



Voice of the Voiceless in Select Works of Uma Parameswaran

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Abstract— *Displacement is a part of human experience. The displaced communities often live on the margins and preoccupied with the elements of nostalgia. The concept of alienation is inevitable in immigrants life because his journey is from rootlessness to selfhood and to self-realization. The voice of the immigrants writers express the human emotions awakened by the human sensibility.*

Keywords— *Alienation, Nostalgia, Identity crisis, Marginalised society.*

“The fact that I did not really come here to get here,
I sort of drifted here to get away from there” (35).

Gita Mehta

The words cited above, spoken by one of the “instant nirvana” aspirants in Gita Mehta’s *Karma Cola*, exemplify the basic problem of the diasporic psyche: of not belonging anywhere, of feeling dislocated and being without any roots. Expatriates, exiles or emigrant settlers who find themselves displaced from one country or culture and aspire to accept the new identity of the alien land into which they have moved into will constitute the diasporic community.

Exile is a part of the human experience, writers of displaced community express the inexhaustible imaginative resources through writing. The act of displacement activates the diaspora writers mentally to visit their home frequently through dreams and literatures, so much so that their homeland reappears to them as a series of objects or fragments of narratives. They record the theme of displacement and self-fashioning and connote a dispersion, scattering or decentralization of national or religious groups living outside their homeland. Caught between conflicting cultures, the immigrant writers often dwell upon the themes of dislocation, survival and loss of identity. The feeling of nostalgia is heightened if the writer happens to be a coloured immigrant in a predominantly white

society. Writers of the Indian diaspora in Canada – Bharathi Mukherjee, M.G.Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry and Uma Parameswaran often explore the crucial issues of racism, alienation and the confused social disparities that are found in the world of an immigrant. This paper discusses the issues of racial discrimination, sense of alienation and nostalgia in the works of Uma Parameswaran.

Nostalgia and longing for the homeland and their sense of alienation in the country of adoption are prominent in Uma Parameswaran’s works. She has given expression to nostalgic memories where the reader can encounter the shifting involvement of the immigrant in the country of adaptation and the country of origin. Her works show how life abroad is exciting, a bit absurd and often lonely. In her writings the protagonists’ search for the symbols of collective past and their attempts to resensitise their sensibility through their communion with past heritage is obvious. The central characters are drawn not only from the royal or ruling classes but generally from the ordinary segments of the society, a cross section of professions and race.

According to her, writers of displaced communities occupy a significant role in expressing the transformation of language and culture. They live on the margins of two countries and create cultural theories. They are often preoccupied with the elements of nostalgia as they seek to locate themselves in a new culture. They focus mainly on the culture of the homeland and at the same time

adopt and negotiate with the cultural space of the host land. Parameswaran in her article “Literature of the Indian Diaspora in Canada” says, “. . . immigrant spaces are not homogenous, they depend on how they adjust and adapt to the new environment and nation”(12).

Education, qualification, usefulness to society, economic status and one’s rootedness to one’s culture- all factors affect settlement. Their views are based on individual experience, which interfere with the whole process of belonging and adjustment. Parameswaran unifies an essential Canadian sensibility with that of her Indian historic past. The individual’s alienation from himself and society constitute the thematic centre of Uma Parameswaran’s works. She derives her material from her cultural background and history and articulates both Indian and Canadian sensibility. This sensibility stems from her culture and gives her a kind of imagination and freedom to roam freely around the world at large. In order to survive in the foreign land, the immigrants create an ambience thereby establishing their own ghetto, celebrating festivals, dining together or holding community feasts, sharing cultural markers, frequenting to the houses of their colour and little socializing with the dominant group. They create an “alternative world” in their present world and they ignore the subtle desire to merge among the majority, oppose the willingness of their children to adjust and accept the dominant culture.

Uma Parameswaran’s *Dear Deedi, My Sister* portrays the problems that ravage the larger immigrant community in Canada. Though it is a short play the impression it leaves, is very powerful. Sapna, an immigrant from India in her late twenties, is the main character who narrates everything to her sister. For a woman who has settled in a foreign country, it is natural to expect letters from her motherland. Sapna says, “When I first came, the mailman’s daily visit was my lifeline (63). Even though she is in Canada, her heart is still in India and with her relatives. Nature is “both bounteous and tyrannical to her” (63). As in India, in Canada also “wheat grows in miles and miles of prairie gold” (63). In the land around her, there are cedar and fir trees; but in the landscape of her memory, “there are other smells and sounds of mango blossoms, monsoon rains, and temple bells” (63). She has been longing to hear the temple bells which she used to hear in India; to inhale the smell of incense stickers which she used to burn for Lord Parameswaran; to see Lord Nataraja, the presiding deity of dance; to walk to the temple to have a glance of Lord Shiva. All these she describes to her elder sister, Deedi, who is far away in India.

