
**Bridging Cultures: Cosmopolitanism in Uma Parameswaran's
*“Rootless But Green Are the Boulevard Trees”***

Dr Anju

Associate Professor, Department of English, Lakshmibai College, University of
Delhi, Delhi, dranjudahiyadu@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the cosmopolitan perspective in Uma Parameswaran's play "Rootless but Green Are the Boulevard Trees," which addresses immigrants' sentiments of nostalgia, alienation, racism, and the adaptation process necessary for coexistence with the host country's populace. Parameswaran depicts the 'rootless but verdant' existence of an Indian family in Winnipeg, highlighting intergenerational problems; enlightened parents endeavour to reconcile the divide. The paper elucidates the experiences of the younger generation in the play; the stark reality of racism; and the feeling of dislocation, caught between parental expectations and mainstream culture and also sheds light on the experiences of the first-generation immigrant characters who face challenges in integration due to experiencing prejudice and maintaining strong ties to their Indian heritage.

Keywords: Diaspora, Homelands, Cosmopolitan, Constructive Co-existence.

Diaspora Writing

Diaspora writing is an important feature of the contemporary literary movement called New Literature in English which is also known as Literature of the emigrant experience. Diaspora writers belong to different parts of the world, particularly from third-world countries. The one thing they have in common is that they belong to countries that were once ruled over by the British Empire and hence English became the language of their administration, legislation, judiciary and higher education. The term diaspora refers to the shift of people from their homelands. For those people who have settled abroad as immigrants, nostalgia is an inevitable

outcome of their displacement. On the one hand they long for their native land and on the other hand they make immigration a positive act by assimilating themselves into the alien culture.

Parameswaran portrays in her works the trials and tribulations of immigrants and deftly projects their odyssey from alienation to acculturation before they get assimilated. She foresees a world where people would co-exist harmoniously without any discrimination and would love each other to accept individual differences. The first- generation of immigrants often go on nostalgic trips and remember their homeland in various ways which Rushdie calls "Imaginary Homelands" as is apparent from his description of the feelings of the immigrants in "Imaginary Homelands":

"Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are hunted by some sense of loss, some usage to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge... that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India of the mind." (Rushdie 10)

To recreate the homeland, the immigrants in the play refer back to the old Indian myths telling and retelling many versions of the stories from the great epics. Krish and Priti, the youngest second-generation immigrants in the play, like to listen to these stories. They want to hear the story of the Mahabharata. In this way, they keep connected to the past, of their old homeland. As Diane Mc Gifford affirms, "One of the obvious strengths of Uma Parameswaran's writing is her ability to blend modern experience with traditional myths and stories." (Mc Gifford 307)

In a talk with Vithal, he recalls his visit to India: "...Our summer in India... I thought we were packed off there for granddad's sixtieth birthday just to please the folks back home, and I hated leaving Winnipeg But Jeez, that was the best time I've ever had" (Parameswaran 88).

Racism and Gender Discrimination

Racism defines the nature of the lives of the diasporic people as it is one of the major problems for immigrants. Owing to their race, they have to face humiliation and discrimination. The issue of racism is depicted in "Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Tree", when Vithal tells Arun that if the house of a non-white Canadian "gets stoned and eggs smashed on the window", one does not even get a quick response "from the goddamn cop" (Parameswaran 99). Even a little schoolboy from

the Philippines, Itago, like Blake's Little Black Boy, has been conditioned by the racism prevalent in Canadian society. He says in "Trishanku" :

"When the snow comes, Ma, I'll get less brown, won't I?

It would be nice to be white,

More like everyone else." (Parameswaran 65)

Sharad in the play expresses his plight as he says, "All those alien faces staring at or through you, it makes me wonder" (Parameswaran 13). Due to gender discrimination, has to leave her job as well as Canada. Regarding Veejala's resignation Dr Moghe says, "It happens to be of the wrong colour as well" (Parameswaran 129). Veejala Moghe, instigates the play's pivotal conflict. Veejala, a talented astronomer, is disillusioned with the subpar academic standards and pervasive prejudices of Canadian universities. Her choice to forsake her family and return to India, where she anticipates recognition from peers and the pursuit of significant academic research, astonishes her family-oriented brother for one reason and the complacent Canadian for another. This ironic statement effectively fulfils Uma Parameswaran's objective: it elevates the awareness of Canadians by conveying that immigrants, rather than arriving empty-handed, contribute intellect, knowledge, and competence. Despite facing numerous challenges in a foreign land, immigrants demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability, carving out a niche for themselves through harmonious coexistence.

