



UMA PARAMESWARAN'S A CYCLE OF THE MOON: A TESTIMONY OF INDIAN VALUES WITH TRADITIONAL TOLERANCE

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Abstract. “A Cycle of the Moon,” a captivating novel, almost revives the relative-oriented life of South India. The novel does not only accentuate cultural alienation usually experienced by immigrants but also the legacy of culture. The characters in the novel are traditional in their own way of living but contemporary in their outlook. They are persistent to retain their individuality. The writer defies the patriarchal culture that overrides the Indian scenario. The plot throws light on core Indian sensibility and ceases the isolation of its characters by giving them a place and voice in Canada for adequate introspection and self-assertion. Through this *mélange* of cultures, the novelist attempts to mark a shift from a sense of rootlessness to a sense of community and from estrangement to reconciliation. Uma Parameswaran crafts her tales along a composite world picture of culture, customs, ideas, ethics, and values of the community. At the beginning of this tale, Mayura, a young lady who had defied all societal norms by leaving her husband, returns home. Iyer's family tried to get Mayura to return to her husband, but she behaved as though no one could convince her otherwise and preferred spending time alone. Parameswaran's fondness of her homeland and the sense of pride in her culture are evident in her story telling. As an operational device, myths bring coherence in her theme, plots and characterization. The present article focuses on the cultural and traditional aspects through the portraited characters of Parameswaran in the novel “A Cycle of the Moon.”

Keywords: patriarchal, conventional, culture, transitional, isolation

INTRODUCTION

Uma Parameswaran moved from India to Winnipeg in the 1960s, is a retired English Professor, University

of Winnipeg. She did her M.A. in creative writing (Indiana University) and PhD. in English (Michigan State University, 1972). She is a renowned poet, playwright, fiction writer and a critic. Women's literature and South Asian Canadian literature are her two core interest areas of research. As a student, Uma read copiously about epic poetry, American literature and Greek Theatrical traditions. Her motto is to give voice to the South Asian Canadian diaspora. "A Cycle of the Moon" is her second novel where the author delves into the minutiae of love, sex, marriages and family life in South Indian families.

Parameswaran as a writer-activist takes the initiative in bringing in community's shared experiences to the forefront. Mayura's sudden visit was bound to wagging tongues. **"Why have you come back, you shameless creature, why have you come to disgrace the family."** (Pg. 9) Very few venerate Mayura because she appeared to be tenacious and her grandfather's pride and conceit shows all over her. **"She is her grandfather all over- egocentric and arrogant, insisting that her rabbit has but three legs, stubbornness incarnate."** (Pg. 206) Women of Judge Ramakrishna Iyer's family conceive quickly and come to their homes but there is a norm, **"the bride's second visit when, escorted back by her father in the seventh month, the golden hue of pregnancy on her filled-out skin, she enters her mother's home at an auspicious time of an auspicious day."** (Pg. 3) People started mocking among themselves that Deepavali was two months away and what made Mayura who was married hardly three months ago return to her parents? They were sure that reason would not to coerce more dowry or any petty grumbles at the wedding because it was surely Justice Ramakrishna Iyer's best celebration to date. **"Like a feudal lord, the retired judge had presided over the preparations, and like fief-holders the pundit, the head cook, the hired hands carried out his injunctions."** (Pg. 5)

The head of the family is Judge Ramakrishna Iyer who built separate houses for all his grownup sons on his two-acre land. Beneath his shrill wit and strident rule is a man of munificence and empathy. Patriarch Ramakrishna Iyer was an irrefutable authority in administering weddings, as he was in everything he shoulders. It was Parvathi, Mayura's mother's otiose desire to perform the wedding in a flamboyant function hall but the judge instantly refused the suggestion. **"A girl should be married at**