In another context, Parameswaran narrates how immigrants feel happy to receive letters from their homeland. It is a great solace for them as they get relief from the boredom as well as loneliness. When Sapna is in the joint family, she used to do all sorts of domestic works like cleaning, attending to the children and the men folk and spending long hours to fetch water from the well. She feels very happy amidst the family members and sometimes she is distressed by the ill treatment meted out to her by the family members. She says “But these are hardships one can bear for Nature, as you say is sometimes bounteous and sometimes stingy as a mother-in-law” (68). Since she has settled in Canada, she is quite relieved from all those burdens. Her sister Deedi says, “Sapna, my sister, you are lucky to be far away from all these burdens that womankind must bear in this our ancient land happy in your new home . . .” (68). For that, Sapna replies “Here too women suffer dear Deedi, for being women. The burdens are different but the pain is the same” (69). These lines show that wherever they live, the immigrants feel the same way about their family problems. It may be because of living on a dual plane- of straddling two worlds -of looking both ways - of trying to forge an identity with the new land - yet continuing to look back with a lot of nostalgia and regret. All this leads to a sense of alienation- a displaced sensibility- a hyphenated, decentred and fractured existence, of having a belief in the restoration of their sanctified ancestral home and a definition of self by identifying with their homeland.

Uma Parameswaran’s first short story *The Door I shut Behind Me* introduces her saga of thematically related, intergenerational and intertextual immigrant experience.

It reflects the sense of wonder and fear of the immigrant at the new world around himself and nostalgia for the world left behind. Regarding the theme Judith Kearnsin remarks that the “treatment of the theme of Indo Canadian experience in different genres particularly intriguing especially as the writing was interconnected by theme and by recurring characters” (49). The story is about a young graduate Chander who secures a green card, goes to Canada and is surprised to see the Indian families in a new country. His mother gives him a copy of the Ramayana and a translation of Bhagvat Gita as parting gifts but he buys a copy of Chandra Sekhar’s *Radioactive Transfer*, though it is not his field of study; nor is it one that one could read during a journey. He is simply driven by an urge to hold that book:

Chander blinked the glare away and focused his eyes on the book in his hand. The black of the title, the motley orange - yellow – green of the jacket resolved

from their hazy halations into a clear spectrum of colours and forms --The Ramanaya, a new English translation. His mother had given this and Annie Besant's translation of the Bhagavad Gita to him at the airport half-apologetically, half beseechingly, choosing the last hour so that he would not have the heart to refuse. "Keep it on your table," she had whispered . . . (3)

These lines show how Indian families in Canada create "Little Indians" around themselves and try to live in the memories of India of their childhood rather than the India of today. All the characters often live in a world of nostalgia centred on a sort of homesickness, bearing the pains of uprooting and re-routing, the struggle to maintain the difference between oneself and the new unfriendly surroundings. "Indians abroad" seem to be more self conscious than the "Canadians abroad". Both are torn between the old and new world values. Though Chander has a well settled life in Canada, his mind always longs for his motherland. He expresses his views "I'd give anything, anything in the world to see one of my own people, to hear my own language" (7).

Uma Parameswaran's *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* explores the lives and experiences of Indian immigrants as they struggle with the painful and bewildering task of adjusting in their new land. Her primary interest is to discuss the problems of the immigrants at various levels and their struggle between the pulls of two cultures. This story depicts real life like people in the Indo Canadian community and the events, situations and experiences pictured are common and typical as they occur in various families of the immigrants in Canada. Several factors related to the recognition and acceptance of the immigrants have been discussed in this play, as the change called for affects the total configuration of memory, history and cultural values and at times the individual immigrant has to work within polarities between the question of belonging and not belonging.

