



CULTURAL POLICIES IN UMA PARMESWARAN'S ROOTLESS BUT GREEN ARE THE BOULEVARD TREES

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This paper explores the theme of cultural identity and displacement in the works of Uma Parameswaran, a prominent South Asian Canadian writer, with particular focus on her recurring use of the "Trishanku" metaphor. Drawing from Indian mythology, Trishanku symbolizes a liminal state of suspension between two worlds, aptly reflecting the predicament of Indo-Canadians who navigate between their inherited Indian traditions and the socio-political realities of Canadian life. Through her omnibus *The Door I Shut Behind Me* that comprises the short story "The Door I Shut Behind Me," the long poem *Trishanku*, and the play *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*, Parameswaran examines the complexities of identity formation among first- and second-generation immigrants. These works depict the tensions between nostalgia for the homeland, the challenges of assimilation and the desire to create a hybrid cultural space. Characters oscillate between preserving traditional values and embracing new norms. By portraying these experiences across multiple genres, Parameswaran not only documents the South Asian Canadian diaspora's emotional landscape but also offers a nuanced critique of cultural adaptation and the ongoing search for belonging in a multicultural society.

Keywords: Uma Parameswaran, Trishanku metaphor, Indo-Canadian identity, cultural displacement,

An immigrant writer situated in a different cultural environment of a host country is faced with a very complicated problem of representation or writing. She has to represent various complex issues, faced by the immigrants, related to immigration, such a racism, cultural displacement, resettlement, assimilation or adaptation to new mores. Thus, the writer describes the various aspects of a community of people depending upon her location in each community. This location of a writer in her own "world" colours her writings as well. Hence the different writers reflect different cultures in their writings. But an immigrant writer is in a very peculiar situation. First, she has to de-authorise her native culture and then try to adapt herself to the new socio-political environment of a host culture. This results into a sort of conflict between her two roles as a carrier of her "mother" or "native" culture and as a representative of a new "alien" culture.

Uma Parameswaran is a prominent South Asian Canadian writer who has highlighted the problems of the immigrants, that is the South Asian Canadians or the Indo-Canadians or the "new Canadians". Like other South Asian writers, she is also highly conscious of the fact that the question of "identity" is the most crucial among so many problems. And thus, she has produced the literature - fiction, poetry and drama addressing the various vexing issues related to the problem of "identity" of the Indo-Canadians. The immigrants are rightfully proud of "their ancient civilizations and traditions and determined to make their inheritance part of their Canadian writing. " But they are equally aware of their political status as Canadian citizens. And therefore, they dangle between the two different identities- the old and the new one. Uma has expressed this precarious but creatively fecund situation through her famous mythological metaphor of "Trishanku" which recurs her writings.

Trishanku, according to old Indian myths, was a famous "Suryavanshi" king who wanted to go to heaven straightway with his body through "yajna". But this was not acceptable to the gods, and the sages. And so, he was not allowed to enter the heaven. Thus, he was struck in the middle of the heaven and the earth and made his own heaven there. The same kind of situation is there with the South Asian Canadians in Canada. And because of this similarity, Uma has again and again referred to the metaphor "Trishanku".

Uma Parameswaran's writings seem to probe the daunting question, faced by the South Asians in Canada, "Who are we?" In order to explore this question, Uma has to rewrite their identities. But there is an ambiguous or undefined space between the two identities. This means that in order to construct the new Canadian identity, they have to de-construct the Indian identity and vice-versa. In her works, the Indians seem very eager to "describe" their new Canadian identity and so they have to describe their old "Indian" identity. They, at times, also de-cribe the white majoritarian Canadian culture in assorting their identities. But they do not abandon their "Indian" identities in order to acquire Canadianess. They oscillate between the two identity-poles. And so, their situation is just like Trishanku.

This Trishanku-like condition is aptly expressed by Uma Parameswaran in an omnibus "The Door I Shut Behind Me" that consists of a short-story "The door I shut behind me," a long poem, "Trishanku" and a play, "Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees". Although these writings belong to different literary genres yet they are thematically ties to one another because they together tackle the south Asian's overwhelming question- "Who are we".

The story "The door I shut behind me" is the first entry of this omnibus. It has two main characters – Chander, a South Indian scientist visiting Canada on a University Fellowship and Kishan Aggerwal, a North Indian. The story mainly centres round Chander. Chander, though a modern intellectual, inhabits a typically Indian religious culture. Krishan Agrawal is an opportunist, hypocrite having bad manners and anti-west tirades and because of these Chander doesn't like him. Uma Parameswaran shows these two young men as having, an "Indian" identity, yet they are quite different from each other.

