

**ENCOUNTER OF CULTURES: VOICING THE DIASPORIC SELF IN UMA  
PARAMESWARAN'S OEUVRE**

**Manisha.N.Rathod**  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Andhra University  
Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh

History of human civilization is full of migration, however in the modern period major waves of migration originated in the colonial period. The United Nations estimates international migrants constitutes about three percent of the world population. There is an ongoing thread among the scholars to produce magnum opus in the field of Diaspora and to study about the migrant communities under the fabric of 'study of Diaspora'. Etymologically the term 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek word 'Diasporian'. Khachig Tololian writes, "The term (Diaspora) that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community. The Diaspora debate over the past decade has experienced two extreme positions-one being that the terms and concepts refer to the specific migration of Jews, which occurred among very unique historical circumstances; while the other is that of a universal application and settlement beyond the borders. However in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a broader perspective of the Diaspora emerged and now it is confined to merely Jews migration. Hence forth we see the resurrection of the old term 'Diaspora' which has been partially prompted by the impasse of the idea of 'racial and ethnic minorities created with their emphasis on the inter group processes and their static notions of culture and difference. Uma Parmeswaran, being a diasporian, has been a true representative of her native culture and also been relocated herself in the host culture admirably, having grown new roots in the alien soil. I have taken a short story, a series of poems and plays which represent not only the dilemmas of the immigrants but also the zeal and enthusiasm of the younger generation to belong to the host culture. Parmeswaran is concerned with the impact of Diaspora on the immigrants, in particular how Diaspora has affected the Indian immigrants as they try to adapt to their new environment and how it affects their relationship with the people around them especially their children who are born in host country.

Migrated writers feel the mixed feelings of cultures and as well as they witness the pro-democracy demonstrations hereby leading to encounter of cultures. They experience the condition of anonymity for fear of repercussions in the mainland which echoes a dilemma articulated by many recent migrants from the mainland. On the matters, to do with the identity, when an individual shifts country's the identity is one big thing question which cannot be overcome. Apart the 'Desh-Pradesh' syndrome is flashed in their mind again and again heading them towards despair and dilemma. Many of the first generation expatriates who consider India their true home, as it is their place of nurture, values, and extended families and as well as their deepest sympathies and attachments. However, this is not universally the case; accommodated to the overseas lifestyles, many diasporian members experience a distant dissonance when re-

introduced to their former sub-continental cultures. The Diasporic consciousness, as some critics aver, presupposes the predominance of such feelings as alienation, dispersal longing for the ancestral homeland, double-identification with original homeland and the adopted country (desparadesh dialectic), identity crisis, remembering the myths of the homeland.

The modern Diasporic Indian writers can be grouped into two distinct classes. One class comprises of those individuals who had spent a part their life in India and have carried their baggage offshore. The other class comprises of those who have been bred since childhood outside India. They have a picturesque of their country only the outer view terming India as exotic place of their origin. The writers of the former group have a literal displacement where as those compared that of the latter class who find themselves rootless. Both the classes have produced an enviable corpus of literature. The Diasporic Indian writers usually deal with the characters from their own displaced community but some of them have also taken a liking for western characters and they have been convincing in dealing with them. Indian Diasporic writers of the first generation have already established their credentials by winning numerous awards and honours. But recently the ranks of the second generation of Indian writers in the west have swelled enormously and many among them won international recognition. Thus we come to know that Diasporic writing requires the writer's projection of his own culture, relating at the same time more positively to the host culture. As he moves from one culture to another, the writers may need to relocate him afresh in relation to the centre. Living on the margins, trying to perform the role of an ambassador and a refugee, the Diasporic writer seeks affirmation and re-affirmation in a new perspective. Being an immigrant of 1960's, Uma Parameswaran, an Indo-Canadian writer, fulfils both the requirements of Diaspora. While the "melting pot" ethos of the American culture helps to iron out the socio-cultural differences to a great extent, creating a monolithic 'American' identity, the multi-cultural 'mosaic' of Canadian culture protects the rights of ethnic cultures to maintain distinctive identities within the main stream Canadian culture. Hence, she could relate more positively to Canadian culture, while retaining at the same time, her distinctive identity.

