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Diasporic Consciousness: A Study of Representative Works of Uma Parmeshwaran

Dr. Monali J. Parghi
M.A., Ph.D., NET, GSET

Abstract

This paper explores diasporic consciousness in Uma Parmeshwaran's Mangoes on the Maple Tree and selected short stories from What Was Always Hers. Drawing from Harpreet Kaur's work on identity negotiation, Liza Joseph's analysis of Indo-Canadian family dynamics, Sonal Varia's study of cultural adaptation, and Vijay Mishra's theory of the diasporic imaginary, the article examines themes of memory, home, belonging, gendered experience, and intergenerational conflict. The study reveals how Parmeshwaran's narratives articulate the emotional and cultural negotiations that define Indo-Canadian immigrant life.

Introduction

Diasporic consciousness is shaped by memory, longing, conflict, and the ongoing negotiation between the homeland and the host nation. Vijay Mishra describes diaspora as driven by "an imaginary homeland, preserved through desire and recollection rather than physical return" (Mishra 425). Uma Parmeshwaran's fiction captures this emotional landscape with clarity and authenticity.

Her novel Mangoes on the Maple Tree and the short stories in What Was Always Hers stand as representative works that portray immigrant family life, gendered responsibilities, and generational tensions. Critics such as Harpreet Kaur and Liza Joseph affirm that Parmeshwaran's writing reflects the complexities of identity formation and belonging within Indo-Canadian communities (Kaur 95; Joseph 80). Supported by these critical perspectives, this study examines how diasporic consciousness unfolds through the characters' memories, conflicts, and cultural negotiations.

Memory, Home, and the Emotional Fabric of Diaspora

Memory is a defining force in diasporic life. Mishra's concept of the diasporic imaginary emphasizes that immigrants reconstruct home through memory, often idealized and emotionally charged (Mishra 426). In Mangoes on the Maple Tree, family members hold tight to memories of India, using festivals, food, stories, and rituals to sustain emotional continuity. These cultural practices become anchors in an unfamiliar land.

In What Was Always Hers, stories such as "Sisters at Christmas" and "The Green Maple Tree" show how memory becomes both comfort and burden. Characters carry their past into the present, shaping how they navigate identity and belonging. Joseph notes that Parmeshwaran's characters "rebuild a sense of home through shared memory and family relationships" (Joseph 82), which mirrors the emotional reality of diaspora.

Identity Negotiation and Cultural Adaptation

Migration requires continual negotiation between inherited culture and the demands of the new environment. Harpreet Kaur argues that identity in Mangoes on the Maple Tree emerges through

"a fluid negotiation shaped by cultural memory and generational pressures" (Kaur 94). The younger generation leans toward integration, while the older generation preserves cultural boundaries, creating a tension that defines diasporic identity.

Sonal Varia similarly observes that Parmeshwaran's fiction portrays "subtle yet persistent forms of cultural conflict and adaptation" within immigrant families (Varia 48). The short stories reflect this negotiation vividly characters shift between languages, food habits, and social expectations, revealing the hybrid nature of diasporic life.

This negotiation is not only cultural but emotional, as the characters attempt to belong to two worlds at once. Their identities become layered, dynamic, and constantly reshaped through experience.

Women as Carriers of Culture and Continuity

Diasporic consciousness in Parmeshwaran's works is deeply gendered. Women bear cultural responsibility, emotional labour, and the role of mediators between generations. In "What Was Always Hers," the protagonist embodies this dual burden preserving cultural values while navigating personal longing and agency.

Joseph highlights that women in Indo-Canadian literature often act as stabilizing forces, "bridging tradition and adaptation through daily cultural practices" (Joseph 81). In Mangoes on the Maple Tree, women sustain the moral and emotional fabric of the family. Their resilience becomes a central narrative force, shaping how the family confronts displacement and adaptation.

Intergenerational Dynamics and the Tension of Belonging

A recurring element of diasporic consciousness is the friction between generations. Younger characters, shaped by Canadian schooling and society, develop hybrid identities, while the older generation clings more firmly to memory and homeland. Kaur explains that such generational divides reflect "conflicting models of identity performance" within diaspora (Kaur 96).

The story "Triya's House" captures this divide with emotional clarity, while in Mangoes on the Maple Tree, parental expectations collide with children's desire for autonomy. Varia notes that

this conflict "forms the emotional core of Indo-Canadian immigrant narratives" (Varia 49). Parmeshwaran portrays these tensions with empathy, revealing the evolving nature of family relationships in diaspora.

Conclusion

Through Mangoes on the Maple Tree and What Was Always Hers, Uma Parmeshwaran constructs a rich portrait of diasporic consciousness one shaped by memory, identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, gendered experience, and generational tension. Supported by the critical insights of Kaur, Joseph, Varia, and Mishra, this study demonstrates that Parmeshwaran's fiction offers an authentic and layered understanding of Indo-Canadian immigrant life.

Her characters reveal the emotional weight of migration and the quiet resilience required to build belonging in a new land. Their stories embody the creative, often challenging interplay between tradition and transformation that defines South Asian diaspora.

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