Chander and Kishan Agrawal get themselves invited to a party by Indo- Canadians which have sunk their "regional" differences in order to acquire "new identities" in Canada. Here Uma aptly has expressed the Trishanku-like condition as she asks:

"What are they? Indian or Canadians? They had not
changed their food habits; the women had not
changed their costume: . . . still far from being

assimilated into the general current of life around them. Yet they were as far from the Indian current. They shied away from talk of their return” (p.11).

The first generation of Indo-Canadian can neither shed their “Indian” identity completely nor accept the new world, that is the white Canadian mainstream. Hence Uma Parmeswaran’s application of the Trishanku-metaphor to represent this identity crises-condition of the Indo-Canadians: - “Like the mythological king, Trishanku, they stood suspended between two worlds, unable to enter either.

Uma's next entry is a long dramatic poem. "Trishanku" It which extends the Trishanku-metaphor in its rich complexity to describe the identity question of the Indo-Canadians. It exhibits the opposing viewpoints of the different narrators among which the main narrator is caught up under the pressure of three different identity -determinants "the world that is" (Canada), "the worlds that were" (the home countries) and "the world that will be "(the future in Canada) which are "Clamour and hammer/to enter" (p.21). "Trishanku" is again woven around Chander and his people in India and Canada both but this time Chander is nostalgic about his native town "Madras" although he has been settled in Canada for some years. Chander's father is very critical of present-day India and wants to settle in Canada. Here Uma has beautifully expressed the raging tension in Chander's mind as to whether reject his Indian identity wholly or partially. The effort of re-inscribe the Indian identity is also shown here as some Indians long to acquire new Canadian names as "would be nice to be white, more like everybody else" (p.39).

About the acceptance of the Western culture, Uma articulates her doubts and fears through a middle-aged Indian woman, Savitri, who looks sceptically at the western culture-markers. The huge indifference of the white majority to their lives in day to day life makes them angry, “Who are these Faceless people/among whom my life is oozing away?” (p.50). Yet, the young Indo-Canadians are attracted towards the different marvels of modern technology. Chander, new as a Canadian, stresses the need to retain an "Indian" face under a "Canadian" mask. With the help of this, he wants to maintain a balance between both the identities. Like Chander, other Indo-Canadians as Vithal are also trying to be balanced and to accept the new environment where they have to live. In this way, Uma skilfully describes the old and the new identities in order to let the new Canadians live a world of their own.

The third entry, an important play "Rootless But Green are the Boulevard Trees", though re-assertion of both the earlier works, is more effective. Earlier the problems are being told but now everything is being ‘enacted’ before the audience. In this play, we can have a look at the daily routine of the Indo-Canadians, their feelings, their mixed culture, their behaviour and many mores.

The drama is enacted between two generations of the Indo-Canadians the first born in India with a predominantly Indian identity represented by Shared Bhave and Savitri Bhave, in Canada with his wife; the second one born and raised predominantly Canadian identity represented by the Bhave Children – Jayant, Jyoti, Krish, their relatives and friends Vithal, Priti, Arun. Dilip, Sridhar, Andre, Rajen and Laura. Having different predominant identities, both the generations have different perceptions of Canadian culture. This clash can be seen

from the beginning to the end of the play. In the very first scene, Jayant's statement reflects the very clash:

Don't you come at me with all that crap about morals and Hindu values. I've had an earful from dad nineteen fucking years. He and his pipe dreams about India. Why the hell didn't he stay there? (Act-1, Scene 1. p.98).

Again, when Jayant says about the game as "provincial champ in a crappy basement game", Jyoti represents their real identity

I am glad you are pitching out, and I sure hope it gets into that thick head of yours that we are different, and no matter what we do, we are never going to fit in here. Take to the road, get high, sleep around but still and all. (Act I, Scene 1. p.98).

In Scene II, Savitri wears, though Coat-pants outside, but sari, a typical Indian dress, at home and looks totally different- very brown, very Indian, softly beautiful. At home she does all the household work like a typical Indian woman who cares too much of others.

When Sharad Bhave Comes home from his office, Savitri cares for him. She worries too much about Jyoti though Sharad tries to normalize her by saying: "The Youngsters here are doing will. They have their own code of morals and they are more idealistic than we given them credit for" (Act I, Scene-II, p,102). In the new environment, he is afraid of the crowd as his frustrations, disappointments come out when he is talking about travelling in the bus:

All these alien faces staring at you or through you. It makes me wonder. Makes me ask myself, what am I doing here? Who are these faceless people among whom my life is oozing away? (Act I, Scene II, p.103).

