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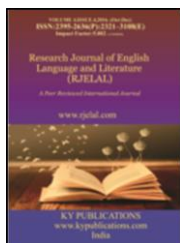
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FRAGMENTED IDENTITY – A JOURNEY TO SELF TRANSFORMATION

J.ABIRAAMI

Assistant Professor, L R G Government Arts College for Women, Tiruppur.

dhyanabi68@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

The quest for identity and the plight of immigrant's life is a fascinating subject for the immigrant writers. The immigrants' movement which begins as a journey of adventure marked by the hope of bright future gradually turns less and less adventurous because what they see in reality is an entirely different situation. Uma Parameswaran enables the readers to understand the agony and trauma they are subject to and bring home to the readers the feeling of emptiness and exclusion felt by the characters. She emphasizes that settling down requires surrender, change and assimilation on the part of the immigrants.

Keywords: Immigrant, Identity crisis, 'in-between' syndrome, adjustment and adaptation.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature of early days focuses mainly on reuniting of legends, praise of peasants and writing about personal experience which give a befitting expression to their thoughts and feelings, visions and aspirations of the writers. However, this lasted only for several decades and the quest for identity is a recurrent theme in modern literature. With the advent of new technology, the whole globe has become a village, the identity is no longer fixed. A person got his identity by virtue of his profession, caste, religion, region, but the moment he shifts to another place, country and region he has become marginalized because of his demographic caste, religion and regional patterns. A creative writer's sense of identity, his efforts to seek it and the challenges that he faces while exploring and affirming it are issues of considerable significance.

Identity can be defined as "the process of creative self-realization". To create an identity is a part of the essential business of an artist. For a writer, identity refers to the discovery and

declaration of literary nationality which can be treated both distinctive and rooted. It has been treated variously by the writers who have succeeded in realizing their own identity and affirming through their work. Identity is a semantically loaded imprecise term that may mean any 'verbal or social emblem or equivalent personal salvation'. In general, when an individual finds himself in a fortunate position to satisfy his needs and is able to play consistent roles in society, his identity is thought to have been established. Identity crisis results from negation of these factors. Whatever may be the definition, the creative writers have used the term when they are marginalized. Identity is no longer confined to the individual level; it can affect a group, an institution, a class, a profession or even a nation. It can be realized through discovery of one's own self and not by the imposition of social expectations on the individual society.

A sense of identity is a perennial sustaining creative force for a writer. It would be difficult to realize the magnitude of the loss of identity unless

we bear in mind that it is the root cause of all problems. In the early stage, the individuals or groups were marginalized either in the name of religion, race, region community, caste, gender, nationality or even ideology. But with the dawn of social reality, the marginalized societies reacted against the suppressive practices and points out that the loss of identity results in alienation. Identity may mean different things to different persons and it may be realized in various forms. For many people it is nothing but desperate struggle and the effort taken by the individual may be visible only to some observers and quite meaningless to others. The sense of identity has become a creative force for the immigrant writers as they have experienced in their life by living in the marginalized society.

Expatriates, exiles or emigrant settlers who find themselves displaced from one country or culture and aspire to accept the new identity of the alien land into which they have moved into will constitute the diasporic community. The memories of homeland and the life in a new region have been disturbing both in terms of defining cultural identity and also to assimilate into a new space and writers who have left their homeland for settlements abroad have voiced this new premise of experience. The strategic concern underlying this diasporic writing is the search for home. The act of displacement activates the diasporic writer to their frequent mental visits to their home through dreams and literature so that their homeland reappears to them as a series of objects or fragments of narratives. As a result of this, the writers have always the dual feeling of the sense of wonder and adventure at the sight of the new landscape and simultaneously the nostalgia for the world left behind.

Both Canada and India are former colonies of the British Empire and are now important members of the commonwealth. The major part of Canada is peopled by immigrant Europeans who settled down in its vast land by waging a fierce struggle against the hostile landscape. Also, there are immigrants from other countries such as Japan, China, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and other South Asian Countries, though their number may be much smaller as compared to the European settlers. The

Canadian society also has minority settlements of the natives who have become exiles in their own land. Hence, this immigrant's nation has its own share of problems and tensions which are exhibited through its long continuing question of national identity especially at the cultural and literary level.

