

## Transcending the 'Trishanku' state :Evaluating IndoCanadian Diaspora through Uma Parmeshwaran's novel "Mangoes on the Maple Tree"



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### ABSTRACT

*The term 'diaspora' very significantly depicts the people who are scattered around the globe for one reason or the another. 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, Anita Rao Badami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Uma Parmeshwaran are some of them. Uma Parmeswaran recognizes the experiences of Indo-Canadians as expressed through literature to be unique in their own right.*

**Key words:** diaspora, immigrants, indocanadians, trishanku.

#### Introduction:

"Svargo astu sa shariiraya trishankoh asya shaashvatah|

Naksatraani ca sarhvaani maamakaani||

Yaavat lokaa dharisyanti etaani sarvashah|

Yat kritani suraah sarve tat anujnaatum arhatha||

"Let there be eternal heaven to Trishanku with his mortal body. Next as long as the world remain let all of these stars and galaxies I have created also remain eternally in their places as my creation. It will be apt for you all gods to accede". So said Vishwamitra to gods<sup>1</sup>. The metaphor of 'Trishanku' has been commonly used to define people who live in a state of 'in-betweenness' or more precisely the immigrants. The present paper attempts to situate Uma Parmeshwaran's novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* within a diasporic conceptual framework. It focuses on the assimilative tendencies of the immigrants and their efforts to transcend their trishanku state. The forsays can be traced back to the Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* depicting the challenges, banishment etc. There have been travels of trade and religion. People also migrate voluntarily for better opportunities and career prospects. The novel flashes over the life of The Bhaves family who migrated from India to Canada and were living in the most centrally located city Winnipeg. Diaspora is a concept with its own history and Indian immigrants in the global age are aspirants of a new affluence. Canada has always drawn a large number of immigrants from various countries including India, which has led to the recent emergence of IndoCanadian writings and creation of a niche in the global literary arena. The experiences of this migration can be problematic as well as congenial. Uma Parmeswaran identifies four phases of the immigrant experience to Canada: Firstly, the experience of en-

countering the "vastness and harshness of the Canadian landscape," which she believes the South Asians missed out totally because they went basically to cities. Secondly, "the struggle of the immigrants to establish themselves in their own esteem and in society". But Parmeswaran feels that South Asians haven't achieved this totally because despite being settled financially they still feel unsettled. Thirdly, Second-generation Canadians of South Asian origin, "realize that home is here, not elsewhere". Lastly, "the affirmation that home is here ... but a place where one can be oneself, assimilating if one is comfortable doing so being different if one chooses to be so"<sup>2</sup>.

Trishanku despite of belonging to the earth desired heaven on his own terms and was made to live in a parallel heaven as his new abode. Similarly the immigrants try to build up a third world for themselves in which they can find comfort and solace. Diaspora and nostalgic desires are inseparable. The immigrants maintain continuous explicit and implicit contact with their homeland and other dispersed segments of the same group to ease their grief and cherish the memories of the past. But in this novel as Nalini Iyer says:

The Bhaves and Moghes are refreshingly different from some families that inhabit the world of diasporic fiction. There are no daughters being threatened with arranged marriages, no authoritarian parents, no weeping sentimentality about the land left behind"<sup>3</sup>. Sharad and Savitri - the parents of Jayant and Jyoti are referred as 'non authoritative' because they never impose their thoughts nor interfere in the cultural belongingness of their children. Sharad insisted that one should know about the cultural heritage. On knowing about Jayant's decision of going on the road trip they were worried. The Bhaves "would never admit aloud that they were proud. Jayant was taking to the

road with Brendam, Jim and Bob..."<sup>4</sup> The novel exemplifies the third stage as mentioned by Uma Parmeshwaran. The differences in the assimilative tendencies of the Bhave and Moghe families, their efforts in the retention of their own culture and its transplantation to the second generation. Trishanku's headlong suspended state refers to the discomfort and non attainment of both the worlds but Uma's characters in the novel transcend the state of dilemma and have a clear concept of their Canadian identity.

"I am 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 never going to fit in here." Jayant replies "..... sis, you'll see. Don't you come at me with all the crap about morals and Hindu values and the whole hogwash. I've had an earful from Dad all these seven fucking years." Jayant claims impatiently that the present is important to him and he does not feel any sense of belonging when faced with Indian people.

**Findings :** The novelist very clearly depicts the Indian families who retain their own identities in the foreign land and establish compatibility with in its culture. She refers to their conception as "forms of thought and existence in which people are 'at home' with their world and each other, but not at the cost of 'losing themselves"<sup>6</sup>. The children of parents of Canadian multicultural society who enjoy most of the modern comforts would not like to settle in India. They may go as tourists to see the land of their ancestors but not to settle there. . Materially they are better off than they had been in the countries of their birth. They correspond to the two key types of diasporas, traditionalist and assimilationist<sup>7</sup>. The main thrust of South Asian Canadian writers is away from India and towards Canada. In other words, it is an out of India or away from India experience that is being recorded. The relationship between diasporas and homelands is dealt with particularly because this will help in understanding not only how diasporas regard themselves, but in how homelands come to be created and defined. Sharad's sister Veejala's return to India emblematises her desire to look back to India as her homeland where as Sharad's family stays back in Canada. This paper suggests the complex and reciprocal relationship between the two,

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rather than a simplistic unilinear trajectory of influence or impact. The creation of one's abode in the host country is not an easy task which the characters in the novel have finally achieved" The theme of belonging opposes rootedness to uprootedness, establishment to marginality. The theme of longing harps on the desire for change and movement, but relates this to the enigma of arrival, which brings a similar desire to return to what one has left"<sup>8</sup>. In other words, a nation needs a diaspora to reaffirm its own sense of rootedness, while the migrant who did not feel like an Indian.

In 'Trishanku' Uma Parmeshwaran has referred that the "in-betweenness" of the immigrants is a space of possibilities. This leads to Savitris reflection of her sister-in-law's leaving: "Veejala who had lived almost as long as outside 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 where as they would here with their old ways, old values, old everything"<sup>9</sup>

**Conclusion :** Every immigrant transplants a part of his native land to the new country, and the transplant may be said to have taken root once the immigrant figuratively sees his natives. Their life gives us a glimpse of the feelings about their new home as well as the tensions among themselves. This makes diasporic narratives both transitional and liminal. The texts themselves are journeys between source cultures and target cultures, between homelands and diasporas, until the two overlap, change places, or merge. This ambivalent, complex and dialectical relationship between diasporas and homelands can be traced in their "effort to maintain ties with the motherland; and acculturation and adaptation to the host society"<sup>10</sup>. These efforts are more clearly visible in the second generation immigrants as Jayant and, Jyoti, due to the significantly prominent need of belonging in them. Despite of the palpable distancing from India the children feel connected to the homeland and retain the culture of their parents as is evident from Jayant's staying back when he decides to stay for her nine year old cousin Preeti. The novel provides ample understanding of both countries and cultures, it also traces the events showing how the family members come to terms with the crises they face and how they develop their understandings as they live in Canada.