

**Landscape as an Overriding Component in Diasporic Writing:
A Metaphoric Study of Uma Parameswaran's Engaged Novel
*Mangoes on the Maple Tree***

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Uma Parameswaran, an Indo-Canadian writer of plays and fiction presents her firsthand observation of diasporic life. She is of the opinion that there are writers who have “a tendency to exaggerate, a leaning towards the over-idealization of nostalgia or towards satire” (2007, 27-28). They are expatriates who refuse to let go of India that makes them “The Nowhere Men, or Trishankus... Trishankus can neither wholly repatriate themselves nor can they wholly impatriate themselves into their adopted country” (2007, 27). Ultimately, the challenge of commonwealth literary critics is in the exploration and understanding of the bicultural vision of writers. On the other hand, Parameswaran maintains objectivity in portraying the several facets of multicultural Canada. She lives in Manitoba, Canada undergoing the third phase of expatriation where the policy of the government is multiculturalism in a bilingual framework. She represents ethnic minority writers in Canada “whose cultures are neither English nor French and whose heritage languages are neither English nor French” (Pivato 2000, 3).

Parameswaran's first novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* (2002) is an engage literature; engagement is a specialized term used by French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre which refers to the process of accepting responsibility for the political consequences of one's actions. Leaving one's home for a foreign place is a tough decision taken by Sharad Bhavé and his family and when they suffer from a sense of loneliness they accept that their own decision to leave home is the sole cause of their problems and hence they try to establish collective solidarity by mutual support. While dealing with the Indian diaspora in Canada in terms of isolation and interdependence of the diasporans, Parameswaran truthfully and logically records the feeling of rootlessness, which makes them Canadian as most people living in Canada. This kind of a positive responsibility for the consequences of one's actions makes the novel an engagement literature.

According to Sartre, the artist has a serious responsibility to society and this idea is “an application to art of a basic existentialist tenet: that a person defines himself by consciously engaging in willed action” (“literature engage”). He hoped that literature might be a vehicle

through which oppressed minorities could gain group consciousness, and through which members of the elite would be revoked into action. Sartre's claim that "engagement is an ethical and political virtue begins with the premise that humans are necessarily situated in particular places and times. It is impossible to be politically neutral, he insists" (Heter). Existential engagement thus requires political awareness and responsibility, and overcoming bad faith with respect to political issues. In late works like *Critique* Sartre "combines a demanding account of personal responsibility with the functionalist view that individuals incarnate their environment. The result is a portrait of social responsibility that holds average citizens responsible for diffuse social ills like racism, poverty, colonialism and sexism" (Heter).

Likewise, Parameswaran too focuses on the vastness and harshness of the Canadian landscape that makes her immigrant characters grow accustomed to the new land, despite the diasporic writer's problem which reads as follows:

Though the landscape around me has been cedar and spruce for the last twenty five years, the landscape I am most familiar with is treed with mango and jasmine. I can describe without effort the tender yellow blossoms and the hailstone showers that brought green mangoes to the ground but I cannot be as effortless when it comes to the pine cones I have been ranking off my yard for the last so many years. (2007, 104-05)

As it is summarized, "The novel examines various tensions that arise within the family as well as tensions that arise between the family and the greater society in which they are a minority" (Gerein 91). Parameswaran thus tries to bring the Ganga of India to the Assinboine of Canada "not only for Indo-Canadians but for all Canadians, so that the fund of Canadian allusions and sensibilities is extended..." (176). Canada, "a land of demons awaiting enlightenment" (New 18) has always been characterized by the multiple ethnic groups that it houses and as a colleague of Parameswaran says, "A sense of community has steadily enriched her [Parameswaran's] work, which deals with the intersection of different cultures and the adaptation of ancient traditions to life in new and unfamiliar circumstances" (Kearns qtd. in Parameswaran 1998, 7-8). Parameswaran's work deals also with "the 'New Canadians' in Canada [who] fall a prey to racial discrimination and disempowerment" (Thomas 2008, 28). It focuses on the disparate cultures within the diaspora where children born in Canada are definitely different from those who come to Canada in childhood. Among the seniors there are of two types namely "those over middle age...those who have spent their working life in Canada, and those who come to Canada after retiring from India, to join their adult children" (Parameswaran 2007, 213). It is relevant to quote here how Uma Parameswaran traces the four phases of immigrant settlement:

The first is one of 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 ethnocultural issues. The fourth is when they have "arrived" and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (2007, 305)

Her works deal with all the four phases exclusively as well as overlapping.

