

ANGLING FEMALE THOUGHTS IN “A CYCLE OF VOICES” FROM
TRISHANKU AND OTHER WRITINGS

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People in general state that there is no use in crying over the spilt milk. Past is always considered as dead and pondering about that is perpetually considered as futile. However, Uma Parameswaran’s *Trishanku and other writings* break this notion. This work of a diaspora writer cannot be read for the contemporary issues as it deals with the first set of diaspora people who moved from India to Canada. Despite the fact that the text deals with the previous set of immigrants, still it cannot be ignored. The text provides the base to learn about the first set of immigrants and provides a link to learn about the state of current immigrants. Apart from the theme of nostalgia, this work has universal themes too.

This collection is also unique in its literary genre. Uma has broken the boundaries by compiling poems, short prose and excerpt from a novel. Her new attempt is worth reading. This collection is unique and deserves kudos as it appeals to heart and soul. No wonder many pages make us suffer and choke our throat in tears. The text treats your emotion. The current paper ventures to explore the emotions and thoughts of female character in “A Cycle of Voices” poem collections alone.

Uma Parameswaran’s *Trishanku and other Writings* is often read as a diaspora text that deals with nostalgic memories of the first generation settlers. She is well-known for making the Indo-Canadian generation popular in the world literature. To quote from the article “An Exposition of Immigrant Experience in Uma Parameswaran’s Works”, “Uma Parameswaran has portrayed the evolution of the Indo-Canadian community and the evolution of the writer through her works”.

To focus on *Trishanku and Other Writings* in particular, if one thinks about any other unique feature of the text, tremendous perspective may overflow but this paper ventures to deal with a single feminist aspect of the text focusing on the initial part of the collection of poems titled as “A Cycle of Voices”. Adhering to the title the poem, the thoughts and the voice does not belong to a single person. Different characters of gender with various regional identity of India record their views and notions.

Despite different voices, the collection is not a fragment. A string of connection can be traced when carefully read and they have a one or the other common feature. Uma has used a classical style by beginning the collection of poems with invocation. However even through the invocation she brings out the liminal space in which she struggle to thrive. *Trishanku*, a mythical

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character who was forbidden entry into the celestial city is given an in-between space in the sky. Uma deftly uses this character both in the title and in the invocation. She points out to her third space through the lines,

And What?

Shall I hang myself in the sky

As Trishanku did of old? (15)

Homi Bhabha talks about the third space that can be created by dislocation. In this context a third space is formed both within and outside of an individual due to the migration from a native town to a distant land. Even the birds that migrate knew the season for migration and they make sure to come back to their own land but the situation of human beings who dislocate is entirely different. Comparing the psychological and biological stress encountered by an individual based on gender, this text has to be carefully studied for the position of female in a migrated land. The experience of a man is rather different from women but no matter where women resides there are some universal feel and suffering that she has to encounter. To quote from the “Voices from the Gaps”,

She has been able to write about South Asian women in a range of professions from the secretary to the housewife drawing from her own experiences as a professor and her observations of South Asian Canadian women. From immigrant women and Canadian-born South Asian women to exploring the generation gap between old and young South Asian women, Parameswaran’s stories contain the highest degree of cultural sensitivity.

Uma does not fail to record the voice of those women who have undergone a change in location but their suffering remains the same. The first women character introduced in Cycle of Voices is Usha. Her name signifies the dawn of the day which is considered as most auspicious but in contrast to that Usha’s life seems to be filled with pessimism. She has unfulfilled desire of becoming a mother for a child and that re-echoes throughout her thought process. Her loss of a child in the womb is expressed in her agonised voice. The thought of her son being dropped in a white-lid jar is the greatest horrible and threat to her. She imagines the demise of her unborn son and this experience is common to any mother universally who loses her child in womb. To quote,

And they dropped him in a white-lid jar

And carried him away.

Threw him down the incinerator perhaps,

Flames sucking at those unformed lips

That will never suckle here,

My son, heir to the heritage of the solar kings. (31)

The same idea of her loss is reiterated in the voice captured in Pages forty and forty one. She recollects the way she lost her child. Her son has bid her farewell disappointing and denying her a chance to rock him in the cradle. Neither her small promises to take him shopping, walk with him through Canada’s Christmas store pointing out toys nor the big promise to offer him the heritage of the solar kings could hold him back. Both the eternal love and the infinite love for him did not move him to stay with her. She was left only with a soundless womb with gurgles of pain. Another voice of Savitri also expresses a sense of loneliness. She runs a school for toddlers but still she wonders her place in the alienated world. She becomes the witness of culture shock in new land and simultaneously she feels jealous about Chandrika, former one side lover of her

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husband. When she happens to meet her, she feels a little jealous about her appearance and the way she talks. It is an irony to watch a lost soul trying to be a support for tear shedding children. To put in her words,

Little Pete Korolski
Abandoned child
Of foster homes
And bright eyes
Blinking back tears
As he ushered parents
With grave ritual
Pair by pair.
But who does my hand
Linger on his shoulder?
His need?
Or is it mine? (38-39)

The narration of their experience by Usha and Savitri presents an oxymoron. On the one hand Usha appears to be a mother who longs for the presence of her lost child. Her repeated miscarriages make her life more painful while on the other hand Savitri's narration presents the children of the settled land who crave for the caress of their parents. The poet beautifully contradicts the parenting mode from different backgrounds through these characters. Savitri despite being a teacher consider herself as mother of twenty four nine year old children. Every year children moves to the next class but perpetually she is the mother of little ones incessantly.

