

**AGONY OF THE IMMIGRANTS IN UMA PARAMESWARAN'S MANGOES ON
THE MAPLE TREE**

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ABSTRACT

Uma Parameswaran is a novelist dealing with the Indian immigrants in the Canadian society and their bittersweet memories of the homeland. She insists that diasporic writers in Canada must write about immigrant life in the Canada setting and not dwell on the loss and memory of the homeland. *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* is concurrently delineates the complicated relationship between the characters, especially of the new Indo-Canadian generation raised in Canada. The novel is about a family that has migrated to Canada, and negotiating with different cultural values. It pictures multiculturalism, rootlessness, alienation, racism and the nostalgic feeling of the characters when trying to assimilate into the new land. There is always a sense of belongingness as well as alienation towards the host country. It focuses on the two families Bhaves and Moghes. The novel is about three generations. Both families are Indians who decided to migrate for the better future of their children. They think migrating to Canada will help their children choose better lifestyles. Since they are completely culturally rooted in India, The Bhaves family and the Moghes family represent the three phases of diasporic assimilation. Each of the characters is dealing with the disruption caused by immigration. Sharad, the father, trained as a nuclear Scientist, but makes his living in Winniperg as a real estate broker. His wife Savitri, is exhausted with the demands of her job as a teacher and demands of her family. Jyoti is the protagonist; she is a well-intentioned young woman who spends far too much time worrying about inevitable things, such as her brother leaving home, leaving home herself and other unstoppable family-fiction phenomena. While these internal conflicts run high in the minds of the family members, the external conflicts of workplace inequalities, racism, and other political oppositions towards immigrants shadow their existence.

KEYWORDS: Alienation, Racism, Rootlessness and Nostalgic feeling

Mangoes on the Maple Tree is written by Uma Parameswaran. This is her first novel. The background is of Winnipeg, Canada. The protagonist of the novel is Jyoti, the daughter of Bhaves. The goodness of the family is at stake with the cultures of two different countries. They hard to establish their individuality through their choices.

The novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* the main characters are the members of Bhave and Moghe family, living in Canada for the past eight years. It covers almost three generations of citizenship who deal with the dilemma of being in diaspora. The parents Sharad-Savitri Bhave and Anant-Veejala Moghe represent the first generation. Their elder children Jayant-Jyoti and Vithal Moghe belong to the second generation. The third generation includes the younger siblings Krish Bhave and Priti Moghe, their connection with India is very far away, to distant and not clear.

The novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* deals with certain themes such as alienation, nostalgic feeling, racism, hybridity and rootlessness. Migration began with the dawn of civilization. Man was required to move from one place to another in search of food, water and shelter. Finally man had to give up nomadic life style to set up towns and cities.

The theme of alienation is dominant in the character of Sharad. He feels completely isolated in Winnipeg due to loss of his earlier job and his people and environment. He has been a nuclear Scientist at Trombay in India, however due to his segregation from the dirty politics in the institute. He resolves to migrate to Winnipeg. He becomes an Estate broker after his moving to Winnipeg. He is unlikely about his isolated self in the host land because he feels every face is unknown to him. His dilemma is that he cannot live with the unknown and unpleasant people of the host country.

Another reason for the immigrant sense of alienation is the unequal treatment provide out to them. Jayant aunt Veejala resigns her job without the consent of the family. Because her professional life as a nuclear Scientist is male-dominated; She decides to go to India, so that she can enjoy more freedom and liberty in her homeland. She used to be control at her mother's place and now she would like to reduce those moments.

In India, when she sold her ring to do a flying course, the family never wanted her to do that such courses are not meant for girls. In the same way, she remembers the freedom . She used to enjoy when she was there. She never cooked at her mother's place: "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" (74). However, Veejala's sister-in-law Savitri wonders at her decision to go back:

Veejala, who had lived almost as long outside India as in India, 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. (112)

The problem of racism is faced by immigrants of different generations. The first generation, because they have immigrated to the country by their own choice, may feel required to accept the consequences even though with difficulty. On the other hand the second generation is relatively more impatient because for them Canada is home. Therefore they tend to be less tolerant of discriminatory behaviour.

Racism many times takes the form of name calling such as, Paki, Nigger, Chink etc, and being denied from group activities. The first generation non-white immigrants who immigrated as adults have had to experience racism in their daily lives. But, the firm belief they had developed in their formative years about their sense of self-worth have been helpful in dealing with these challenges. But, the children of these immigrants who are raised in Canada have to spend their formative years in the Canadian social context. The issue of racism is also raised in the novel, in a scene where Jyoti is at Romona's house-a friend of Priti's, who Jyoti plan to pick up. Two boys ring the bell, "collecting pledges for the school band" (95). But Romona, whose parents are out, replies that nobody was at house.