home, not at an exhibition hall.” (Pg. 4) The judge accentuated that the pundit should chant every mantra prudently and explicate in detail the meaning of those vows that young couple had to take. **“Don’t murder Sanskrit”.** (Pg. 5) Ramakrishna Iyer had done kanyadaan, the Sanskrit sacraments to not just one daughter but five including his niece. He remembered Indira’s wedding, his daughter where he and Maitreyi sat alone with their sore hearts. A maid who had been with them since Indira’s birth poured out her emotions by howling loudly whereas they could not even evince their feelings openly. **“Lucky, they could cry uninhibitedly at weddings and funerals, whereas Brahmins, indoctrinated through generations to stoic impassivity could not slacken the rein on their emotions.”** (Pg. 13) Parameswaran has acutely focused the socio-cultural rudiments in her works. The current work presents dogmas such as the influence of Hinduism, the control of tradition in a conservative culture, and the efficient application of rituals in daily life. These cultural institutions play a key role in maintaining the sanctity of Brahmin-centered Hinduism.

Uma Parameswaran portrayed women though traditional by nature but adapt to contemporary outlook and are determined to retain their individuality. **“The women's unconventional behavior isn't due to pressure from the outside world, but rather to a shift in their own awareness. They aren't content with just hearing about gender equality on paper; they want to live in a world where they have the freedom to pursue their own interests and fulfill their full potential.”** (Mies 88) In a society moving towards transitional phase a radical change is witnessed among the modern women who once were confined amid four walls are now ready to confront any circumstances. Ranjana Harish mulls about Indian women's need for respect. She talks of "a journey from the metaphor of the needle to the pen, i.e., from 'feminine' helplessness to 'female' authority, from tradition to modernity (Harish 167)". Mayura claims that **“Raghu was a boor and asensualist.”** (Pg. 22) His flippant nature of discussing their intimate life to his friends was most atrocious. She fearlessly condemns her aunt that a scholarly person like her should not be matched with such an impious person. **“If he had been otherwise, a studious academic with a sensitive mind engrossed in philosophy or physics... what use dreaming? It was too late, too late.”** (Pg. 41)

Traditional Indian culture and contemporary urban life coexist and often clash in India. Women in India find themselves in a precarious situation during this time of change. Women in today's India who are both educated and confident are always fighting to break free of the stereotypes perpetuated by a patriarchal culture. There is always discrepancy between supremacy of conservative life to that of contemporary awakening. Through her characters Parameswaran showcases the staunch practice of cultural and traditional sensitivity. Kamakshi is one such character, a conservative outlook and strictly abide by the rules well-defined by religion. As a widow at the age of twenty-two she returned to Hari Vilas with her infant son. It was Ramakrishna Iyer who brought her home and instilled aspirations towards her life. Though her mind widened with years of experience but her body remained twenty-two forever and **“I could not dis sever--- would not dis sever because of my preconceived ideals of womanhood, Sita and Shakuntala and Arundhati who were begotten of man to be worshipped by him because he needed to worship” (Pg. 44)** She took up the responsibility of her brothers' children after the demise of Maitreyi. Mayura's arrival devastated Kamakshi so she grabbed every edge of her life to make Mayura realize her flaw. **“We are too tied down to our inherited values of one-man-for-life, unconsciously and inextricably trapped by Brahminical ideals to be...” (Pg. 40).** Saveri the other character, Iyer's daughter, who though granted a love match with a man of Brahmin caste, but poor, lives to suffer bitterly. **“A woman must make do with whatever her husband earns. It is the primary requisite of a self-respecting man's married life.” (Pg.164)**

Like many other South Asian authors, Parameswaran explored the power and relevance of caste. Through her characters, she emphasizes the primacy of caste identification among South Asians compared to other social categories. Chitra's character portrays reverence and morality which obligated her to give up Ananth for the sake of his uncle who was orthodox and took proper care after her father's demise. Ananth persuaded her but she did not accede his love even though she had adoration towards him. **“So stupid, so humiliating to have admit that this age-old bugaboo caste-system has added another two sundered hearts to hang on its trophy.” (Pg. 69)**

