

# From Alienation to Assimilation: A Study of Uma Parameswaran's *Mangoes on the Maple Tree*

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## Abstract

Diasporic literature is the expression of the experiences of the people who left their native land and settled in the foreign land. The reasons vary from political to economic to educational. The experiences expressed are both negative and positive, but mostly negative. Uma Parameswaran's works are in tandem with this. She shares the experiences of Indian community living in Canada. She identifies herself with her characters. Thus, they become her mouthpieces.

Parameswaran's debut novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* was first published in 2002. It deals with the themes of exile, alienation, identity crisis, acculturation and assimilation in the lives of immigrants. It tells us how the Bhave and the Moghe families feel in the new country—Canada, which is their new home. This article is a study of the first and second generations' reactions in the new diasporic situation. The present paper, through the close textual analysis studies the change in the outlook and insight towards the host culture and native culture from the perspective of the first and second generations characters. The theme of dislocation in the lives of expatriates has also been explored.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Assimilation, Rootlessness, Identity-Crisis, Culture, Immigrant, Isolation, Diaspora, Indo-Canadians

## Introduction

The diasporic Indian writing in English encircles every continent and part of the world. A great deal of Indian writing in English is produced not only in India, but also in the wide spread geographical areas of indenture like USA, UK, Canada, Australia and South Pacific countries. Though, the literary representations of these writers are common, their views, responses, resonances and narratives are different. They have different socio-cultural backgrounds and literary ancestry, and hence the thematic preoccupations and literary styles are also different.

Diasporic writing brings into focus, not merely the role of an intellectual's relationship with the evolution of democracy, but also the language of transformation and hope. It serves as an outlet to the pent-up passions, emotions and feelings, and helps as a cathartic indignation. The diasporic writings have also helped in casting a new aura around global India and have contributed their share in building a novel image of India abroad. The welfare and wellbeing of the overseas Indians are brought out through these writings.

Diasporic writing today connects the past and the present, and forges a new notion of fluid and transnational identities; it opens up spaces for new expressions of a transnational global culture. It is only on this premise that the struggle against racism, class structures and other forms of oppression would gather new momentum. It is a necessary and an inevitable shift which indicates the new opportunities for different social movements.

A study of the diasporic writings reveals that the common features noticed in the writings of diaspora are nostalgia, homesickness, sufferings due to distance from their homeland, mental trauma and anguish caused due to the pull and push factors of belonging to the land of adoption and at the same time maintaining their cultural traditions and identity.

Etymologically 'Diaspora' is drawn from Greek word '*diaspirein*' meaning 'to disperse.' Since the nineteenth century, the term 'diaspora' has been widely applied to the dispersal of the Jews throughout the Gentile nations and to the Jewish community that lives outside the frontiers of the

biblical Israel. The term is now extended to include other populations who are displaced due to slavery, colonialism or forced migrations. A typical example of diaspora is given by the New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of English Language as "the dispersed Jews after the Babylonian captivity." In the article named "Problematics of Theorizing Diaspora and Situating Diasporic Literature" Swaraj Raj has quoted Homi Bhabha's views on diasporas:

*. . . gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival gathering the present (52).*

#### Objective of the Study

The objective of this research paper is the study of Indian immigrants' psyche living in Canada through Parameswaran's novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree*. What problems do they face in the new land? How do they cope with their feelings of homesickness, nostalgia, identity crisis and alienation etc.? How do they try to acculturate and assimilate in the host country? And what obstacles do they encounter in the process?

A chronological study of Uma Parameswaran's works reflects ongoing involvement of an immigrant writer with reality. This study is limited to her novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree*. *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* reflects the sense of wonder and fear of the immigrants at the new world around them, and nostalgia for the world left behind.

