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An Exposition of Immigrant Experience in Uma Parameshwaran's Works

J. Abiraami, M.A., M.Phil.



Uma Parameshwaran

Saga of Rootlessness and Alienation

Uma Parameshwaran is a first generation immigrant from India to Canada. She started her career as a newspaper reporter in India and later became an author of several works which won awards like 1999 New Muse Award, Canadian Author Association Jubilee Award (2000). She presents her stories in the framework of Diaspora studies which include her western experience with the Indian realities. As an expatriate, she is clear and conscious about her own identity and

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hence all her works reflect the sense of rootlessness and alienation which are mostly relevant for the Indian Diaspora.

On Defining Diaspora

Before analyzing the experiences and maladies of the Diaspora present in Uma Parameshwaran's works, an attempt is made here to define Diaspora with the help of the views of a few theorists. I also deal with the various hazards experienced by the diasporic groups in the process of settlement in the new country, their cultural dilemmas and displacements, generational differences, transformation in their identities with the new demands and their mode of existence.

Etymologically 'diaspora' is drawn from Greek meaning 'to disperse' and signifies a voluntary or forcible movement of the people from the homeland into new region. It has also been used to describe the social, cultural and political formations that result from this displacement.

Double Marginalization

In the diasporic discourse, there is constant search for roots through revision and re-writing as in the post-modern discourse. Generally, the writers of diaspora are caught physically between two worlds and this double marginalization negates their belonging to either location. Homi Bhabha describes the status of diaspora in the dominant culture way appropriately by saying "... all diaspora are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common 'we'. Their living 'in-between' condition is very painful as they stand bewildered and confused and show resistance to the discourse of power in various forms. Hence, through literacy articulation a migrant becomes a spokesperson of his / her distinct identity and thereby put forth the notion of cultural distinctiveness.

Yearning for Home and Preservation of Cultural Identity – Losing Importance

Though the process of migration leads to mingling of culture, migrants have yearning for "home" to go back to "the lost origin". They also face cultural dilemma when their cultural practices are mocked at and there is a threat to their cultural identity. But in the recent years, these confusions, problems and yearnings become less intense as they get influenced by the culture of the

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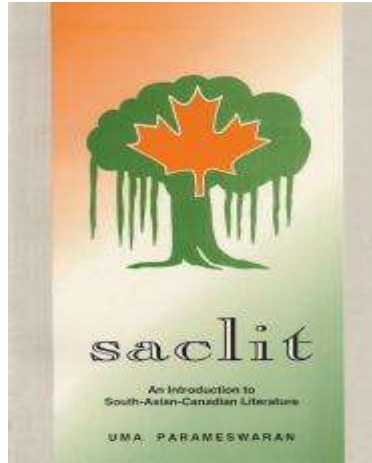
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country of their migration and also adapt themselves to it. They enjoy better settlement and place in that country but their sense of identity borne from living in diaspora community (is) influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grandparents. In course of time these migrants form communities and thereby different diasporic communities make “composite communities”. Thus distinct diasporic communities are constructed out of “the confluence of narratives of the old country to the new, which create the sense of shared history” as remarked by William Safran.

Stages of Evolution



Uma Parameswaran has portrayed the evolution of the Indo-Canadian community and the evolution of the writer through her works. Though it is not possible to discuss the portrayal of all diasporic experience, a modest attempt is being made here to highlight some of these issues discussed in the works of Uma Parameswaran. Her work is the framework of diasporic studies which ascertain her western experience with the Indian realities. She describes the community of new immigrants in Canada in one of her poem,

*“We are new Canadians
Come from faraway places
The Alps and the Andes
Essequibo and the Ganges
Our memories, our faces
Chiseled by ancient cultures”*

(Writing the Diaspora, Pg: 99)

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Uma's writings have references to Indian culture because she has always been involved in promoting Indian culture in Canada. It is not only in Canada, that the immigrants undergo these humiliating and discriminatory experiences, but also in every dominant culture and in other nations too that they meet this kind of treatment. She expressed this view in one of her poems,

*“Furrowed with tears because of our race
Or colour, or tongue that stumbles
Over words so alien to the many places
From which we've come”*

(Writing the Diaspora, Pg: 343)

Thematic Interests

Like many other immigrant writers, she shows strong thematic interests in the experience of immigrants, particularly South Asian Canada, with an emphasis on issues of assimilation and racial position.