Savitri agrees with Sharad but Jayant (younger generation) loves to travel in the bus and remembers some Indian places. He is not nostalgic about those while Sharad is. At this Jayant comments: "Our people", our old country, dad, there's no "our people" and "old country" for anyone in the world any more, least of all for us. This is our land and here we shall stay" (Act I, Scene III, P. 104). This shows Jayant's accepting the new place and culture while Sharad is more predominated by the Indian culture. When Sharad, Savitri, Jayant Krish and Patil (their relatives) take dinner, they talk about the myth of Mahabharata in which Lord Krishna visits Pandavas in the forest and asks for dinner. Jayant remembers the school, having no walls, only a thatched roof in Grandad's house. So, by remembering, everybody is becoming nostalgic about India. They want to be escapists but some of them have courage to face them as Vithal vehemently comments: "Quit talkin' fella, running away, that's all everyone thinks of, run away, tuck your tail between your legs and scam the moment some problem comes up." And "All you can think of is running away. Run away, like a coward" (Act I, Scene V. p.109).

Jyoti, coming from the younger generation, is open-minded for sex. Savitri wants to protect her because of the morals and Hindu values she has but suddenly she is shocked at Jyoti's taking the things casually and comes to the fact that she is in Canada, and not in India.

In Act II, Scene I, Sridhar, who is madly in love with Jyoti, flares up as: "But now I can't get to sleep until I have exhausted myself ripping you up, until I rape and rip you apart night after night" (p.114). At this the writer's comment that Jyoti with "her face hidden by her hair" is all because of the Indian values she has inherited. It shows that the morality and values still are there in the people who have come from the Indian roots basically. So, they are more conservative due to this as Indian girls do not answer even for a hello from guys.

At this point, Jyoti aptly says: ". . .We have to change with time" (Act 11. Scene 11 p.117). Earlier Jyoti has said that "we can never become one of them". So, contradictions are there as they are not sure of their identities. Sometimes, they feel alienated from the present world and the other time they hope for a better world. So, this dangling between two worlds is shown clearly by the writer. Like Jyoti, Savitri's comments are also contradictory as at one place she says: "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" (Act 11 Scene II, p.124); and at the other she is happen to say: "They'll survive, Beti, they'll survive, but will our spirits?" (Act II. Scene 11, p.125). There's a consistency in her comments. Sharad becomes very anxious first and then angry because Veejala, his sister decides to go to India back without discussing the matter with him. He always used to be protective about her. He feels very disappointed when she never asks about anything after she has come to Canada. Veejala is such a character who can do the things according to her own wish. Nobody, can stop her. She is open-minded and practical as she instructs Jyoti: ". . . jump into bed as many times as you wish. but don't jump into matrimony" (Act III Scene II, p.133). And again, she advises her, ". . .you have o face up to your problems, you can't run away from them..." (Act III Scena 11. D-136). And after setting of this practical advises, Jyoti responded Girdhar in a positive way as to show the change and yearning for a better world. And the better world is to be attained by being apart from the whites suggested by Uma Parameswaran through Vithal's comments: "... They've never wanted us and now we are threat.... We've got to stay apart, stay together that's the only way" (Act II Scene II p.117). Again, he 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" (Act II Scene II. p.118).

Sridhar broadens the idea of Vithal, "... why does it have to be them" and "us" all the time, why not just you and me, an individualistic approach: ..." (Act 11 Scene 11, p.121).

At first, Sharad is frustrated after the Ontario poplar has died and happens to think that if Ontario poplar, which is not native to Manitoba, can't grow and survive, what chance do we have? But at the end of the play, the hopefulness has been shown through Jayant who says:

"What does it matter how long it (the tree) 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 this time. This evergreen doesn't

have one Christly use- it isn't even good as
firewood- but it is there and it is green, it is
beautiful" (Act III Scene III p.142).

And he says: "Yeah, rootless. Let's face it" (p.142). That means he has come to the facts and is ready to face it.

Thus, Uma Parameswaran shows how the young generation of Indo-Canadians wants to de-cribe its old "Indian" identity by describing its new identity as "Canadian" -however hard may be the process. And through this way they can come out of the Trishanku- like condition of being dangled between the two worlds and make a heaven of their own. They will survive in the new world.

Notes

1. Daine McGifford (ed.) *The Geography of Voice*, Toronto, TSAR. 1992, Introduction, p. ix.
2. Uma Parameswaran, *The Door I Shut Behind Me*, New Delhi, Affiliated East West Press, 1990. All the subsequent references to her fiction, poetry and drama are to this text with page nos. (Act, Scene and page numbers, in case of drama) in parentheses.