In the play Jayant, Sharad's son, introduces his father who was an atomic energy scientist in India. Jayant believes that instead of migrating to Canada if he had stayed in India, he would have become a Director. Because he was not able to get a good job as he desired, he ends up as a real estate broker. Jayant's voice has contempt for his father as he chooses to migrate. He says bitterly, "Instead he quits the place to be and rots here selling houses, Jesus, a crappy real estate broker, just one step better than an encyclopedia salesman . . ." (76). Though he had a better career in India, the living conditions are better in Canada which even Jayant admits later when he recalls their

ancestral house. "Some house that, a sprawling shambles handed down untouched from the time of Peshwas, where you have to walk half a mile to get to the shithouse, Jesus, we haven't lost anything on that count; even he couldn't think so" (77). Like the others in the play, Sharad too faces racial anxiety. He has a lean face and a long neck "which he tends to stick out so that his Adam's apple shows even clearer and he looks even taller than he is" (81). Sharad's life represents the state of diasporic dilemma as he is like 'Trishanku' a figure from Indian mythology who, with the efforts of the 'rishis' was pushed to heaven but was denied entrance to heaven by the gods. With both the forces working simultaneously in opposite directions, he could not belong to either place and stayed in between two worlds. His plight of not being able to belong anywhere gets further reflected in his children's behaviour. Savitri, Sharad's wife faces challenges of different nature in the new country. When she comes to know that her daughter has an active sexual life, she reacts vehemently and says "We are supposed to treat you as rational adults even when you behave like beasts" (90). As a father, Sharad finds it difficult to accept his children's life style. He refuses to admit that his children "can wander into the bushes" (81). These lines show how the first generation immigrants are facing problems due to the behaviour of their children. Jayant, Jyothi's brother is also upset when he realizes that his sister might be sleeping with her boyfriend. He looks at her and "there is something in her eye that draws him up sharply, against the wall of recognition" (77). He is extremely disturbed and wants her to turn down his suspicion, "Unwilling to accept it", he desperately wants her to deny the same by asking her again and again: "You haven't sister? You haven't? (78). Hence youngsters are unable to handle the pressure from home and from friends and if they don't follow their culture they would be alienated. As a result, irritability and unhappiness surfaces in the home. The author sees "the seeds of sadness in her eyes" (81) to reflect the melancholic state of their unsuccessful attempt to fit in the given environment.

On the other hand, the second generation immigrants in this play -- Jyothi, Jayant, Krish, Vithal, Priti, Arun, Dilip, Rajan, and Sridhar, who have studied in Canadian schools, speak and dress like other Canadians, have similar hobbies, but still they are seen as aliens. Jayant tells Jyothi: ". . . but you are never going to be one of the boys. Not that I see why anyone would want to fit into this mould" (76). The second generation Indo-Canadians find it difficult to maintain a balance between what the society expects from them and what is expected of them by their families. The parents of the second generation immigrants want their children to be members of the Canadian society and at the same time want them to confirm to their notion

of Indian Children. Like their parents they do not have memory and nostalgia to fall back upon, nor do they cherish the comforts of the present life, as they have not known the discomforts.

Apart from this, most of the members of the Indo-Canadian diaspora experience the feelings of alienation, assimilation and go on 'nostalgic trips'. The memory of the homeland remains an important part for the first generation members. They face tough competition and racial discrimination wherever they go in the alien soil. For people of the first generation who have spent most of their life and have settled in Canada in their middle ages, the conflict is not as intense as their roots are still in India. They have their own country to fall back at any time. But, people of the second generation are greatly disappointed, when the whites are not ready to accept them and consider them as equals. Uma Parameswaran in her article on "Scaling Walls: Linguistic and Cultural Barriers Between Writer and Community" says "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 . . ." (28). Hence, in order to save themselves from the psychological crisis of their identity, the immigrants are compelled to cling to their own tradition and to mix with their own people rather than suffer total rootlessness and alienation from both the cultures.

Uma Parameswaran's *Trishanku*, is a series of monologues, spoken by different characters; some voices recur, others do not; all gather richness and meaning from each other; each monologue is a poem in itself and each is part of *Trishanku*. The most striking feature of *Trishanku* is the vivid sense of life created by the memories, dreams and present realities of each speaker. This memorable work epitomizes the life of typical middle class Indian immigrants in Canada. All the characters, incidents and even dialogues are repeated in her work, spanning genres, whereby they give a sense of continuity and veracity creating the illusion that she is writing about real people and real episodes. In this poem, the poet narrates the strangeness of the land, its geography and customs through the section where Sharat remembers his ancestral home, where his father would perform puja early in the morning facing the rising sun in the east:

In our ancestral home
Every newmoon day
Father, as his father before him,
in silk dhoti
vibhuti on forehead and chest
sacred thread dipped in turmeric
sat on a wooden plank

facing the east
to repeat the purohit's chant
sprinkle holy water with darbha grass
and call upon our ancestors. (40)

This shows the vivid sense of life created by the memories and dreams of the speaker. The collective memory touches every person who is physically, culturally and emotionally displaced.

