
THE TRISHANKU SPACE: DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN UMA PARAMESWARAN ROOTLESS BUT GREEN ARE THE BOULEVARD TREES

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Abstract: The term 'diaspora' very significantly depicts the people who are scattered around the globe for one reason or the other. The diasporans are in the beginning feel alienated in the host country and have a diasporic consciousness. Later they assimilate to the new culture but still have a sense of nostalgia for their homeland, its culture, thereby live in a Trishanku Space or caught up in in-betweenness. This paper is an analysis of diasporic consciousness in Uma Parameswaran's play *Rootless But Green Are The Boulevard Trees*

Keywords: assimilation of ethno-culture, Diasporic Consciousness, In-betweenness.

At the most fundamental level, a diaspora refers to the dispersion of a particular people from a homeland. Once used exclusively to portray the exilic condition of Jewish communities, the term now applies broadly to dispersed people removed from their original homes. Its initial usage denoted unwilling or forced dispersion through conquest and a corresponding desire for restoration and repatriation amid a sense of immense yearning for the lost place of origin. The experience of living in the diaspora is closely connected to a specific 'diaspora or diasporic consciousness', which could be defined as the knowledge and awareness of the persisting difference to the majority of a country's citizens in terms of culture, ethnicity and social and financial advancement. The sociological implications of Diaspora have been incorporated into literature to produce a flourishing genre in post modernism: Diasporic literature. A key characteristic of diaspora is that a strong sense of connection to a homeland is maintained through cultural practices and ways of life. This concept has been widely used by a number of authors to delineate the process of adjustment and assimilation by the Indian immigrants in a foreign land. Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Agha Shahid Ali, Anita Rao Badami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Uma Parmeshwaran are some of them. Uma Parameswaran recognizes the experiences of Indo-Canadians as expressed through literature to be unique in their own right. She is a well known novelist, poet and literary critic and *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* (1979) in one of the plays in her short story collection *Sons Must Die and Other Plays*. In this play, Parameswaran gives us a forceful yet profound look at an Indian-Canadian family. One of the major themes of that the play deals with is, how the Bhav family and many people in the expatriate Indian community feel rootless and experience Trishanku or a sense of 'in-betweenness' in their new country. Trishanku is a character in Hindu Itihasa and the story of Trishanku is told in the Bala Kanda portion of the Valmiki Ramayana. The phrase "Trishanku's heaven"

describes a middle ground or a compromise between ones goals or desires and one's current state or possessions. *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* gives a different insight into generational differences in dealing with the diasporic situation. The play's title actually frames the storyline. The Bhav family- Sharad, Saavitri and their children Jyoti, Jayant and Krish - have moved to Winnipeg, leaving behind a comfortable life with servants and as regards Sharad, a professional career as a nuclear scientist. His sister, Veejala, has been living with her husband Anand Moghe and their children Vithal and Priti longer in Canada than Sharad and his family have. Parameswaran sets the two families' lives, the Bhaves and their slightly more domestically challenged cousins the Moghes, amidst the 1997 floods in Winnipeg and is related by several of the protagonists, although the focus lies on Jyoti. Initially it might look like a psychological study of a typical working class family, but slowly and with great skill, Parameswaran, a writer incredibly adept at subterfuge, shows that the conflicts are both internal and external and personal and political. Contemporary Canadian literary landscape is composed of multitude of voices speaking from the diverse ethno-cultural spheres and from the spaces in-between cultures. These voices reflect changing attitudes to Canadian identities—they speak against homogeneity, uniformity and exclusionary structures. The experience of multiple cultural traditions and the sociopolitical discourse surrounding it have found their way into the Canadian literary output, and is often commented on through cultural signifiers such as language, food, clothes, music and traditions diasporic imaginary, identity crisis etc. In the beginning of the play there is a verbal fight between the Sharad siblings and in course of the verbal duel one could find the collective memory about their place of origin, Pune, their ancestral house, with servants to do all the chores and their social position an atomic energy scientist. Jayanth remembers every detail of the proud family history that had been passed on to him by his parents. On an occasion he

says,

“Remember Dad, how the roof flew away that second year? And all the baby mangoes fell off the trees?” (85)

and on other occasions he nostalgically remarks,

“Remember dad, my banana cluster in granddad’s house?” (86), “(His voice far away) Remember that mango tree in Chetan Das’s yard back home?” (78)