Another major female voice that is heard by the reader is the voice of Chandrika. She is a strong voice who could express the sense of a soul cut off from the native land. Her thought echoes the feel of first generation settlers. She says,

The land is green but my heart was barren,
Warm are the people but my heart was lonely,
Money flows in rivers but my heart was dry.
Bereft of want and tensions
Bereft of sorrow and pain
Bereft of Comradeship
My heart lost its voice, my brother.
It is not the land for you and me. (51)

The setting of an Indian household in Canada is picturesquely brought out by Chandrika. They have Ganga sealed in copper pots and placed above fridge. Since there was not enough places to display Indian Gods, all the Gods have found their abode over the fridge. Her father demands for the Ganga water and when he leaves he wishes her daughter "Dheergha Sumangali Bhava" an expression that blesses a women's husband to have a long and healthy life. The wish is carried even in the new land. This particular blessing can be considered as a sign of marginalisation. A woman is expected to carry the fortune of her husband and healthy life in contrast the husband is not responsible for his wife's health and life. Thereby in a way wedding bond is not mutual. It leads to a hierarchy where the husband is given the first order and the wife is placed second. Though some may interpret this statement as the power assigned with women to hold her husband life still it is not a proper act to assign a woman with such herculean task.

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There is no one to take care of her after marriage but in turn she has to shoulder all other burdens. No matter where the woman lives, the cultural and the social bond begin to pester her. Uma Parameswaran rightly captures that spirit where woman becomes the brand ambassador of native's social and cultural act. She is supposed to be an idol in carrying the spirit of culture and rituals and in many cases she does that happily even in a dislocated land.

The other minor characters are Poornima, Tara and Tara's mother-in-law. Tara and her mother-in-law's voices present the voice of a female who belong to a different social strata. Uma brings out the difference in their strata by the usage of broken English. These women are literally shocked in new land. Their English has more Indianness. When Tara goes with her Italian neighbour to stores, she is shocked to see the flesh of animals hanging like bananas. To put in her words,

Toba toba Behn, whole hunks
Of animals hanging from hook
Like we hang bananas no?
Ram re Ram, my stomach churns
And I rush out. (54)

Her frank acceptance of lack of English knowledge is evident from the lines "But behn, is hard for me to ispeak Ingleesh" (54).

The lamentation of Tara's mother-in-law evokes both laughter and pity. She is not able to accommodate herself to the new environment. She doesn't like the way the windows and front doors are always kept in close. She misses the rangoli on porch steps. According to Hindu mythology, doors are kept open with rangolis on floor to welcome goddess Lakshmi. This goddess is expected to pour blessings of richness on the human beings. So, Tara's mother-in-law is worried about the entry of goddess into home. She is questioning her son that how the goddess will bless the three days old food stored in cans and ice-cupboard. She openly states that she hates to see her daughter-in-law holding hands with some other men and her son holding hands with some other women.

Of course she is happy with her son status who has settled with car, home and a good job but she could not tolerate the smell of previous day cooked food. According to her, the cooking smell should be filled with leaping aromas of turmeric and green coriander and mustard seeds popped in hot oil. The hot food with flavour will not stink up in the air. She does not want to be secluded inside the home. She wants to be with nature. The noise of birds, rain will be more soothing rather than the noise of the washing machine. She is utmost frustrated about the new settlement. Her mind longs for the dust, hot air and flies. In short Uma's character of first generation women have been caught in the cluster of culture even in yonder land. To conclude, Uma Parameswaran's "A Cycle of Voices" once again proves the trauma of women experience. The land may change but their suffering never seems to get ceased. The sense of in-betweenness is quite common for all the immigrants but then the state of women is at stake. Their thoughts unveil the voice of majority of Indian women settlers.



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What I Thought: My method for reading Voices From the Past was to read only the entry for the day, even if I had gotten behind. That was a mistake, which I only realized when I began reading Volume II and read all the pages, even if I fell behind. Reading every page is important because some of the excerpts are split over two or more days. My only other complaint with Voices From the Past is that the Scripture verses for each day didn't always seem to work well with whatever the topic was. Some days the excerpt and verse went together very well, and other days I was left wondering how the verse correlated to the entry. It's possible that reading every entry would have solved this annoyance. Rushing edited the best writings from the English Puritan period into readable, daily digestible bites. It is thought by some that extinction is inevitable for some animals; therefore, people do not need to concern themselves with preventing this natural phenomena. Personally, I am not a proponent of this view, because I believe that biodiversity is essential in matters of the environment. Also, nowadays, the anthropogenic factor is often to blame. In conclusion, although species become extinct regularly, this may strongly affect the balance in the environment in a negative way at some point; thus, our society should take action. Also, people often create life-threatening conditions for animals, and therefore, ought to proactively prevent their extinction. Other groups of researchers, both from the cultural psychology sides and cognitive psychology sides, have attempted to evaluate the influence of culture and language more directly. Ji and colleagues [108] and Saalbach and Imai [31,32,59] examined the mutual relationship of culture and language on the conceptual relations people use in organizing object concepts. 4. Whorf BL: Language, Thought and Reality. Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf. MIT Press; 1956. 5. Sapir E: Language: An Introduction to the study of speech. The Speckled Band and Other Stories. Retold by Anne Collins. Mac miu.an. I knew it was Julia. 'I jumped out of bed and ran into the corridor. As I opened my door, I thought I heard a noise. It was a low, clear whistle. Then I heard another sound. The notion that language influences thought has a long history in a variety of fields. There are two bodies of thought forming around this debate. One body of thought stems from linguistics and is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. There is a strong and a weak version of the hypothesis which argue for more or less influence of language on thought. The strong version, linguistic determinism, argues that without language there is and can be no thought while the weak version, linguistic relativity