The first-generation immigrant characters have to face harsh racial discrimination in Canada. Racism is one of the major problems for the immigrants. Owing to their race, they have to face humiliation and discrimination. The issue of racism is also depicted in a scene in "Mangoes on the Maple Tree" where Jyoti is at Romona's home. Two boys ring the bell to collect pledges for the school band. But Romona replies that nobody is at home. When Jyoti is about to close the door, she hears them, saying, "Paki Paki house" (Parameswaran 95).

Paki is an expression of racist abuse. The hostility towards the immigrants is shown clearly in the above-mentioned quotation. In the short story 'Darkest Before Dawn', the problem of racism is depicted by Parameswaran. South Asians are referred to as 'Pakis' by the whites and are humiliated because of their way of dressing, of speaking, of conducting themselves and because of their food habits. In the story, Jyoti and Priti encounter a group of young boys who had come to their house for

collecting something when Priti says that nobody is at home, the boys mimic her and shout before leaving, "Paki, Paki house, dirty dirty" (Parameswaran 136). One of the boys even throws a snowball at the window. Jyoti reacts instantly in an angry way and says, "You want to grow up a barbarian, eh? This is a great country, but snootfaced kids like you are stinking it up" (Parameswaran 136).

Uma Parameswaran raises the voice of protest against the discrimination of immigrants. Jyoti Jakhar Dahiya in her paper "In Search of Roots: A Study of Uma Parameswaran's Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees" aptly concludes, "Her works are political and voice a protest against the ill-treatment meted out to immigrants in foreign land"(118).

Due to the racial discrimination, Jayant decides to leave home for California for a year. "In rootless but green Jayant, of an age when young men repudiate their father's values, mocks Sharad Bhave's hopes that Canada will give his children the environment necessary for dignity and spirituality." (Mc Gifford 306)

However second-generation immigrants are trying to accept Canada as their nation. Jayant responds to his father "Dad there's no our people, no our country for anyone in the world anymore, least of all for us. This is our land and here we will stay" (Parameswaran 14) Vithal, Jayant and Sridhar are hoping that one day Canada would become a land where people of different culture would co-exist on equal terms. The boulevard trees represent the immigrants who are rootless yet they are green and beautiful.

Although the immigrants are in a foreign land without roots, yet they are happy and lively. Uma Parameswaran visualizes the coming generation by saying: "Come a couple of generations everything would be more even all around, within the community and outside, we'd have a lot more brown-white kids" (Parameswaran 32). Interracial marriages could be the solution for their pitiable immigrant life and will further lead to cultural co-existence.

As Stuart Hall in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" suggests identity forms between and under the influence of two axes: "the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of differences and rupture" (53). Hall refers to the diaspora as: The diaspora experience as I intend it, here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (57-58) Thus, Hall opines that diaspora identities are

dynamic. They are not static. Through transformation, they acquire a new self as projected mainly by the second-generation immigrant characters.

Creative Space of Hybridity

Passing a boulevard lined with green trees while the sun is shining means seeing patches of shadow, followed by patches of light. When diasporans, up-rooted or rootless, first recognize the shadow of a dried leaf, their experience might be followed by or changed into a patch of sunlight, a creative space of hybridity where new possibilities emerge and new identity positions can be taken up. This positive stance on the future, regarding their cultural backgrounds not with a pang of regret as a source for hybridity, as a third space, is illustrated in the following quotation from Jayant talking to his younger brother Krish that they will plant evergreens and oaks with roots and grow mangoes on maples, Jamuns on birches and bilvas on spruces.

The colloquialisms are an equation of the younger generation's adaptation to and adoption of the contemporary Canadian lifestyle. The poetic language concerned with hints at Indian stories or mythologies is representative of the family's ties to India. Yet, both Jyoti and Jayant find a way of dealing with their status as others, creating for themselves a new, a third, space of hybridity by identifying with both cultures. Parameswaran re-conceptualization resonates with Homi Bhabha's "third space" of cultural production within which different elements encounter and transform one another. "Bhabha explains" Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration" but makes possible the movement of meaning within the dominant culture (Bhabha 58).