The issue of the identity crisis has been cradled by Parameswaran through effective citation of multiculturalism - the conflict between their inherited culture and the New World that their hyphenated identity causes. The metaphor of “roots into unaccustomed earth” is especially applicable to the second generation of immigrants. The second generation of Sharads also try to shed their Indianness and assimilate and acculturate to the Canadian culture and lifestyle. Jayant scolds his younger brother when he calls him Bahu. Jayant and his friends use several slang expressions or Canadian or American ‘youth-speak’, like “bug off bozo”, “Howdee folks!”, “Jesus”, “Howzzat” etc. Parent generation still speaks their native language - Marathi - at home, while Jayant is conscious of the fact that he and Jyoti had switched to English, and his kid brother, Krish, didn’t speak a word of Marathi. Adapting to this Canadian language and jargon reveals their adoption to the Canadian youth culture and thus with the identification. By these memories and thoughts Jayant illustrates his position in-between two cultures. While on the one hand, striving to shed their Indianisms, they also have a strong ethnic group consciousness. Once Jyoti advises Jayant

“We are different, and no matter what we do we are never going to fit in here”. (76)

Later Savithri enters home wearing “a pantsuit” and boots but the moment she enters the house she changes to sari and adorns kumkum on her forehead. Though the Bhaves and Sharads enjoy western food, Vithal longs for good Indian meal of puris and raita. Jyoti makes matter paneer to all her brother’s Indian friends, while Jayant makes mango sundae. Thus, even in their outfit and food there is an ‘in-betweenness’. Diasporic literature is strained with the imperative presence of melancholia. In this play Vithal, Veejala and at times even Sharad feel so melancholic about their rootless but ever green charade they lead in the new country. Safran lists other features of the members of the diaspora as, to

“Retain a collective memory... about their original homeland... they believe that they are not ... fully accepted by their host society... they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home”

Wish to return there and also

“Continue to relate... to that homeland in one way or other” (83-84).

The diasporic imaginary is torn between the dual and often conflicting ideologies of the homeland and the host land. The vacuum that thus remains makes them pose the inevitable question, “Where do I belong?” In his essay “Imaginary Homelands”, Salman Rushdie has addressed the identity crisis of the Indian Diaspora

“Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools” (227).

Sharad doesn’t like to take the public transport, for the alien crowd upsets him. This strange eerie feeling haunts him. The members of Diasporas support each other and keep together in their host countries. People who are no blood relatives of the family are invited and integrated into the diasporic community solely on the basis of shared origins. The members of diaspora support each other and keep together in their host countries. The Bhave’s open house allowing Arun, Rajen and Dilip bring out their community and ethnic group consciousness. The issue of racism is broached in *Mangoes on the Maple Tree*, the novel version of the play, in a scene where Jyoti is at Romona’s home, two boys come to collect pledges for the school band and when Romona replies that there is nobody at home, they shout back “Paki! Paki house!” (95). Although, Jyoti acts tough, she is deeply disturbed as that was her first encounter with overt racism. It triggered an “uncontrollable spasm of fear and shock” (98). ‘Paki’ is an expression of extreme racist abuse that cannot be ignored, it emphasizes that the person addressed has the status of the ‘other’, making difference more visible, and practically annihilating the will to integrate into the host society, as this is a proof of hostility towards foreigners, towards diasporans. Sharad is doubtful about the life of the Ontario Poplar they have planted and exclaims that it is an analogy to the meager chance of their family’s survival there in the new country. Savithri too adds that the evergreen tree might survive but questions whether the diasporans spirits would stay alive. But the tree imagery comes again in the last section of the play when Jayant cancels his trip and celebrates life. He brings in an evergreen tree and erects it in the middle of the yard. He then explains that the evergreen tree has no roots and will fall as soon as the snow melts. This planting of rootless but evergreen tree can be regarded as a metaphor for the diasporans struggle to make a life abroad. The younger ones are set to create the third space of hybridity, not only by mixing mangoes with maples, but creating a new cultivar which has maple leaves but bears mango fruits. Parameswaran presents the first generation settlers being nostalgic of India and the second generation settlers being initially analytic and critical of their Trishanku

position and finally accepting and acknowledging the new land as a source of their survival. In Jayant's final passionate speech he talks with a newly earned wisdom that he insists that both generations are able to deal with the experience of the diasporic situation. He advises his father by commenting that,

"Dad, there is no "our people" and no "old country" for anyone in the world anymore, least of all for us.

This is our land and here we shall stay" (83).

In spite of the problems faced by the diasporans, Dilip too feels that one has to assimilate to the new culture and lifestyle of the host country. He advises Vithal that, "you should make every effort to merge since you are here to stay. I mean, this is your country, the only land you know and will know. You have to try to assimilate, don't you think? (98) Uma Parameswaran traces the four phases of immigrant

settlement- the first a nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is so busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is when immigrants start taking part in the shaping of Diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethno-cultural issues. The fourth is when they have "arrived" and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. The Trishanku or the 'in-betweenness' is felt in the initial phase of immigrant settlement which later on acculturates to the new socio-cultural lifestyle. Though the diasporic consciousness surfaces in the minds of the immigrant settlers, slowly they try to assimilate to the life of the host country.

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