to earn Canadian dollars, she has lost the softness of her hands. Jyoti reminds them of their suffering thus, "No matter how long we live here it is never long enough to forget either our old ways or our old comforts." She tries to keep her spirits up forgetting the comforts of the past. Due to her Indian background she feels perturbed over her daughter's dating with her boyfriend. If there is any assimilation or acculturation it is only external. Her

Indian concept of sexual purity is butchered when she finds contraceptives in her daughter's car. Such incidents torment her much but she cannot check her daughter doing so. Ironically, the only thing she can do is to tell her daughter not to use her father's car when she goes on dating. Her husband is repentant of leaving India and he still cherishes Indian system of social values. Being Indian, family ties are more important to him than anything else. Another character Veejala leaves Canada due to racial and gender discrimination. Asked if she is discriminated against because of her sex, Dr. Megha views, "I happen to be of the wrong colour."

In an attempt to find roots on a foreign land the first generation has to make a lot of sacrifice. What haunts them the most is the memory of their homeland? On the other hand, the discrimination and the raw deal they have to pocket living amongst the foreigners is another serious problem. Only a few people like Veejala prefer to suffer in their own country rather than in a foreign country. She confesses that the conditions in India are also not encouraging and living in India is also like wasting one's life. But she will prefer to "waste" her life in India rather than living in "*the backwoods of Canada*." The tragedy of the second generation is graver in the sense that unlike their parents they have none to fall back upon in India.

The second generation has no love for India and they accept Canada as their mother land. But for the natives of Canada they remain Indians always. This feeling gradually dawns upon them and frustrates them ultimately. Jyanti and his friends belong to this category of the disgruntled generation of immigrants. They are not accepted as equal by the whites.

Assimilate, my ass. They don't want us to assimilate. They want us out. We shall be squashed like bugs soon. All these years we thought the isolation was coming from us, but now that we are trying to merge we know exactly what they feel. They've never wanted us and now we are a threat. (98)

As a last resort they start searching for their own lost ethnic identity in various ways. They celebrate Indian festivals enthusiastically wearing Indian dresses, assemble at their religious places on religious days, dance and sing Indian traditional songs on important family occasions. Uma Parameswaran tries to convey the idea that nostalgia is the prime feature of the migrants of the first generation; the interest in the ethnocentric country organizations of the next generation proves that the migrant may be of any generation they never get over the feeling of nostalgia. Finding emotional joy in family ties is the core of Indian culture. Indian migrants cannot break away this bond easily, suggests the playwright. At the end Jayanti drops the idea of going out and Jyoti's refusal to date Andre suggests that the second and the third generations have to fall in line with their parents in order to lead happy family life. Indian culture seems to stand as a winner at the end when we find the family leading happy life after they resolve to believe in the Indian concept of family and family ties. If they want to live happy with their distinct identity and survive in the alien culture, the children have to cultivate Indianness through their parents.

Here the Canadian claim of being a multicultural society also stands exposed as the native citizens are shown reluctant to accept the Indians easily. Vithal says: "We've got to stand tall. And by god we shall. We shall build our temple at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine and then we shall say Okay we

are ready to assimilate. Not here not now. Now it'll be bootlicking, apple-polishing." (98-99)

Thus we see that both the plays collectively portray the inner and outer picture of the life of Indian diaspora living in Canada. *Sons Must Die* rejects the idea of war in general and deplores the loss of human lives in Kashmir. It suggests that the Indian Diaspora despite living thousands of miles away from their country remains emotionally tied to it. The happenings in India, whether it is in Kashmir or in any other state, affect them and they cannot remain indifferent to them. They are bound to their homeland which they have left and they don't feel at home on the land (Canada) where they are actually living. In *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* this idea gets pronounced all the more.

References

1. Uma Parameswaran. *Sons Must Die and Other Plays* New Delhi: Prestige Books. All other textual references are from this edition only page number is given in parentheses, 1998.
2. Ganesan S. *The Ambivalent Note: A Critical Study of Uma Parameswaran's Sons Must Die* India in Canadian Imagination: A Literary Response ed. R.K. Dhawan, D.K. Pabby SS. Sharma, New Delhi: Prestige, 2003.