

# **A SYNOPSIS OF THE THESIS ENTITLED**

**CRAFTING ONE'S OWN AESTHETICS: A STUDY OF  
THE DIASPORA FICTION OF  
UMA PARAMESWARAN AND SHYAM SELVADURAI**

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**MARY YASMIN THATTIL**



**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH,  
UNIVERSITY OF MADRAS,  
CHENNAI – 600 005**

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## **CRAFTING ONE'S OWN AESTHETICS: A STUDY OF THE DIASPORA FICTION OF UMA PARAMESWARAN AND SHYAM SELVADURAI**

Migration is no new story to the human race. Since the dawn of civilization man has had to move from one place to another in search of food, water and shelter. Eventually he gave up this nomadic lifestyle and set up towns and cities that are now known as the very first 'cradles of human civilization'. However, his nomadic lifestyle was far from over. Survival being his primal instinct, time and again he has had to resettle, both when food and water ran low and when natural disasters and marauding warriors wrecked havoc on unprotected settlements.

Various other reasons that have occasioned migration in times of increased conscious action are the quest for knowledge (right from the seventh century Chinese pilgrim Huien Tsang to present-day students who throng foreign universities across the globe), racial and religious persecution (as in the case of the Polish and Armenian diasporas), military conquest and oppression (as is evident in the war-stricken countries of East Africa and, closer home, Sri Lanka) and material gain (as is the case for most modern-day diasporas, most notably the Indian diaspora in the Middle East). These varying reasons have led to the creation of a variety of diasporas such as labour diasporas, student diasporas, military diasporas and refugee diasporas.

It is common knowledge that the term *Diaspora* (capitalized) was originally used to specifically refer to the Jews who had been exiled from Babylon and forced to leave their homeland on pain of death. In ancient Greek the word means "a scattering or sowing of seeds". The exiled Jews were compelled to scatter far and wide in order to survive.

The word *diaspora* (without capitalization), however, is used in contemporary social science discourse to refer to any sizable ethnic population living outside their traditional homeland, sharing common bonds and subsequent developments in their culture and ethnic identity.

Over the years, global migration has registered a marked change. Today, a vast majority of migrants are highly educated and skilled workers and professionals, who voluntarily migrate in search of greener pastures, unlike the Jews of yore. Hence, one finds that the original meaning of diaspora is vastly expanded but excludes the connotation of forced exile that it held for the Jews. The academic field of diaspora studies was established in the late twentieth century, apropos the expanded and modern meaning of 'diaspora'.

### **Chapter I: Introduction**

As a combined result of natural disasters, economic collapse and war, the first half of the twentieth century saw the creation of a host of diasporas, mostly across North America, Asia, Europe and Africa. Some of the most notable diasporas of this era have been the African diaspora, the South-east Asian diaspora, the Polish diaspora and the Arab diaspora. Over time the South Asian diaspora has come to be viewed as separate from the earlier South-east Asian diaspora: the former now limiting itself to the countries comprising India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Tibet while the later remains concerned with the countries of Japan, China, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia amongst others. In like fashion, attempts are being made to further cull out the Indian diaspora from the portmanteau term of 'South Asian Diaspora' and see it as separate from the Sri Lankan diaspora, the Pakistani

diaspora and the Bangladeshi diaspora, primarily because the Indian diaspora enjoys a singularity that perhaps no other diaspora does for two very remarkable reasons.

Firstly, the connotations of forced exile and the fear of death, if caught, cannot be associated with the Indian diaspora. At no point of time were the Indians ever *compelled* to leave their homeland due to war or on pain of death. Right from the earliest indentured labourers, 'free' or 'passage' emigrants and the later skilled and semi-skilled workers, down to the highly educated, highly qualified and highly skilled professionals of today, migration has only taken place with the express intention of material benefits and often intellectual and professional benefits too.

Secondly, there exists, within Indian territorial borders, an equally vibrant and more fascinating inter-state diaspora, something perhaps unheard of anywhere else in the world. Multiculturalism, which is a political policy in Canada and other parts of the world, is but a way of life in India. Thus, the Indian experience of diaspora, both within and outside territorial boundaries, can provide necessary models and frameworks of acceptance, assimilation and the maintaining of one's ethnic identity while simultaneously identifying with the mainstream host culture.

The gradual spread of the Indian/South Asian diaspora can be historically seen to comprise of three main phases.

- The First Phase – this was a voluntary migration that occurred centuries earlier when Indian traders and business merchants and Hindu and Buddhist monks traveled and migrated to various parts of Africa and Central and Southeast Asia. This earliest phase left a tremendous cultural impact on these regions.
- The Second Phase – this phase occurred in colonial times and comprised three stages. With the abolishment of the slave trade in the West a large and sudden

demand for cheap labour was created. In the first stage thousands of young, able-bodied Indians signed up as indentured labourers and were shipped out to work on plantations in the Caribbean islands, Fiji, Mauritius, Africa and even Canada. In the second stage these indentured labourers were closely followed by ‘free’ or ‘passage’ emigrants, a group of Indian traders and businessmen, who set up shop in close proximity and did business with these indentured labourers. In the third stage, as news of their success stories percolated back home, greater numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled labourers found their way to foreign shores.