***Trishanku* – Symbol and Metaphor**

One of the recurring themes in her work is the problem of rootlessness, the search for identity. She has used her own experience and observed that there is racism and underemployment in Canada. Her work ‘Trishanku’ is a cycle of poems where fifteen different voices give expression to the immigrant experience of the diaspora in Canada. As the title ‘Trishanku’ refers to the myth of a king who lived between heaven and earth, so the people’s condition also in the state of in-betweenness. This collection is generally considered to be her major poetic achievement.

*“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 wants and tension
Bereft of sorrow and pain
Bereft of comradeship
My heart lost its voice, my brother
It is not the land for you and me.”*

(Trishanku and Other Writings, Pg: 51)

Four Phases of Immigrant Settlement

In this poem she has formulated the four phases of immigrant settlement. The first one is nostalgic for homeland with fear in a strange land; the second one is adjusting to the new environment; the third phase is taking part in ethno cultural issues and the fourth phase is participating in national issues. Written in different voices, it is a long narrative poem about the life

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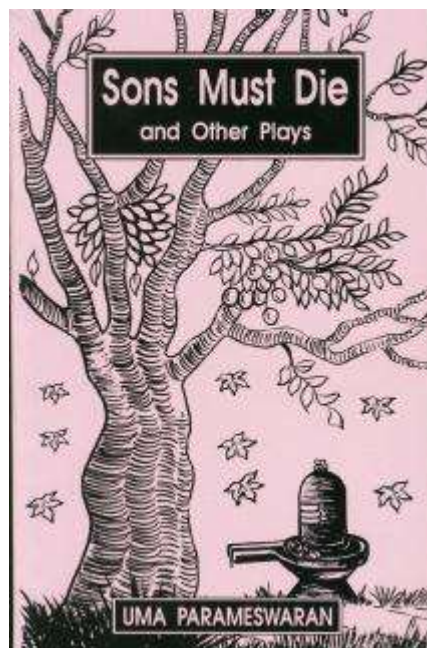
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of an Indian Canadian family in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In that she expresses the voices of men and women from India living in Canada as exiles, expatriates or immigrant, with memories in the past.

But these memories do not keep either the actors of this poetic drama or the readers in the past. They are evoked to explain and define the lives of the speakers as they try to survive as individuals and as a community in the new and bewildering land. Most diaspora set in Canada focus on sufferings and discrimination and the voices depict the varied landscape of memory set against the present.

The Plays of Uma Parameshwaran



Several of the plays, she wrote for the Indo-Canadian stage in Winnipeg were included in her work titled 'Sons Must Die'. This play is set against the Indo-Pakistan war of 1947 – 48 and provides an excellent example of the author's progression. At one level, these plays deal with the demands and experiences of such universals as motherhood, bhakti, transplantation, etc., and delineate the growth of theatre in the Indo-Canadian community. Through this, we are not only made aware of the South Asian experience but also of the struggle in life that makes us all human.

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To Conclude

To sum up, we can say that by analyzing the diasporic experience in their various nuances and manifestations in the fast changing political, social, economic and cultural global scenario, Uma Parameshwaran has created an insight into the attitudes and views of natives and new comers. She conveys the fact that better understanding of mankind can be achieved only by rooting out ignorance. In her works she has shown dynamically the shifting concepts of “home and displacement” in the successive generations of migrants. By this she has secured a commendable place along with the other writers of Diaspora.

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J. Abiraami, M.A., M.Phil.
Assistant Professor of English (SG)
Faculty of Engineering
Avinashilingam University for Women
Coimbatore – 641 108
Tamilnadu, India
dhyanabi@yahoo.co.in

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