Commenting on the creative processes of the immigrant literature. Uma Parameswaran has observed that "Every immigrant transplants part of his native land in the new country and the transplants may be said to have taken root once figuratively sees the river that runs in the adopted place, not the Ganga, or the Assiniboine as the Ganga, both of which imply a transference or substitution – the confluence of any two rivers is scared." Evidently the suggestion is that the Ganga and the Assiniboine cannot be substitutes for one another but can exist as co-relatives. The visualizations of his experience and the concretization of the immediate in radically different idiom is indeed a process towards the re-location of the immigrant's identity. The new world presented is not a fantasy that cancels the reality of the past but on the contrary is a re-adjustment, adaption, participation and fulfilment.

A chronological study of Uma Parmeswaran's works reflects the ongoing involvement of an immigrant writer with reality. Her first short story "The door I shut behind me" (1967) reflects the sense of wonder and fear of the immigrant at the new world around oneself, and nostalgia for the world left behind. The story is about a young graduate Chander who secures a green card and goes to Canada of being and his first impressions of being in a new country. While his mother gives him a copy of "The Ramayana" and a translation of "Bhagvad Gita" as parting gifts, Chander himself, buys a copy of Chandra Sekhar's Radioactive Transfer, though it was not his field of study nor a book which is to be read during a journey. He simply was driven by a urge to hold that book "To see it was to think of its India-born author and to think of him

was to open a world of ambition and inspiration.”After being Indian families, he realises that “when we leave our country we shut many doors behind ourselves though we are not aware of it at that time.”At the same time, being an optimistic, he feels that there are many doors ahead of us.”

Uma’s second and most important work “Trishanku”(1988)was a sequence of poems covering twenty years and spoken by various voices, where one finds an encounter of different cultures. In a review of the sequence, Tom Wayman pays tribute to its “startling and powerful collage of the experience of uprooting and re-settlement, of the intermingling of personal and social histories of many other human dimensions involved in transplanting an ancient culture to a new land.” Within this context, the range of topics which Uma Parameswaran treats is far-reaching, child –birth and child-rearing, education, poetry itself.

The most striking feature of Trishanku is the vivid sense of life created by the memories, dreams and present reality of the speaker; the characterization and its impact on the reader demonstrate the challenged posed by the sequences of invocation:

Begin with the world that is  
Though the worlds that were  
And the world that will  
Clamour and hammer  
to enter.

Here are few voices that depict the fear,wonder the uncertainty, the dilemmas, the sense of loss ,anger, isolation, despair and intense nostalgia, at the same time an overriding impulse to survive in the new environment .The characters recur in all her work, Chander, Usha, Chandrika ,Dilip, Savitri, Sharad, Jayant- caught in between the worlds like “Trishanku”, trying to create a third space.

### **USHA**

Madras I love you  
You broad beach road where the polished tar  
Flings mirages that vapour on my speeding car  
Your strand a stretched out beside the sea  
Where at my feet taps eternity  
Madras, I hope one day to call me your own  
Though pledged now to land  
Which my love has made our home

### **SHARAD**

In our ancestral home  
Every new moon day  
Father, as his father before him in the silk dhoti  
Vibhuti on forehead and chest  
Scared thread dipped in turmeric  
Sat on a wooden plank  
Facing the east  
To repeat the purhoti’s chant  
Sprinkle holy water with darbha grass

And call upon ancestors  
But there the sun rises south east  
And the planets and all-a kilter  
And all my words question.

**DILIP**

Amma,I like school  
It is such fun  
We play most of the time  
and sing songs in French  
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Ma,you think you could change my name  
To jim or david or something?  
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When the snows come, Ma,  
It is nice to be white  
more like everyone else, you know?  
I can do everything on the jungle- gym  
That petey can.

**CHANDRIKA**

Across the seas is land  
Where man may stand tall  
May walk and talk without fear  
May pray and play in freedom  
I have been there, my brother  
The land is green but my heart was barren  
Warm are the people but my heart was lonely  
Money flows in rivers but my heart was dry  
Bereft of want and tensions  
Bereft of sorrow and pain  
Bereft of comradeship  
My heart lost its voice, my brother  
It is not the land for you and me.