Uma Parameswaran builds her stories surrounded with culture, customs, ethics and societal values. The performing of cultural elements like use of rangoli, eating food on plantain leaves, worshipping trees etc. are much apparent in her description. **“As the tulasi stood in the shade of the fruitful tree, so would its devotee stand all her life in the protective shadow of her husband.” (Pg. 57)** The startling incident with which the novel begins is the sudden return of Mayura, newly married, who declares that she will not go back. Parameswaran uses the scandal as a springboard to explore themes of identity in India and the world at large, including the challenges of conservatism. Parameswaran composed the routine of the other stretched characters with abundant details filled with pompous, conflicts and envies. **“We have a pleasant surprise,” he said, Mayura is here. Raghu is on business trip to Delhi, and so she came down here, and of course we are not going to let her go till after the engagement part.” (Pg. 26)** Mayura spends a month at home appraising her potentials. She perceives everyone in a new light, including her adored brother who has just deserted his love for beneficial arranged marriage, and Chander, a cousin returned from Manitoba, an innocent idealist once now projects to be unethical. **“God, god, is that what all men are? Mere jellyfish or sexual animals?” (Pg. 73)** Parameswaran ponders the meaning of our contemporary culture and strives to probe the effects of globalization on our minds. She deals with topics in a manner that makes them relevant and engaging, making the reader stop and consider the gravity of the issues she raises in her works. Parameswaran's fictional universe mirrors our own dynamic culture.

Uma Parameswaran's style of capturing the characters is exceptional. She probes into the emotions and feeling of isolation. Her selection of words, the staging of thoughts and ideas makes the crisis of the characters felt by the reader. After obtaining his green card, Chander visits Canada, where he is taken aback by the sight of Indian families settling into their new home. His mother had handed him the Bhagavad Gita at the airport with a mixture of remorse and pleading, waiting until the last possible moment so that he could not reject. She had murmured, "Keep it on your table," and I had ignored her. (Pg. 88) These words illustrate how Indian families endeavor to keep their roots in India alive and well.

Acculturation is predictable that cannot be escaped by an immigrant. He is not always free to acculturate as his experience depends on larger extent of the host society. This has great impact on the diasporas feeling of being at 'home' and in its motivations towards the host countries. **“The son of a merchant, here I am. My mom likes to spread rumors, and my wife is overweight. Yes, even with runny noses, my kids go outside and play. However, I adore them. Yes, please! I'd rather be with them on my dung-polished cot in my courtyard, surrounded by them than I am right now....”** (Pg. 92) In the article named “Towards the Centre: The Writings of Uma Parameswaran,” Indira expresses that as a diasporic writer Uma Parameswaran constructively relays on Canadian culture, while retaining at the same time her typical Indian identity through her characters. Though Chander has a well settled life in Canada, his mind always longs for his motherland. He expresses his views **“I'd give anything, anything in the world to see one of my own people, to hear my own language”** (Pg. 92) His opinion about his awaiting marriage, the age-old arranged marriage. **“A good cook who won't ever give me sandwiches, I've had enough of those for breakfast, lunch and dinner these two years. Someone who sings classical songs, or plays the veena maybe, soft-voiced.”** (Pg. 87)

Due to poverty, political despotism and exploitation of human rights people moved out of their home countries where on the other hand economic opportunities, political freedom, physical safety, and security pulled them towards new terrains. Uma Parameswaran explores into the politics of the extended family, tracing its complex inter-relationships, intrigues, histories and developments through a period of crisis. Vasudevan, a character in the novel faces such a scenario, he had been chased from his homeland by the then colonial rule for his nationalistic activities. **“He wandered through Europe, and when drifted into Athens he saw the Aegean and Acropolis, he saw the people, the poverty, the beauty all so akin to his own land, and remained there.”** (Pg. 28) Parameswaran appears to be pragmatic and rational as she faces the diasporic situation. The transitional fragment calls for insignificant endeavors for the immigrants like getting involved in politics or community work, voluntary social organizations, or in short to become acculturated.