"Nobody's home," the boy mimicked to his companion. "What you see ain't people, them's ghosts", and both laughed wickedly as they turned away. Jyoti closed the storm door and was about to shut the inner door when she heard the boy shout, "Paki! Paki house!" "Did he say Paki?" Romona nodded again. Jyoti opened the door and walked out in her socks. One of the boys had just thrown a ball of muddy snow at the front window. The other was about to follow, but saw Jyoti come out, and so pretended to clean his gloves with the snow. Jyoti caught the boy by his coat collar and dragged him into the house. "Did you say something?" she asked. (95)

Although Jyoti acts tough, she is "deeply disturbed...it was her first encounter with overt racism" (98). Nothing prepared her for what she feels after this incident, neither Vithal's stories nor the discussions of racism in university courses, the word Paki triggering in Jyoti an "uncontrollable spasm of fear and shock"(98). Paki is an expression of extremely racist abuse

that cannot be ignored, it emphasises 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 diaspora.

But even the younger generation is sometimes forced to come out of their ostrich-like attitude to racism, as when Jyoti, visiting an Indian home, is confronted with two small boys who had come to make a collection, who shout "Paki house" (95) as they are leaving. The fact that she was able to force an apology out of them is little consolation:

Jyoti...drove away, her mind in turmoil. The incident deeply disturbed her. It was her first encounter with overt racism. Oh, she had heard of it, of course...there was no doubting that racism existed. She had read of it and discussed it in her sociology courses, but this was her first encounter with it face-to-face. She couldn't even begin to sort out the feelings that had rushed through her...the uncontrollable spasm of fear and shocked at the word 'Pakki' flung at her. There was something about the encounter that frightened her far more than the actual incident warranted. (98)

The name *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* is suggestive of the theme of Rootlessness. The moving of Moghe and Bhave family changes the life of all the members. The feeling of rootlessness is dominant among these members. In the opening scene of the novel, Jyoti tells her brother Jayant, that as they are immigrants they are rootless. She further tells that they are the misfits in the novel environment of host land. They basically feel the problem of assimilation with the host culture.

For any diasporic individual it is essential that he or she have to accept the cultural ideology of the host land. Then only he or she can be fit in the environment of the host land. Sharad's character exhibits the feeling of rootlessness in an intense manner. He asks his son Jayant, this question "Can we really grow roots here?" (22) This reveals his dilemma that being the migrants they are undergoing many problems and he is not sure of his existence in the host land.

As Sharad belongs to the first generation which has spent most of their life in India and has settled in Canada in their middle ages, the conflict of assimilation is not so intense for him. Sharad and Savitri carry India with them and their roots are still in India. But the second generation suffers worse as they think Canada is their land, try to send roots deep and get assimilated. Sharad Bhave an atomic energy scientist in Trompay, India moved out at the age of thirty five. Many a times he regrets being a real estate agent. His wife Savitri is a school

teacher. They represent the hardships, racial discrimination and tough competition of first generation. They cannot go back to India. But Sharad is shocked to know that his sister Veejala, a scientist in Canada prefers to return to India.

Anita Desai in *Cry, The Peacock* asserts the feminine will to be recognized, same is the desire of Sharad's sister Veejala, who wants to move back to India to search her identification. "Maya, the central figure, the wife of a lawyer, devoid of progeny, finds it difficult to exist in Gautam's world. Maya is possessed by the prophecy made by an astrologer, Death....To one of you" (30). Like Maya, Veejala is in a dilemma of a choice, she wants to permanently leave Canada.

While Jayant prepares Sundae along with his friends, he gives the following instructions "don't ever use maple syrup because both are too overpowering, Mangoes and maples don't mix" (57-58). Uma Parameshwaran is very clear in highlighting that assimilation of the cultures Indians setting on Canadian soil will, inevitably create strange diaspora. Her novel reflects this fact very clearly. Probably, she has experienced it deep rootedly, the exquisite and subtle tension, that went in the shaping generations and continents.

Uma Parameshwaran is the representative playwright and novelist of the so-called phenomena i.e. Rootlessness. She provides a typical insight different and unique, into generational differences. Sharad says,

Roots son, roots. I often think of our plantain trees back home. Each plantain tree leaves a young sapling, before it dries up...It is a symbol of continuity and usefulness; You know how every part of plantain tree -flowers, leaves, trunk- is put to good use. Roots are so important. Can we really grow roots here?... And if an Ontario poplar can't survive in Manitoba soil, what chance do we have?. (22)

Uma Parameshwaran recreates the atmosphere of nostalgic feeling, homelessness and the consequent agony faced by her characters and at the end, her character gradually rise above their alienation and work for assimilation in their new home. They remember their 'homeland' in various ways by remembering old myths, telling and retelling many versions of the stories from the great Indian epics to the children, cooking Indian food at home and there by maintain a relationship with their homeland. Perhaps Uma Parameshwaran's finest achievement is this that she ends the isolation and silence of her immigrant people by giving them a place and voice in Canadian literature.

The quest for identity is common to all immigrants and Uma Parameshwaran expresses this challenge of identity through her characters. She wants to convey that in order to survive

in the alien place; the immigrants must redefine themselves and accept each other as they have become part of the host society. As far as the immigrants are concerned their family bond and their link with the past assist them as they go forward. Uma Parameswaran drives home the point that the true identity of a person does not lie in being an Indian or Canadian but in the inner spirit of the person, the true human spirit.

Jayant thinks that everyone is rootless in the world. Even the history reveals the same thing. But everybody has to stand firm and confident in his life. Parameswaran tries to convey the same thought through this novel that nobody has his or her roots fix in a land.

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