

Between Two Cultures: Uma Parameswaran's *Sita's Promise*

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Abstract

Diaspora is an emerging word in literature. The word 'diaspora' literally means scattering or dispersion of the people from their homeland. Literature produced by the diasporic writers explores the problems and possibilities engendered by the experience of migrancy and diasporic life. From India, millions of people have migrated to various alien lands under 'forced exiles' or 'self-imposed exiles'. Some of them have made a mark in the field of writing. These immigrant writers reflect, on the one hand, their attachment to the motherland and on the other, their feeling of alienation and rootlessness. The diasporic writings which are also known as 'expatriate writings' or 'immigrant writings' largely give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers owing to the clash of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo. The feeling of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety to reinvent home obsess them which find expression, consciously or unconsciously in their writings. There are many diasporic writers scattered in various countries like Britain, America, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, Mauritius, East Africa, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago and so on. The writers like V.S.Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, Salman Rushdie, Lakshmi Gill, Yasmin Gooneratne and many others have left their country and settled abroad. Among the older generation of the Indian Diaspora, A.K.Ramanujam and Uma Parameswaran are the stalwarts. This research paper analyses the nature of the dance drama *Sita's Promise*. The unique technique and style used by Uma Parameswaran to bond the two cultures and her active involvement in bringing the Indian culture and heritage to the Indo-Canadian community at large has been discussed.

Introduction

Diaspora is an emerging word in literature. The word 'diaspora' literally means scattering or dispersion of the people from their homeland. Literature produced by the diasporic writers explores the problems and possibilities engendered by the experience of migrancy and diasporic life. From India, millions of people have migrated to various alien lands under 'forced exiles' or 'self-imposed exiles'. Some of them have made a mark in the field of writing. These immigrant writers reflect, on the one hand, their attachment to the motherland and on the other, their feeling of alienation and rootlessness. The diasporic writings which are also known as 'expatriate

writings' or 'immigrant writings' largely give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers owing to the clash of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo. The feeling of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety to reinvent home obsess them which find expression, consciously or unconsciously in their writings. The diasporic writers who find themselves sandwiched between two cultures: "born under one law, to another bound" (Parameswaran, 15) move from faith to joy through the center of indifference to the mature faith or understanding. There are many diasporic writers scattered in various countries like Britain, America, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, Mauritius, East Africa, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago and so on. The writers like V.S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, Salman Rushdie, Lakshmi Gill, Yasmin Gooneratne and many others have left their country and settled abroad. Among the older generation of the Indian Diaspora, A.K.Ramanujam and Uma Parameswaran are the stalwarts.

Discussion

Uma Parameswaran, a poet, playwright, short story writer and literary critic, is known for her contributions to the emerging field of South Asian Canadian Literature. She burst on the literary scene with her book of poems, *Cyclic Hope Cyclic Pain*, in 1973. For the past twenty five years she has been actively involved in bringing Indian culture and heritage to the children of Winnipeg. *Sita's Promise* is a play which links epic India with modern Canada through myth and dance. Uma Parameswaran's imagination is really high. The story's only point of coincidence with the original epic is that of Rama's fourteen years of exile. The character of Rama is explanatory and not traditional. It traces Rama's growth from a narrow preoccupation with codes of kingship to awareness of what it is to be human to a point where he rises to realize his divine mission. The drama ends with the readers' recognition of Rama as the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the Supreme Essence.

Uma has glorified the dynamic role of Indian art tradition and beneficial hold of spirituality over the psyche of Indians who get settled in Canada. According to her, the knowledge of rich Indian culture imparts the feeling of elevation to the expatriates striving to carve their position in action land. Besides the older generation tries to teach their children about the richness of their culture so that they may not feel culturally uprooted. These aspects are revealed by Uma Parameswaran in her plays. *Sita's Promise* elucidates upon the celebration of Indian art traditions and familiarizing its richness to the children born in Canada and other Canadians.

In Canada, the playwright has found that people become submerged with materialistic values and consumerist culture and so want to return to the unspoiled, original glory of the rich culture of their home land. For this they highlight their spiritual beliefs and roots. The story of the Ramayana has always fascinated Indians and the visual presentation of this epic through

drama, a performative art, is really very marvelous. Besides, the playwright has highlighted the everlasting bond existing among Rama, Sita and Lakshmana to stay united and face odds with equanimity. In the course of their conversation, they reveal the details of Indian philosophy. Sita says,

“The mysterious time that makes a day seems a year when you are away, and a year a day when you’re near” (53).

In response to this statement Rama says,

“I only know there are at least two levels of awareness – the human and the divine. It is like us sitting in this groove. We can see only the trees around us but someone who is perched on a cloud can see the whole hill and to someone who is way above the earth, the hills and plains and forest and sea are all laid out flat – the past and present and future all come together as the Eternal present” (53).

In India, the marital bonds are more emotionally and spiritually unbreakable than in the western world. A wife is considered to be an energetic force who provides strength despite her absence in physical form. On being asked about Urmila, Lakshmana says,

“Urmila and I have all that anyone needs. The hand of God is often upon us and we see and feel each other more often than we deserve. In my dreams, she comes to me, Sita, and dreams are often more real and satisfying than actual sight and touch. As Shri is to Narayana, as Shakti is to Siva, is Urmila to me. Without her I am nothing ... If I act like a God, it is because her love makes me one” (59).

Many mythical characters such as Jatayu, the sacred eagle, Adishesha, the snake of primeval existence, Lake Agassiz, the primeval ocean, are introduced to the Indo-Canadian readers. Likewise, many traditional dances of India like Tillai dance of Lord Siva, Kurathi (gypsy) dance, Krishna Leela is also used in the play for the view of the Indo-Canadian readers. The blend of classical music (Carnatic) and classical dance (Bharatanatyam) is enthralling.

In *Sita's Promise*, Sita is portrayed as beautiful, sacred, loving, innocent and courageous and not very serious as in the original epic. In the play, Rama is much worried about the immaturity of his wife. He wonders how the childish Sita can rule the Kingdom of Ayodhya in the near future. He doubts if she can act like a queen. Lakshmana is depicted as wise and dutiful. He always defends his sister Sita when Rama accuses her. He even blames Rama for neglecting the call of love for the sake of duty. Rama is seen as a preacher, philosopher and quite a serious as well as a matured personality when compared to the other two. He preaches about the mysterious Time, Eternity, Spirituality and more. He is obliged to perform his duty more than

love. The portrayal of these characters in a new light shows Uma Parameswaran's 'expatriate sensibility' that has affected 'a dynamic act of re-mythologisation'. (James, 2003).

Sita's Promise is thus a play interspersed with dance and music referring to myths. It stands unique as it reveals both the evolution of the Indo-Canadian community as well as the evolution of the writer. It deals with the demands and experiences of such universal entities as motherhood, bhakti, transplantation and more on one level and defining the growth of theatre on the Indo-Canadian community on the other.

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