The literatures of immigrant writers, born on the Indian subcontinent is varied in content and form but common to all of them is a passionate faith in their own voice that is raised to express their Canadian experience. All cultural identities differ from one way or the other and every perceptive consciousness is rooted in its own socio-cultural, racial, class and gender identity. For the immigrant writers, the quest for identity has been a significant issue at the social, cultural, literary emotional and psychological levels. Writers like Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Uma Parameswaran and a host of other immigrant writers highlight this quest for national identity by defining, redefining, analyzing and exploring it from all possible angles. Uma Parameswaran's works offer a special insight because she herself is a descendant immigrant Indian who is constantly aware of the agonizing problem of identity crisis. Like all migrants, she has not been able to shake herself free of the idea of roots. In her work, one can find the dilemma that an immigrant writer undergoes by creating an imaginary home for herself and reconstruct her roots.

As a creative writer, Uma Parameswaran depicts the immigrant society in turmoil and transition through the lamenting crisis of the protagonists in her works. Her exposure to other landscapes and other cultures increased her understanding of her own particular culture in a wider sense. The confrontation between the East and the West, the strange love hate relationship that exists between the two, the cultural alienation and the loss of identity faced by the expatriates and immigrants are some of the aspects that are presented with deep insight by her. This paper would discuss about the agonizing problem of identity crisis experienced by the Indian immigrants in Canada.

Identity is a much debated term in Post colonial literature. The ethnic, cultural and ideological circumstances prevalent in the alien and native

societies enmesh the protagonists. They become the victims of despair and loneliness as they feel the people around them asking them, 'who are you?' 'Where are you from?' 'Why are you here?' The perplexity of the protagonists caused by the binary opposition results in identity crisis. The problems met with by the immigrants in establishing their identity is an interesting starting point for research especially from an Indian point of view. The problem of identity crisis varies from individual to individual and they react in different ways. Sometimes they may find a solution and sometimes they may not. Hence the individual may have to adjust himself/herself to the situation and create an identity for himself/herself.

In Uma Parameswaran works the protagonists face fragmentation, alienation, identity crisis and they are on a search for their authentic selfhood. They do not realize what they are and what should be. The question "Who am I?" raised by the protagonists reverberates in all her works. In her works she unifies an essential Canadian sensibility with that of her Indian historic past. Like every immigrant writer, she attempts to "grab the best of two worlds" to use her own phrase. All her protagonists suffer from the loss of a sense of identity at one point or the other. The immigrants do not enjoy the life in "Straight lines" and smooth plains and neither can completely detach herself from her past nor do her characters have any certainty in the future. In the quest for identify as an Indo -Canadian writer Uma parameswaran expresses the culture, mythology, rich traditions of India with sarcasm and irony and tries to bring out that "Life outside India no doubt shapes one's responses to India" and the responses may vary a lot depending on one's own personality and values.

As the Professor of English at the University of Winnipeg, She expresses her own experience in Canada. She admits that there is racism and under employment in Canada. Her struggle to identify herself with the new host country enables her to write from a wider and more exciting angle. In her Canadian experience, immigrants were lost souls but in her transformation to a writer and a resident of the Canada in the process of immigration is something different. In her opinion immigrant

experience diaspora under different conditions – first they grow up in a foreign land with their migrant parents, second by virtue of their homeland, third, they exercise their conscious choice to do to other countries in order to pursue higher education or for lucrative job. Hence, whatever the classification, in real life also, they caught between psychological problems of diaspora such as dislocation, unbelonging, marginalization and cultural dissonance that are common to men.

The basic desire of any migrant is to attain better prospects or for a better livelihood in the adopted Country. In a nation like Canada, people with varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds enter a cultural 'mosaic' with the expectation that they are accepted as they are, without any change in their identity. Canada has embraced in its generous bosom in diversity of humanity of different languages stock and culture. This makes the migrants to accept the new nation as their own and created a holistic development in all aspects. Parameswaran's works move around the problems faced by South Asian and other visible minorities in Canada. The situations in her work have been so structured as the real happenings in Indo Canadians families. She enables the reader to understand the agony and trauma they are subject to and bring home to the reader the feeling of emptiness and exclusion felt by the characters.