Uma Parameswaran's novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* focuses on the sense of loneliness and the feeling of nostalgia that the immigrants undergo in the early stages of their settlement in the alien place. There are different types and attitudes among the immigrants where some are emotionally detached and some will stand together without worrying about their class or cultural differences. The concept of home, nation and cultural identity of belongingness to the place of ancestry does not remain the same for all individuals. In the first generation immigrants, migration creates alienation, nostalgia of the past and rootlessness at the place of migration as he or she is still clinging to the cultural beliefs, practice and norms of the homeland. Hence, the sense of loss or 'living in border' gives rise to the concepts of double consciousness and homelessness which mark the diasporic identity.

Uma Parameswaran's writings reflect the consciousness of the need for regaining roots in the tradition of India and a rueful nostalgia towards that. Through her work one can identify how Canadian culture produces disenchantment in the minds of the immigrants and how they find themselves crushed under the burden of alienation and rootlessness. As a diasporic writer she has a huge bank of memories of homeland that she has left behind. It has provided the necessary impetus to chisel her identity in the host society. Her characters demonstrate the universality of real life experiences.

Though Uma Parameswaran has categorized nostalgia as an element of the first phase, the very fact that one turns towards ethnocentric community organization goes to prove that the immigrant never gets over the feeling of 'nostalgia'. Hence, the best way to survive under the pressures of hybridity is to keep contacts with one's roots. In fact hybridization transcends the boundaries made by man and thus creates a heady mix of multicultural and multi-ethnic society. Through their sense of alienation the immigrants have learnt what they have unlearned in the alien culture -- The old order has to give way to the new, by way of assimilation. It also depends on the age and the immigrant's length of stay in the two cultures. Most of the first generation immigrants do not get emotionally involved with the events of their host countries, though they very much remain alert to the

incidents in the mother country. The second generation immigrants are not fully cut off from the mother country; but they too have a feeling of unsettlement and disturbing memories of the parents' motherland. The issue is alive, though not as powerfully as for the parents. Hence, the attempt to "assimilate" has been explained by Uma Parameswaran in her play *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* as follows: "Why does it have to be "them" and "us" all the time, why not just you and me, an individualistic approach; the best bet is to let time take its course and come a couple of generations everything would be more even all around, within the community and outside" (101-02).

The second generation is torn between two polarities; the immigrants develop a sense of in-betweenness which results either in the loss of identity and alienation or in hybrid identity which means adoption of both elements of home and host culture which has also been termed as plural identity. Hence there is no solution to the problems of the immigrants. The disturbing issues which resist adjustment or which stir up irrational responses can be overcome with the positive mentality of the immigrants. Gauri Shankar Jhain in her book *Dimensions of Diasporic English Fiction* says :

The immigrants employ three different techniques of adaptation in abroad. They are assimilation, cultural preservation, with economic integration and ethnic polarization for pursuit of power cultivations. The most profound and predominant pattern is the cultural preservation with economic integration. It continues from generation to generation. In the process some disappear and some syncretise or change. Meanwhile they develop double identity, a status of Trishanku, neither to the maternal place nor to their foster country, and their culture becomes a sandwich culture. (144)

Undoubtedly, to an Indian, an ancestral house stands for an institution and roots are not merely geographical site, but a way of life oriented to value system believed in and lived by people through generations. Uma Parameswaran re-creates the atmosphere of nostalgia, homelessness and the consequent agony faced by her characters and at the end, her characters gradually rise above their alienation and work for assimilation in their new home. They remember their 'homeland' in various ways by recalling old myths, telling and retelling many versions of the stories from the great Indian epics to the children, cooking Indian food at home and thereby

maintain a relationship with their homeland. Perhaps Uma Parameswaran's finest achievement is this-- that she ends the isolation and silence of her immigrant people by giving them a place and voice in Canadian literature.

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