“He sketched Indo-Hellenic culture, and he would show his sketches where he had superimposed broad-hipped Uma on Venus, and Hercules on Bhima the better to show the similarities and differences of sculptural traditions.” (Pg.29)

It is not soothing to any immigrant to blend in a hostile environment where the mainstream mock against the cultural mediocrity. Radha, raised in Greece, whose hybrid ancestry and upbringing become a source of conflict for her. **“She longed for common Greek name; she did what others did with greater zeal so that she could merge herself the more indistinguishably with the world around her.” (Pg. 29)** Parameswaran urges through her characters that the immigrants to cross this situation with serenity and perseverance and by informing the latter about our indigenous heritage, culture and social values. Radha remonstrated with her father that it was her father’s land and wished she could return home because she noticed that people had no gratitude for his gallant ideals and had notrenowned on his patriotism. In the later part of the novel, it was evident that she realizes: **“I mustn’tfeel upset over little things. It is just their way, different from ours, no doubt... Hari Vilas, Madra,India had absorbed her into a rut of conversations. She could not go back now or ever.” (Pg. 33)**

An apparent competence of Parameswaran’s writing is to balance modern experience with traditional myths and stories. Writers of Indian Diaspora have been recurrently pulled towards the rich mine of Indian Mythology. The two epics under Indian Mythology, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata accumulates enormous pools of chronicle potential. Parameswaran exploits these myths to interpret some serious underlying purpose beyond that of telling a story. According to Mircea Eliade, **“Whether the reality in question is the whole universe or only a small portion of it (an island, a plant species, a certain kind of human behavior, or an institution), myth explains how it came to be via the actions of supernatural beings. So, myth is usually a story about how something was created.”** In the novel the spectator stands partway amid of fragile Mayura and that of Mayura's grandfather, Judge Ramakrishna Iyer, who pin points the flaws of his granddaughter in a conventional style but witha metaphysical touch.

She is just like the silent beggar at the door who refuses to go. (Pg. 203) The eldest of the Hari Villas family, the rock upon which the household rests in terms of moral obligation and tradition, is also unsure about where to lay blame. When Mayura realized what she needed, Ramakrishna Iyer hoped she would be modest and work hard to get it. He believes that for lesser faults many suffered heavier punishments. “For mistaking Shraavan’s pitcher gurgle, for unwittingly killing a deer in copulation were Dasaratha and Pandu bereft of son and sex.” (Pg. 208)

Where the reader was first left feeling dissatisfied with the story's logical conclusion about finding acceptance by compromising one's beliefs, they discover an abrupt reversal at the story's conclusion. **“She did not take the entire blame but the feeling of regret was certainly there, and overtones of apology. Please ask me to come and I shall come she had said, but not in those words.” (Pg. 214)**

Rajeshwari Rajan has commented on the novel, she found it to be a typical Tamilian Brahmin family being depicted. According to her it is **“....A book that is utterly captivating. Uma Parameswaran delves deeply into the extended family's politics, charting its intricate web of ties, intrigues, histories, and changes as it faces a time of crisis. I was enthralled with how well she portrayed the manners and rituals of Madras's Brahmin upper society in the 1960s. Parameswaran recounts the history of a now-extinct people.”.**

CONCLUSION

Only a handful people surpass in executing their proficiencies and Parameswaran is one such writer, who replicates strong Indian ideological roots and Indian values in her works. The closeness of family and the importance of one's extended family to one's well-being are central to Indian tradition, and she puts a premium on both. I draw a direct correlation between this and the novel I'm now reading, *A Cycle of the Moon*, because of how well the author, Parameswaran, understands the Brahmin high society of Madras. Uma Parameswaran and her works are profoundly shaped by their shared experiences of cultural displacement and the accompanying feelings of alienation, nostalgia, and upheaval. Overall, it was

a lovely and incredibly enjoyable read, and it is a story spectacularly enriched with the nuances of the culture.

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