In *Rootless but green are the Boulevard Tree* Uma Parameswaran narrates her own experience as well as the life of an average Indo – Canadian family which migrated to Canada for better prospects. In this play, the Bhaves a Maharastrian family migrates to Canada, leaving a well-settled pattern of life back home. Sharad who was comfortably placed at home as an Atomic Energy Scientist, migrates to Canada,

"To live without tension and yet with dignity, to give our children Good food, a liberal education, a healthy environment where, Because the body doesn't have to scrounge for sustenance, the Spirit can aspire to higher experiences than this sorry world Allows."
(77)

But in Canada, he couldn't get a suitable job and ends up as a real-estate broker and encyclopedia seller, much to the decision of his own. For all his optimism behind his migration Sharad has to come across many unpleasant situations and has to find out his identity. He visualizes situation as

"It upsets me profoundly to find myself in a crowd .All these alien Faces staring at or through you. It makes me wonder. Makes me Asks myself, what am I doing here? Who are these faceless? People among whom my life is oozing away? Each so self-contained, So complete, looking at me as though I shouldn't be there."(82).

No doubt dissatisfaction with one's situation is a common human trait but here it becomes more intense in the face of unequal treatment and injustice and constant reminder of differences between the native and the alien. The second generation is caught between two worlds, two cultures and there is a struggle to carve one's own identity and find space. An anxious sense of dislocation is characteristic of the second generation. On the one hand is the pain of being second class citizen and on the other, there is an impossibility of going back. Children feel the sting of racism in their school environment and most choose the survival technique of downplaying it but all react to it individually. The play gives the frustration of younger generation Jyothi, the twenty year old girl says to her brother Jayant, "I sure hope it get into that thick head of yours that we are different and no matter that we do, we are never going to fit in here.(27).These lines shows the issue of oppression,subjugation,discrimination and also to the dilemma of the immigrant families who feel the pangs of dislocation. They experience a state of turmoil and pain because they have not been recognized. They are individuals with their own psychology and biography, reacting to situations in their own individual manner.

In another situation, Veejala, Sharad's sister quits her Assistant Professor post in a Canadian University because of the insipid academic scenario and the colour- cum-gender bias prevailing in the University. The younger generation of immigration keenly feels that they have to face lot of challenges

in terms of appearance, race, faith, ritualistic practices, language and political power. They have no hope of assimilating with the Canadian mainstream for the whites don't want to mingle with them. In spite of all these difficulties the immigrant achieves success by losing their identity in the process of assimilation. As far as Uma Parameswaran is concerned, the immigrant spaces are homogenous they depend on how they adjust and adapts to the new environment and nation. She believes that one should feel part of the Community, one has adopted and tries to grow roots there and for this one has to face the trauma of self – transformation.

In this play Uma Parameshwaran gives expression to a vocabulary of resistance especially to that of younger generation. In this dimension, parents ready to bear the pangs of criticism where as children are frustrated against it. In another context Vithal who is Veejala's son and Sharad's nephew expresses the fear of the minority as, "They want us out, we will be squashed like bugs soon. They have never wanted us and now we are a threat, we have to stay separate from them and stay together within."(54) They overcome this problem as they have developed the quality of adjustment and try to grow roots through self-transformation. These lines show that an immigrant has to adopt the organic process of gradual growth in order to carve space for oneself.

The first generation immigrants suffer a lot and they face tough competition and racial discrimination wherever they go. The idea of assimilation seems a far- fetched one when the immigrants undergo such hardships. Many people, like Sharad, bear it silently for practical reasons, but some rebellious people like Veejala prefer to suffer in their own country than in the alien soil. "Asked if conditions were better in India, she said they were not, but she would feel better wasting her life in her native country than wasting it in the backwoods of Canada" (64). But the younger generation tries to adopt a compromising attitude as Jayanth comments,"Dad there's no our people and no old country for anyone in the world, any more, least of all for us. This is our land and here we shall stay" (68).This shows the mindset of the new generation

that they want to establish their identity rather than fall back upon the old memory and nostalgia.