Uma Parameswaran - poet, playwright and short-story writer was born in Madras and grew up in Jabalpur, India. Parameswaran read extensively drawing motivation from epic poetry and Greek theater through her schooling and during the Indo-China war of 1962. Receiving the Smith-Mundt Fulbright Scholarship, Parameswaran moved to the United States to study American Literature at Indiana University earning her MA in Creative Writing. She completed her Ph.D. in English at Michigan State University in 1972. Since settling in Canada, Parameswaran has devoted much of her writing and efforts in the literary field to create an identifiable South Asian Canadian diaspora. She deals with the problems of South Asian immigrants in most of her works.

In *Mangoes on the Maple Tree*, the author highlights the displacement and subsequent sufferings of the expatriates. The lives of two families – the Bhaves and the Moghes undergo a big change. They remember their life in India nostalgically time and again. They feel rootless in their new home land. The Bhave family is headed by Sharad who was a nuclear scientist in India, but here in Canada he has become a real estate broker. Savitri is his wife. She teaches at a school in Winnipeg. They have three children—Jyoti, Jayant and Krish. Their house is very popular with young generation. Arun, Danesh, Rajan, Prakash and Shridhar etc. visit their house frequently.

This shows their sense of community and ethnic group consciousness. This highlights the fact that their cultural - ethnic background is important to them. Another instance is Mrs. Khanna, who visits the Bhaves only because their families had been neighbours in Delhi at one time. Thus, they prefer to live in ghettos and support one another because of their shared origins.

Moghes comprises Veejala, a university professor and Sharad's sister, Veejala's husband Anant and their children Veethal and teenager Priti. Veejala is an open minded, educated woman. She has spent half of her life outside India travelling to many European countries. She teaches Astrophysics at Blackwell University in Winnipeg. She had married Anant when they were living in India. But now she has no passionate relationship with him. She sometimes thinks to be separated from him, but cannot because her values and culture have taught her that marriage is unbreakable bond which lasts beyond earthly life. She is not very much concerned about her children, rather much concerned about her career. When she feels racially discriminated in her university, she resigns and decides to return to India with or without her family. Vithal is an angry young man. Despite being a second-generation immigrant, he feels alienated and isolated in the host land. He thinks that white Canadians don't want them to assimilate. During a casual talk at Jayant's house he says –

*...they want us out. We'll be squashed like bugs soon. We'll be squashed, I tell you. All these years they led us to believe the isolation was coming from us, that we were communal, parochial, closed within our cultural exclusiveness, etc. etc., but now that we are trying to merge, their real feelings are coming out. They've never wanted us and now we have become a real threat. Serves us right for wanting to be one of them. We have to stay separate from them and stay together, and we have got to show them we have as much right to be here as all these pissedoff whites who have bullied their way into this country these last three hundred years. We have got to stay apart, stay together. That's the only way (63).*

There is a conversation in the opening scene of the novel between Jyoti and Jayant. Jyoti is a young woman and a university student. She is the protagonist of the novel. Jayant is one or two years younger than her and can be counted as a major character. Jyoti is trying to make him understand that being immigrants they are living a rootless life here in Canada.

*"I'm glad you are pitching out," Jyoti said coldly, "and I sure hope it gets into that thick skull of yours that we are different, and no matter what we do, we are not going to fit in here. Take to the road, get high, sleep around but still and on..."(8)*

Acceptance of the cultural ideology of the host land is necessary for any immigrant if he/she wants to lead a peaceful and calm life in a foreign land. But this acceptance is not an easy task as they have spent their early childhood in their mother land India. They fondly and nostalgically remember Indian culture and way of life as a first-hand experience and through their parents here in Canada.