Mangoes on the Maple Tree is a novel that focuses on the problems of the new Canadians, the Bhavé family: Sharad Bhavé has migrated from Pune to Manitoba hoping to improve his financial position; his wife Savitri and their children Jyoti and Jayant also came

with him leaving their sparse comfortable living at their ancestral home. Savitri toils hard as a schoolteacher worrying about Jyoti's adolescent behaviour. Jayant is unhappy about Sharad's present real estate business comparing his early engineering job in India which could have elevated him to greater position by then:

Forms, legal advice bribes just to get people to do their job. In order to expedite the paperwork, his father had legally renounced all claims to ancestral and paternal property.

And now he was a real estate broker.

Betrayal, his lifelong companion. (109)

The royal treatment at their grandparents' house is replaced by harsh racial discrimination in Canada which makes Jayant decide to leave home in 1976 Pontiac car to California for a year. Joyti is in love with a white Canadian Pierre expecting her parents to accept her marriage with "not someone of 'our own kind' " (9).

Following Sharad, his sister Veejala, who is a scientist, also settled in Canada along with her family. Her son Vithal feels the same way as Jayant: "They—white Canadians— don't want us to assimilate. They want us out. We'll be squashed like bugs soon" (81). However, he is in love with a white girl Donna who according to him "is like us, very Hindu in her values more so than many of us" (92). While Vithal supports Jyoti's love with Pierre, Jayant is not able to, for he is immersed in the greatness of his ancestry. He remembers the proud family history that has been passed on to him through bedtime stories and strongly feels that his inheritance is "foreclosed by his father" (108). Jayant recollects Sharad Purnima nights in their ancestral house and wonders how "Hinduism has a place for everyone and everything" (103). He also remembers how in India Hindus are restricted in the name of religion: Avi's father once threatened them saying, "if he ever caught them talking about and doing the things they had discussed, he would have them circumcised—they could be like Muslims for life, because they did not deserve to be high-caste Hindus"(111). His memory includes things that are very much Indian, "Ajoba's library, Aji's jasmine-scented saris, the stop sign across the street, Jyoti's denim jacket, the smell of camphor in the niche of the tulsi tree, the ridiculous oversized billboards on Pembina Highway advertising Stanfield briefs and Cougar boots" (113). He pities himself for the loss by his inability to use Marathi and Hindi words like '*raat-ki-rani*', '*dhobi*', '*charpai*', '*vilayati baba*', '*chunam*', '*jamun*', '*rakhi*', '*kabaddi*', '*shehnai*', and '*tulsi*'. By thus recreating his personal pains he associates himself with his ancestral Indian past that gives him power to face the painful present. His gained stamina to survive in the new land enables him to help other Indian immigrants also to adjust and later assimilate the new culture. Not only Jayant but also the author herself adopts the technique of using these words without glossary or textual explanation to identify India in Canada. This kind of multiculturalism makes the novel an engaged literature. One can very well understand the author's preoccupation with Indian landscape and culture; she is not able to do away with her mental mapping of the Indian soil.

Jayant's aunt Veejala resigns her job without the concerns of the family, for her professional life as a scientist is male-dominated; she decides to go to India, for she can enjoy more freedom and liberty at her homeland. She used to be a rebellion at her mother's place and now she would like to relive those moments. Once she sold her ring to do flying course, for the family never wanted her to do that course which is not meant for girls. She never

cooked at her mother's place where "Back home she was used to returning from school, college, tennis, swimming, etc., to find a hot dinner ready, clothes washed and ironed, the house spic and span" (95). Savitri wonders at her sister-in-law's decision to go back,

Veejala, who had lived almost as long outside India as in, who in appearance, dress, accent, food habits, outlook and every variable one could think of, was at home in the western world, was returning to India, whereas they would continue here, with their old ways, old values, old everything. But why not? India had moved on, would move on, and people such as Sharad would be left behind no matter where they were. Life was easier here than there. (140-1)

What is considered to be painful in the beginning of diasporic living is found to be the easier as the migrants get accustomed to the newer way of life. It is also possible that there are people who would get disgusted with diaspora though had an initial preference for willing migration. While Savitri is an example for the former Veejala can be cited for the later type of diasporans. Savitri is definitely an assimilated diasporan, for she finds Winnipeg to be "a friendly place of warm, hardworking people and large, closely-knit families" (22). She loves her students and worries about her colleague Pete Kozolski's giving of chocolate-covered laxatives to Grade one children.