- The Third Phase – this phase began in post-colonial times and continues into today’s post-modern times. It comprises two stages: (a) the modernist period, from the 1960s to 1980s, and (b) the post-modernist period, from the 1980s onwards.

This dissertation takes as its referential focus this third phase of the movement of the Indian diaspora. Additionally, it chooses to confine itself to the Indian diaspora in Canada. The Sikh regiments of the British army were the very first Indians to set foot in Canada in the 1890s. En route to India, after having participated in Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee celebrations at London, England in 1897, these Sikh soldiers traveled from Montreal to Vancouver by train. What met their eyes were vast tracts of forests in a land where labour was scarce. On their way home, as they passed through places such as Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore, they met other Sikh soldiers of the British army and shared news of the endless opportunities available in the forests of British Columbia. Many of them returned to their homes in Punjab, India, sold off all their land and possessions and soon joined the ranks of the Chinese and Japanese who had already begun trickling into Vancouver.

Over the decades there has been considerable change in the very notion of the diaspora as well as in the experience of the diaspora, all of which is indicative of the fact that the still-emerging aesthetics of diaspora literature is diverse, multi-leveled, complex and nuanced. The dissertation focuses on two South Asian writers: Shyam Selvadurai from Sri Lanka and Uma Parameswaran from India. Key concepts of the diaspora, such as those of home, alienation, assimilation, identity and culture, will be studied under the twin theoretical umbrellas of Modernism and Post-Modernism, apropos the works of these two writers. While the diasporic ambiance was conducive to creativity in general, the Post-Modernist stage was far more liberating than the Modernist stage simply because it proved more accommodating of what was once considered deviant. As both Shyam Selvadurai and Uma Parameswaran ostensibly belong to the third phase of the spread of the South Asian diaspora in Canada, it is this third phase that becomes the frame of reference of the dissertation.

Uma Parameswaran and Shyam Selvadurai have been chosen for study in the dissertation because they stand at two ends of the spectrum of writers from the South Asian diaspora. Parameswaran's voluntary migration to Canada way back in the late 1960s is in sharp contrast to Selvadurai's forced migration in the early 1980s. Apart from the time period they migrated in and the reasons for their migration Parameswaran and Selvadurai are a study of contrasts in terms of the thrust of their creative work and the stylistic and linguistic devices they make ample use of. The dissertation exemplifies how the interstitial diasporic third space stretches its boundaries to accommodate all who can harness its innate powers of re-inventing, revisiting, revising, re-mythologizing, re-framing and re-constituting; thereby enabling the crafting of an aesthetics that is, at once, personal and universal.

## **Chapter II:**

This chapter begins with a discussion on the concept of ‘home’ and ‘exile’, both of which are fundamental to any study in the field of diaspora studies. Just as the diaspora experience has witnessed a sea-change over the centuries, so too have the notions of ‘exile’ and ‘home’ evolved. For the early traders, travelers and pilgrims in days of yore there was no question of ever settling down in any of the places they visited. Home was always there, to be returned to on the completion of their business dealings. In more ways than one it was the early missionaries who were the very first to grapple with the diasporic experience in the truest sense of the term. Having voluntarily given up family and their place in society, they left to spread their religion far and wide without any hope of seeing their home, family and land ever again.

Similarly, for the thousands of indentured labourers, who crossed the *kaalapaani* (the ‘black waters’, a term which carried cultural odium), to work in Caribbean sugar plantations, the return home was, at best, a distant dream that was held on to in order to live from day to day. For the majority of these labourers their poverty and abject circumstances kept them in exile and prevented a return to their much loved land and much-missed families. In the new strange land they turned to each other for comfort and familiarity and forged new relationships and friendships in their ‘new’ home. Feelings of homesickness, nostalgia, alienation and loss were inalienable from their situation and this angst is found to predominate the writing available from this period.

A lot of Shyam Selvadurai’s work is found to resound with the same helplessness and despair that stems from the knowledge of the irrevocable loss of a much loved home, culture and way of life. Forced to leave Sri Lanka, on account of the ethnic strife that has

plagued the small island-nation for decades, Selvadurai faced displacement and relocation at the impressionable age of nineteen. Selvadurai's migration was a voluntary, albeit forced, migration and much of the sense of loss and alienation normally felt by new migrants was mitigated by two important factors. Firstly, Selvadurai migrated with his entire family to Toronto, where they already knew people (those who had migrated earlier) and had friends and extended family. Secondly, and more importantly, Selvadurai was cognizant with Western culture, having been brought up on a steady diet of Western literature, movies and music, as a result of his middle class Tamil upbringing in Sri Lanka.