This shows that the second generation is determined to grow roots in Canada, something which Sharad questions. The younger generation is set to create the third space of hybridity, not only mixing mangoes with maples but creating a new tree that has maple leaves but bears mango fruits. Jayant's final passionate speech is directed at his father, using the metaphor of trees, he insists that both generations can deal with the experience of the diasporic situation and that it is right that they are there.

Finally, he arrives to show his father that Canada can also be home and that it is possible to make the connection between ancient rites and universal gestures. As he suggests: "That's us Dad, not just you and me with our memories of another land another life but all of us in this modern world in the year 1997, rootless but green for the length of our life, long or short; not a plantain tree that leaves a young one in its place, not an oak tree with its roots stretched a mile radius, this evergreen doesn't have one Christly use, it is there, it is green, it is beautiful and therefore right" Sharad

was deeply touched. Jayant had brought home to him, he said, that trees could and would withstand even this eternally wintry Winnipeg, which was not god-forsaken after all because no place graced by man can be forsaken.' (Parameswaran177)

Parameswaran's characters successfully adapt to the alien atmosphere of Canada. They optimistically face the harshness of the new land. As Cariappa in "A Cycle of the Moon" says, "When we leave our country we shut many doors behind ourselves, though we are not aware of it at that time." Chander's reply to Cariappa presents Uma Parameswaran's message conveyed through her works, "There are many doors ahead of us"(99).

Jyoti though engaged to Pierre, who represents the colonizers, feels drawn to Sridhar and thus identifies with both cultures. Jayant, having abandoned his plans of taking to the road with his friends, also arrives to convince his father that it is possible to strike roots in Canada while not forgetting those of the home country. He opines that it is reasonable to put the two pictures of the Peepul and the maple leaf next to each other. It denotes the intermixing of two cultures. Jayant displays in his final performance, through the metaphor of the evergreen tree that mangoes can grow on maple trees. At the conclusion of the play, conflict and tension are momentarily alleviated when the Bhaves partake in a lunch with their sister-in-law Veejala and her children, who are on the verge of abandonment. Veejala is not an adept chef; yet, she makes her best effort and gets pizza for everybody. As the extended family gathers to dine, intending this to be a concluding event, the act of eating together is seen as a communion, a shared experience, and an affirmation of familial solidarity. Throughout the play, Savitri and Sharad Bhave had cultivated and supported their children and their children's companions.

Conclusion

Through her works, Parameswaran advocates multiculturalism. Uma Parameswaran asserts that the figurative maple tree of Canada can and must bear mangoes that symbolize immigrants. It will make Canada a fine manifestation of a multicultural mosaic. In *Rootless but Green* are the *Boulevard Trees*, Parameswaran presents the rootless but green lives of an Indian family in Winnipeg, foregrounding conflicts between the generations. The enlightened parents patiently seek to bridge the gap. Savitri, the mother, especially tries to bridge the gap between the two cultures. Uma Parameswaran's works emphasize the importance of family bondage. As R. Vedavalli in her paper "Sending Roots: A Study of Uma Parameswaran's *Sita's Promise* and *Rootless but Green* Are the *Boulevard Trees*" says, "The immigrants

hope to survive in alien culture being nourished by the strength of family bondage” (125).

By finding Ganga in the Assiniboine, Uma Parameswaran presents a cosmopolitan view. She recommends that wherever we are, that is our home. One should live in harmony with the people of the host country and should contribute to the progress of the whole world. As she aptly writes: "Home is where the feet are, and we had better place our heart where the feet are" (Jain 30).

Uma Parameswaran consistently emphasizes the need to establish roots and integrate into the dominant society, while also retaining one's ethnic, cultural, and mythical connections to the previous home. She strongly advocates for the transformational potential arising from the intersection and amalgamation of several cultures, asserting that the dominant culture does not own exclusive rights to impose its influence. She sees a future when the whole collection of Canadian archetypes and references expands to include archetypes and imagery from the many immigrant cultures and diasporas that consider Canada their home. She creates a third space, a new Canada where there is real understanding, give and take attitude and mutual love between the immigrants and the natives. This third space would pave the way for the further greying of both nations. This constructive co-existence is the need of the hour for universal peace and oneness of the human race. As an ardent advocate of multiculturalism, Uma Parameswaran affirms through her works that people of different cultures can co-exist peacefully to form a global cosmopolitan world.

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