**CHANDRIKA**

I heard him come in the door  
And straight to the kitchen  
He had snowflakes in his hair  
And his face was white as any neighbour  
All blood formed an instant puddle  
As she stood at the kitchen door  
Gangajal, he said, i need Gangajal

The cry of the Ganges has particular meaning for indo-Canadian readers, but the poem's capacity to move readers of all cultural backgrounds types the broad appeal to Trishanku.

**VITHAL** – Representing the promise of the younger generation)

We shall build our temple  
Here are the Assiniboine  
Flows into Red  
And I shall bring Ganga  
As Bhagirathi did of old,  
to our land,  
our Assiniboine  
And the flute player  
Dark as kaya blossom  
Shall dance on the waters of La Salle.

The flute player, Lord Krishna does come to the alien soil when Uma Parameswaran stages 'Meera' which is written in 1971, it is a single story line that takes us through Meera's life with all its familiar episodes. It gives us the pleasures of the familiar, while telling the outsiders basic details about Krishna's life and our dance and music traditions. Sita's Promise, another dance- written by Uma, links epic India with modern Canada through myth and dance. Rama and Sita and Lakshmana –the main characters in Ramayana during their forest exile find a wounded Artic term that has lost its way in its northern migration. They resolve to take it back to its home, they travel northwards, through India to the Himalayas, where Jatayu, the scared eagle, carries them to the tern's home by the shores of the primeval ocean that we now call lake Agassiz. The native children dance for sita and ask her to stay with them..Sita says that she must go but promises them that she will come again, "I, through my people, shall surely come again and we shall sing songs with the children of all the different lands who make this their home."

Sita's promise and Meera indicate the nostalgic passion of an expatriate writer to represents the characters and the message of the greatest resources of her native culture with the help of her talent and learning to represent them to alien audience, earning for them, if possible, the same love and regard that she carried within her for the precious givens that lay beyond the door shut behind her.

Dear Deedi, My sister, composed in the 1980's reflects the writer's embracing a larger immigrant community as the poems are addressed by people not from India alone but from Nicaragua, Kenya, Philippines, Nigeria, Pakistan, Hong kong, Sri Lanka and Japan. Like the poems in Trishanku, these poems too address the issues of racism, adjustment, adaptation and the hopes and the despairs of the immigrants. As these poems too end with the affirmative vision, one agrees with Judith kearns who says in her preface to shakti's world "she (South Asian Canadian poet) is us, but a little newer and fresher and her poems are a little more honest and passionate than ours. If she had found a country, our country has found a poet."

This acceptance of host and by the host culture amidst the dilemmas and self imposed ghettoisation is clearly seen in Uma Parmeswaran's play "Rootless but green are the Boulevard trees". The dilemma exists more in the parent generation than the younger one. Here is Sharad saying, "It upsets me profoundly to find myself in a crowd. All these are alien faces staring at or through you. It makes me wonder. What am I doing here? Who are these faceless people among

who my life is oozing away? Each so self-contained, so complete looking, at me as though I shouldn't be here. It's strange feeling, all those discreetly questioning eyes that make me ask endless questions."

And Savitri opines that's why she got herself a vehicle so that he wouldn't have to ask herself all those unanswerable questions, that perhaps can never be answered, not to their contented. But the budding youngsters assert themselves and demand their inheritance. Jayant, One young man knows that "Home is where your feet and your heart may be there too"

**JAYANT:** opines that our people, our old country, Dad: There's no 'our people' and 'Our country' for anyone in the world anymore, at least all for us. This is our land and here we shall stay. When the father distressingly points out the absence of roots, the son assures him that they can grow roots in their adopted land.

**JAYANT:** Sure, Dad, just look outside. The monstrous new apartment block out there – they have twenty foot trees around the patio and there five footers inside the quadrangle, all set up overnight and flourishing like crazy.

**VITHAL:** If the temp. Goes up to zero degrees midweek, as they expect, that would be the end of that (He waves at the tree)

**JAYANT:** so what? (Vehemently) what does it matter how long it stands? The point is that it is there, beautiful and green for the length of its life? A day, a hundred thousand days, it is a question of what we do and are, during that time.