The first-generation immigrant Sharad is the most alienated character in the novel. He feels completely isolated in Winnipeg. He had resigned from his post of nuclear scientist in Bombay, because of the dirty politics of his nuclear institute. After his displacement, he was left with no choice except to become a real-estate broker. Assimilation in the new environment is almost impossible for him. He is a victim of identity crisis. He says that he cannot be complete as the natives. He says—

*All those alien faces staring at 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? Each of them so self-contained, looking at me as though I shouldn't be there. All those discretely questioning eyes that make me ask endless questions (21).*

His dilemma is that he cannot live with the unknown and unfriendly people of the country. His character shows the feelings of rootlessness in an intense manner. He says to his son:

*Roots, son, roots. I often think of our plantain trees back home. Each plantain tree leaves a sapling before it dries up. That is why we had a pair of plantain trees strapped on the posts of wedding shamiana or door of houses on all festive occasion—it is a symbol of continuity and usefulness; you know how every part of plantain tree—flowers, leaves, trunks—is put to good use. Roots are so important. Can we really grow roots here (22) ?*

But his son, second – generation immigrant, Jayant has opposite views. He says that Canada is their country now and they have all those rights which white Canadians enjoy. In fact, this is a typical view of second – generations of immigrants who have settled in host land. They are not as bothered as their parents to preserve their culture and values. Jayant protests:

*"Our people, our old country—Dad there 's no our people, no old country for anyone in world anymore, least of all for us. This is our land and here, we shall stay"(22).*

He continues arguing by giving the example of many fully grown tropical trees transplanted just a few metres away in an apartment block which are growing green but his father counter-argues citing the example of poplar trees which they had planted in their own yard. Those poplar died up despite all care. Sharad further recalls his neighbour's comment that their poplars did not flourish because they were from Ontario. They were not native to Manitoba.

Racism has also been highlighted in the novel. Though, it is the only incident of overt racism in the novel. Jyoti went to an Indian house which was some kilometres away from her home. When she was inside the house with a kid Romona, two native boys passing from there threw some snow balls at the window panes and started shouting, "Paki, Paki house" (98). Now, 'Paki' is a term typically used for the people of South Asian origin, and as a racial slur is used indiscriminately towards people of perceived South Asian descent in general. This slur is primarily used in English-speaking countries. Later on, Jyoti was able to make them feel sorry for their racist comment. But she was deeply disturbed.

*There was something about the encounter that frightened her far more than the actual incident warranted (98).* Jyoti was aware of her difference, of her otherness and due to this otherness, she defends her culture and heritage. She can feel it; though she has grown up here in Canada, and has acculturated herself but still something is at odds. This is because of her acceptance of Canadian society that she is in love with Pierre. She has a pull towards Indian way of life in the form of Shridhar. She feels attracted towards him also, but resists this temptation and chooses Pierre for the marital bond against the wishes of her father. Jayant's surprise to his parents and friends revealing his love for Donna in the end of novel can also be seen in this respect.

Both generations deal with their diasporic situation in their own ways. Jayant tries his best to leave behind his inherited identity but Jyoti thinks it is almost impossible. They create for themselves a third space in which they can live with their hybrid identities. Right from the starting of the novels, we hear from Jyoti time and again that Jayant was planning to leave his home. But in the last, he abandons his plans and stays at home. He successfully convinces his father that it is possible to strike roots in Canada while forgetting the old country; that it is possible to keep the two images of the peepul and the maple leaf next to each other. While the pictures might not be able to merge, Jayant displays in his final performance in the form of his newly planted tree in the snow of his house-yard and says pointing to the tree:

*That's us Dad, not just you and me with our memories of another land, of 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 isn't good even as firewood but it is there, it is green, it is beautiful and therefore right (177).*

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

### **Conclusion**

When one talks about an immigrant what comes to mind is not just individual psyche, history and narratives of belonging, but certain collective issues as well. While settling down requires surrender change and self-annihilation, there are several other elements which one has to come to terms to as difference in terms of appearance, faith, ritualistic practices, language and political power. Immigrant spaces are not homogenous; they depend on one's reactions to the new environment and country. A number of factors affect immigrants' settlement. Some of them includes educational qualification, usefulness to society they are living in, their economic status and the intensity of their rootedness to their culture. This process is viewed differently by different diasporics. Their views are based on their personal experiences

which meddle in the whole process of adjustment and belonging.

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