Though Veejala dislikes Canada she does not want her children to be reminded of their past life at Pune, for as she says, "you have only bad memories of Pune... Besides, this is home to you, and one can have only one home at any given time" (47). The author is little confused in presenting the character of Veejala; that is why there is inconsistency in her choice of diaspora. The *raison d'être* is unquestionably Parameswaran's obsessive love for her homeland. Again, Anant is made to accept Veejala's decision of leaving for India in a lighter reasonable vein and he happily drops her at the airport. The author narrates, " "You shouldn't worry about the house," he said, smoothly deflecting it from himself. "You should go ahead with your plans, get away from housework and, for heaven's sake, away from guilt feelings." " (212). As a loving husband he understands his wife and broods, "In another hundred years, maybe, he said, women would get out of the bind, but now to be born a woman was to be born with all kinds of guilt complexes. The two of them had an even tougher time because of their hopping between cultures" (213). Parameswaran releases her opinion of women's position in diaspora through a male voice. Anant, having realized the pressure exerted by social norms, consoles Veejala for her guilt conscience. The society calls her leaving abandonment, for she is endowed with family responsibilities which are to be duly carried out. While encouraging her leaving he decides to stay with the children which he explains saying, "I decided to stay because you decided to go away" (214). Such an understanding is possible only when people are in an alien country. They are again restricted by social norms of the homeland when they remain in their home country. Veejala is blessed in that way.

Though Sharad and Savitri dislike Jyoti's love affair Savitri understands Jyoti and talks aside, "when you said that, my darling, I wanted to hold you to myself, lick away your tears, smooth away your fears, take you back into myself and wrap you and keep you safe. Instead, I spoke to you as to a woman I wanted to claw and hurt" (62). In fact, she encourages her daughter saying, "All is not lost, my munchkin" (191). Jyoti also understands and shares the burden of the household with her mother and advises her, "Mom, you should do what you want to do without always following chore schedules" (187). The mother enlightens the

daughter of the awful bigamists of the world and incidentally refers to Rama who “as far as we know, practiced monogamy in spirit and in letter, and even he didn’t prescribe it as a general rule. Through his own actions, he told us what was ideal, but he knew we are human” (188). The author thus inexorably refers to an Indian myth while describing the cultural differences. Jyoti is thus made guiltless about her attraction towards two men namely Pierre and Sridhar. She even justifies Donna’s appeal towards both Jayant and Vithal thinking, “if she, Jyoti, wanted to play around with two men and not let go of either, why shouldn’t Donna?” (208).

While talking about Jyoti’s complete surrender to premarital sex with Pierre the author significantly makes her think of the myth of Narada:

Once Narada was extremely upset, and Lord Vishnu asked him why his favourite *bhakta* was out of sorts. Narada said that he was disturbed by the Lord’s partiality for a particular devotee, who was so steeped in mundane responsibilities that he spent only a few minutes on prayer. Why should that man be dearer to him than a renunciate such as Narada who spent every hour of every day on meditation of the Lord? Lord Vishnu said that he would get the answer after he carried a pot of oil on his head all day without spilling a drop. And Narada had been so engrossed in not spilling a drop that he did not think of god even once that day. (180-1)

The author herself comments that “Jyoti remembered her father’s story, but in her drugged state couldn’t figure out why it had surfaced” (181); however, the readers are able to figure out that Parameswaran is absolutely engrossed with her homeland and Hindu mythology.

Though they are Indo-Canadians the Bhaves follow certain Indian habits and customs. For example during dinnertime everybody should be home and no one should leave anything on their plate and Sharad would narrate Panchali spoon story. Savitri’s discussion with Sharad when they are alone includes matters that could not be shared with the family at dinner is typical of any Indian wife. Uma Parameswaran finds the Canadian landscape to be intruding her narrative, for Canada is her new land. As a transplanted writer she is confused whether to present the constricting problems of the immigrants with a sense of pity and loss or to highlight the liberating advantageous position enjoyed by the immigrants in the new land. That is the reason why she 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. Jayant thus talks with a newly earned wisdom,

That’s us, Dad. Not just you and me with our memories of another land, 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. (221-2)