In this play, the inner conflicts felt by common minority group have been worked out and writer has suggested several ways of self-assertion and belonging. Vijay Mishra has very subtly equalized the memory of lost identity in his essay "Diaspora and the Art of Impossible Mourning" observes "without memory, without a sense of loss, without a certain will to mythologies, life for many displaced people will become intolerable and diaspora theory would lose its ethical edge"(46). Hence we observe that a search for new identity, a loss of home and memories of the past were felt not only by the characters but also by the writer. She has handled the problem of exclusion and discrimination meted out to the South Asian immigrant and the settling of the Indian Community in Winnipeg through affirmative vision. She portrays this situation "by planting Ontario popular trees in Manitoba, all setup overnight around the new apartment block, appearing green and flourishing but which gradually take roots" (75). The only solution the reader can conjecture is to accept the fact that all immigrants involves anxiety and belonging to two communities which forces a kind of struggle that they face in alien place.

Uma Parameswaran's *Dear Deedi, My Sister* reflects the identity crisis which is prevalent in Canada. For this play the author Uma parameswaran won the first prize in "Caribe" a play writing contest in the year 1989. This play focuses on the middle class people who immigrated to Canada from 10 countries viz., India, Nicaragua, Kenya, Philippines, Nigeria, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Srilanka, Japan and Somalia. Each country is represented by different characters where in the author portrays the problem that ravaged the larger immigrant community in Canada. As India is a land of many cultures Canada too is a land of many cultures. Each one has his or her issue to face and deal with. The dramatist allows each character to speak out the various issues that they face in Canada. Their views are based on individual experience, which interfere with the whole process of belonging and adjustment.

In this play Uma Parameswaran discusses these issues in the mode of correspondence between two sisters, one living in Canada and other in India. Apart from these two, we come across a variety of men and women, all immigrants from various parts of the world, settled in Canada. Life in the new land places them in an uncomfortable condition. They are overawed by the vastness of the new landscape and by the new aggressive cultural surroundings. Sekoni, a young immigrant seated in the bus, wonders:

Who are these faceless people?

Among whom my life is oozing away?

Each is so – self- assured

Glancing swiftly but completely

Through me, wordlessly asking:

Why are you here?

And the bus moves on and we. (65)

These lines show how immigrants are uncomfortable in the alien land. When one lands on a foreign land, even food becomes an issue. One may not like the food which is available there. Nayana, a young Gujarati woman, when she returns from the big streets after buying vegetables is shocked to see "Animals hanging from hook, like we hang bananas" (66) and her stomach churns out as she is a vegetarian and cannot bear a scene like this. For immigrants, language is also a problem for them to survive in the host society. Nayana complains "But, it is hard for me to speak English". (66) Hence, the author suggests that one should think about the prevalent conditions there. Next, the author introduced a school going boy Ilago from the Philippines who asks his mother to change his name as Jim or David or something because he faces identity crises in the school. He says,

"Amma, I like school

It is such a fun

We play most of the time

And sing songs in French

Ma you think you could change my name

To Jim or David or something?

When the snow comes, Ma,

I'll get less brown, won't I?
It would be nice to be white,
More like everyone else. (65)
More importantly, jobs are denied to the immigrants. Even in educational institutions, the children are discriminated and they cry out in anguish,

It will not be easy, some said
And it has not as we all know
Who have worked hard ,or worse still
Have no work at all, though willing
And waiting for the break
That would set as on our own
What we were never told, never guessed
Is written on our children's faces
Furrowed with tears because of our race
or colour ,or tongue that stumbles
Over words so alien to the many places
From which we've come.
Have we come from the Niger and Luzon?
From the Antilles and Hong Kong,
Only to see our young ones faces
Slapped by unthinking scorns and unfeeling
barbs
From closed fists and closed hearts.(72-73)

These lines describe how immigrants feel disillusioned. Every line of the play reflects a real-life situation and hints at injustices in the system and the community. It reflects the pathetic condition of the immigrants in alien society. They have no freedom to take leave or speak against the system.

To sum up, the tension and paradoxes of immigrants' lives are very well articulated in Uma Parameswaran's writing. In fact, people migrate and hop from one culture to another with a lot of aspirations, but sometimes the adopted place falls short of their demands and aspirations. As a result, the writers have always the dual feeling of the sense of wonder and adventure at the sight of the new landscapes and simultaneously the nostalgia for the world left behind. In her writings, Uma Parameswaran suggests that the migrants could survive in the alien culture with the nourishment and strength of family ties and with an extended arm of assimilation. She 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.

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