**Vithal** says during an argument with his Indian friends that "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"( sons 99). This statement is also opined with the shard's remark that rivers have always charmed mankind and that is why we Indians, find temples on every hillock, pointing out to yet another means of assimilating acceptance on equal terms. Building temple on the river bank of Canada is an often repeated metaphor in Parameswaran fiction for the herculean task of quest for the undisclosed identity which would preserve the essence of the old even as it merges in the new. Thus we have Parameswaran playing with the overtones of her own name and reinforcing her notion of experimentation of the undisclosed identity in the foreign land when it was disclosed in the own motherland. she has forged by those who had crossed the oceans or who are overseas, carrying individual's baggage of myths and beliefs, and confidently asserting the childhood in the alien land as they feel alienated.

The topic of Diasporic identity is a favourite topic of discussion among the younger generation. So Parameswaran uses the frequent get-togethers of the youngsters at the bhav's house to air different air views of the younger generation. they are individuals who favour total integration, but some others speak of retaining the old, while adapting the new. Immigrants no sooner they enter the unknown land start locating and looking out for their own country people as they confront the threat of racism. Whenever the newcomer Dilip says "You should make every effort to merge since you're here to stay"(sons 37-38). Vithal Moghe, who is a rebellion as he who 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 the 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 they threat...

We have to stay separate from them and stay together within. That's the only way (sons 98)

Rajan cynically speaks out that the much publicized multicultural policy of Canada only ensured that different groups of people were ghettoized, But Vithal asserts that ghettoisation would ensure strength and unity ,in the case of jews. In the play “Dear Deedi, My Sister ,a little boy from the 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 upcoming generation is regarding the marriage, Were we see man complaints that Indian girls prefer white men. Here one notices the awkwardness trying to retain Indian customs, and at the same time behaving as whites of their age do, creating yet another Trishanku .Shard’s daughter Jyothi is engaged to Andre, a white boy as the white boy gains the approval of the jyoti’s parents as the boy has adopted and shared Indian values and culture. In fact Vithal also has a white girl friend, Donna, who is approved by Savitri for being “More Hindu than most of us” (9sons 104), and hence would make a faithful life. There’s almost pathetic attempt of the older generation to convince themselves that their children are still remaining and maintaining the Indian values in the choice of their partners and at the end it is significant that Jyothi breaks off from Andre and turns to Sridhar who had always loved her, and Vithal breaks with Donna. So finally we see the Indian sensibility is always noted and rebuilt by the Indians themselves.

In her article, “Home is where your feet are and may your heart be there too, ”Uma Parameswaran states” Romanizing one’s native land has a place so long as it does not paralyze one’s capacity to develop new bonds within one’s adopted homeland.”The new bonds within one’s adopted homeland. ” The new bonds are already being forged between Jyothi, Andre, Vithal and Donna in “Rootles”. Sharad and Savitri feel that ‘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.’. “Donna is more Hindu than many of us.”

The versatile writer and her characters Jyothi, Jayant, Vithal, Swapna and such youngsters are the ‘flags’ planted by Uma Parameswaran in the Canadian soil who are going to create a new culture. “We must build the temple here, here where the Assiniboine flows into the Red and here shall be the groves where shall dance with Parmeswaran.”

Uma Parmeswaran thought processes ran globally but her living mode was local and the focus was Indian and indianess .One way or other, i.e. implicitly or explicitly, it seems the field of diasporas studies is poised for the challenge of addressing a new perspective where individuals can voice out opinion. Irrespective of how one finds the typologies in the matrix – whether implicitly in a fuzzy manner, or explicitly in terms of contextualizing a myriad of models: the political, the social, the economic and the cultural (which includes the religious) Parmeswaran’s novelty lies in the constructing the deconstructed voices of Indians in Canada. Also we notice that Parmeswaran’s oeuvre, which is puzzling and her experiences seems like a powerful collage of personal and social histories wrapped in transplanting the human dimensions of an ancient culture and heritage to a new land.

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