The allusion to Indian tree and the uselessness of evergreen trees are metaphoric and philosophical in Indian terms. Jayant is already of the opinion, “Our people, our old country—Dad there’s no our people, no old country for anyone in the world anymore, least of all for us. This is one land and here we shall stay” (30-1). He decides not to leave home but to help the country during flood. He observes, “Besides, there’s enough work around here; they say there’s going to be thousands of people coming into the city from the country, which means

thousands of people will later have to go home and rebuild; I'm sure they could do with some help" (219). Priti, the niece of Jayant is also a beneficiary who always longs for the company of Jayant. He readily accepts the assignment of picking her up from her school. When once she is stranded at Polo Park she calls none other than Jayant and on their way home she freely complains about her mother expecting him to look after her even after her mother Veejala leaves for India. In fact, it is only after Jayant understands how much Priti needs him that he cancels his trip to California: "Have to cancel all plans.... I'm not" (197). Not only Jayant the Sharads are her favourite band, for one Indian can alone be a solicitor for another. Whenever her mother Veejala leaves her with Sharad's family she enjoys the Indian dishes along with the Indian tales told by Sharad. In fact, she is unhappy that Veejala does not tell anything about Grandma's house. Veejala too rightly reacts saying, "You have only bad memories of Pune.... Besides, this is home to you, and one can have only one home at any given time" (47). For a second generation settler like Priti home is Canada and all her relatives in Canada are her countrymen. She need not worry about being accepted by the white community. Probably he is at the fourth phase of immigrant life where he tries to become the citizen of the country by active participation and sincere contributions in the corporate living. He brings in a Christmas tree and deliberates, "It is an evergreen tree...and it will stand until the snow melts and then it will fall because it doesn't have roots" (220) and "An evergreen tree...is a thing of beauty...And a thing of beauty is a joy forever" (221). The metaphorical meaning is that their life is also an evergreen tree without roots here in Canada; however, they will survive until there is snow, which is again a metaphor referring to the trials and tribulations they have to undergo in the new land. And, the snow is going to be ever present and their joyful life is also going to continue forever with beauty. Jayant is thus definitely acculturated and assimilated. Jyoti also adds to this confirming the mixture of two cultures which could be the only solution for their pangs of immigrant life: "We will plant evergreens and oaks with roots...And grow mangoes on maples, and *jamuns* on birches, and *bilvas* on spruces. God willing, we shall...Krish and one of those little Indian girls born here, Romona's sister may be, Vithal and Donna, she and Pierre or...whoever it was to be" (221).

While using analogy and metaphor in describing the life of her narrative, Uma Parameswaran cannot help bringing in her own personal knowledge of land and environment. In fact she mixes up both Indian and Canadian landscapes, for what she tries to portray is a mixture of Indian and Canadian cultures. In the multicultural society "Food is used to reconstruct the lost culture. Here, the particularity of an ethnic culture, a different culture, is highlighted rather than hidden or silenced" (Pivato 9). While Jayant's friends visit their home mango juice is served; at that time Vithal rightly observes, "...Mangoes and maples don't mix. And whisk" (74) and he asks for puris. Danesh, another friend of Jayant observes, "you should make every effort to merge, since you are here to stay...this is your country. You have to try to assimilate ...The Canadians would appreciate that" (81). There is also a discussion on a temple to be built on the Red and Assiniboine as a mark of Indian culture being brought into Canada. During the discussion Jayant says, "Vithal and all of you will realize that we have already built that temple, because we carry our gods within and with us wherever we go" (93). Indians need not merge into the Canadian culture, for they can remain Indians in the salad bowl culture of Canada. This sticking on to Indian religious identity is due to the author's concern for her homeland and culture.

When there is a call from the Volunteer Coordinating Centre for help during flood in the Red river Jayant and Vithal cut short the lunch and, Sharad and Savitri reminisced about the Indo-Pakistani war of the 1960s. Jyoti thinks of changing her major of study to anthropology, for she wants to know more about the pioneers and the natives to understand the country better. When Jyoti goes to pick up Priti from the Mukherjees Romona welcomes her. There came two boys collecting pledges for the school band who tease them saying, “Paki! Paki house” (121). It is a routine racial disgrace experienced by Romona while for Jyoti it was her first encounter with overt racism. Later, Sridhar says that interracial marriages alone will solve the problem: ““Just wait a couple of generations and there’d be a lot more white-brown kids who will solve the problem for us.” Her own, for example. They would be beautiful. They always are, these children of two races, black and white, Japanese and white, Indian and white” (125). For that reason Sridhar does not want to remain an immigrant; he learns more about Canada. He quotes translated lines from Papuan songs:

He hiki ke hui me ko ‘u lahul me ka weli ‘ole

‘A’ohe maka ‘u no ‘u tho, me a kia’i pa’a ole ia

It means:

I mingle with my people without fear,

My safety is no concern, I require no bodyguards,

Mine is the boast that a pearl of great price has fallen

to me from above,

Mine is the loyalty of my people. (172)

His knowledge of Canadian history is also well-known when he says, “The Arlington Bridge is an historic treasure. It was built in 1911 on a design originally planned for spanning the Nile” (173). It is evident that he is trying to assimilate. When the news of flood arrives everyone thinks in terms of their possible means of help for a common cause. It is rightly observed by Savitri: “Sad isn’t it that there has to be such a disaster before people will come together...on the other hand, it is comforting to know that people do help out at such times. Just think how terrible it would be if we got so hardened that even disasters didn’t make us human again” (176). Ultimately they find that they are all Canadians, a single unified identity wherein they have to support each other at least during crises. Sometimes they shrug their Indian identity in order to be recognized as Canadians instead of Indo-Canadians, the hyphenated identity which is humiliating. For example, when Krish addresses Jayant *Bhau* he stopped himself, “realizing he had used a forbidden word” (11). It is an example for how Indian words are prohibited by settlers who would like to shed their Indianisms.

Savitri’s humming of *Meera bhajan* during her household to relax herself is a mark of Indianism. When Veejala’s decision of leaving the children also is discussed Savitri says, “I’ve always held that when an essentially moral person does some moral reason behind it” and Veejala says, “the children don’t need me, a child grows as a flower grows” (145). Veejala wants Savitri to narrate the story of a poor widow with a cowherd son named Gopala after Lord Krishna. The story reads as follows:

The school was on the other side of a dark grove of trees and little Gopala was afraid, but his mother prayed to Krishna and then told her son that his older brother, Gopala the flute-playing cowherd, would take him through the grove. Krishna played on his flute and related stories as daily he walked the boy to school and back through the

woods. One day, the teacher asked every pupil to bring something from home for a potluck party, and the poor widow didn't have anything. She told her son to ask his brother while they walked through the woods, and Krishna gave the boy a little bowl of sweet *dahi*, and when the teacher poured it into a bigger bowl, the little bowl filled up again and again and again and everyone enjoyed the sweetest *yogurt* they had ever tasted. (148)

The author thus presents Indianism as offering solace to these diasporic souls longing to be comforted.

While Savitri is a great confidant for Veejala, Jyoti and Veejala support each other mutually. They find themselves lucky to have one another "with whom we can still talk" (153). Jyoti encourages saying "Let's talk about you, Auntie Vee" (154) and Veejala says, "I am on your side, Jyo, I mean it. I'll bat for you against your dad, count on me. And it is a beautiful experience, quite quite ravishing, shall we say?" (155). She talks freely about premarital and extramarital relationships which are quite common in Canadian context saying, "Sharad would kill me if he heard me say this, Jyo, but it is as sound a piece of advice as one needs for living in this age in this country: jump into bed as many times as you wish with as many different people as you wish, with condoms of course, but don't jump into matrimony" (156). It is a culture shock to Indian readers but the author has to justify the presence of biculturalism in the life of Indo-Canadians. Jyoti is able to understand Pierre's many girlfriends with this gained knowledge of the new land. Veejala also talks about how back home in India elderly women "always knew just looking at you if you were having your period or were pregnant or having an extramarital affair" (154). They are endowed with an amazing sense of observation to read body language. Embracing Jyoti, Veejala consoles, "We are all in one godawful mess, my darling, but we'll survive" (162). Thus women in diaspora express their need for mutual support and gathered courage.

Parameswaran refers to the Indian master poet Kalidasa while talking of how despair of the immigrants could be described:

Despair. A dull despair as at some inevitability. A primal feeling. A deer nimbly running towards the lake but breaking of a sudden, sensing a tiger near, then moving forward again, driven not by its parching thirst but by a sense of inevitability. Kalidasa must have described it somewhere, for they had a way, the Old Masters, of combining breathtaking tenderness with nightmarish violence. Infinitely more moving than those who showed the violence of life through violent images. Separation, blindfolded walk into the forest, the circumcision blade; Shakuntala's deer, blue water, tiger. (9)

She is unable to find a better reference than an Indian one to express the terrible despair of the immigrants.

The present paper thus analyses how landscape retards the creative process of the transplanted writer, Uma Parameswaran.

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