Although much of his work deals with the anguish of having had snatched from him a way of life that was so typically Sri Lankan, Selvadurai also rejoices in the freedom that the Canadian way of life accords him. Coming from a country where homosexuality is still considered a criminal offence Selvadurai becomes aware of the fact that his homosexuality is one of the main reasons why he can never feel 'at home' again in Sri Lanka. The ethno-political turmoil in Sri Lanka, which has only worsened in recent times, attracting world-wide attention at the time of submitting this synopsis, is another reason why Selvadurai, of mixed Tamil and Sinhala parentage (which also are the two warring factions), cannot return easily to the place he once called home. Sri Lanka remains for him his home in the past. Any return to Sri Lanka in the present serves only to drive home the fact that much has changed – both in Sri Lanka and in himself. This rift between past and present, between memory and reality is what gives poignancy to Selvadurai's nuanced writing.

Selvadurai began writing almost a decade after having migrated to Canada, but his works show an astonishing level of assimilation. Although the island nation holds



fond memories for him and all his novels are set in Sri Lanka, he finds himself most at home in his adopted country. It is in this once-strange country that he sets about building an identity, a life, a home and a career, all of which are able to span the geographical, emotional and intellectual space between then and now, the once-familiar, now-strange homeland and the once-strange, now-familiar adopted homeland. For the present he is more than content in his new home and is continuously engaged in putting down roots and bringing a personal history into existence.

Uma Parameswaran, on the other hand, belongs to a generation of migrants that pre-dates Selvadurai's generation by a little more than two decades. In fact, Parameswaran was one of the very first Indians to move to the Canadian province of Manitoba way back in the late 1960s. Prior to Parameswaran's arrival in Manitoba in 1966 she spent much of her childhood shuttling between various homes in India. Part of the fascinating inter-state diasporas that exist within the confines of India, Parameswaran was born in what was then called Madras, brought up in Jabalpur and completed her graduation and post-graduation in English from Nagpur University and later from both Indiana University and Michigan State University in America. Parameswaran firmly believes that "home is where the feet are, and we had better place our heart where the feet are" (Writing the Diaspora, 216).

Unlike Selvadurai, Parameswaran is able to move freely between her 'old' home and 'new' home and feels equally at home in both. She is aware that life lived in each place has its own share of pros and cons and all her work is tinged with a celebratory note that revels in such multiplicities. Having spent more years in Canada than in India now, she has no qualms in proclaiming herself a Canadian *outside* Canada and a South Asian

Canadian *within* Canada. This is what she calls “going beyond the hyphen without erasing it” (Writing the Diaspora, 204).

In almost all her work she lays much emphasis on putting down roots and becoming a part of the dominant culture, while simultaneously not letting go of one’s ethnic, cultural and mythological moorings in the ‘old’ home. She is a firm believer in the transformative power that is generated when two or more cultures meet and mix and insists that it is not the prerogative of only the dominant culture to assert itself. Rather she envisions a time when the entire corpus of Canadian archetypes and allusions swells with the inclusion of archetypes and images from the various immigrant cultures and diasporas that today call Canada home.

Parameswaran’s primary contribution to the field of diaspora studies, particularly that of South Asian Canadian studies, is the development of two stunning metaphors – ‘Trishanku’ and ‘the Ganga *in* the Assiniboine’. The entire corpus of her creative and critical work spanning decades can be seen as an exemplification and explication of these two metaphors.

### **Chapter III:**

This chapter is a discussion on Identity, another concept fundamental to the experience of the diaspora. Both Selvadurai and Parameswaran emphasize and concentrate on different facets of Identity: Selvadurai is embroiled with his sexual and ethnic identity while Parameswaran deals with issues of racial and ethnic identity. Selvadurai’s fiction comprises a coming-to-terms-with the reality of being homosexual in Sri Lanka and all his protagonists, from Arjie to Amrith and Balendran, move from an all-consuming guilt at the awareness of behaviour that is considered socially deviant to an

acceptance of their alternative sexuality until they attain an equilibrium that begins to strengthen and sustain them.

Towards the end of the essay “A Vacation From my Past” Selvadurai appears to arrive at a site that facilitates a reconciliation of his past in Sri Lanka with his present in Canada. It also opens up a space wherein his multi-dimensional fractured diasporic identity is celebrated. No more is the diasporic identity a cause for shame, which must be sanitized through the assimilatory process. Today, diasporic communities the world over are experimenting with ways of retaining their ethnic identity in the face of state-sponsored assimilation policies and the fractured self is being valorised on a global scale. The intrinsic plurality of today’s society finds itself mirrored in the acknowledgement of the self’s intrinsic plurality.

The diasporic identity is revealed as a repository within which a multitude of identities are found to co-exist, melting into and moulding each other. The operational mechanism is one that has ‘identities within identities’ and no-one exemplifies this better than Selvadurai. At once he is male, Sri Lankan, Tamil, Sinhalese, homosexual and an immigrant. Different identities come to the fore at certain times and sometimes he is a happy medley of more than one identity. While the realization and reconciliation of his ethnic and sexual identities have informed Selvadurai’s diasporic consciousness, it is what he calls his ‘writing’ identity that has transformed and empowered him, so much so that today he is a source of inspiration and empowerment for the queer community not only in Canada but in Sri Lanka too.

Parameswaran, though more prolific a writer than Selvadurai, has chosen to lay greater stress on the feminine, ethnic and racial facets of identity rather than the sexual identity. It is only in the title story of the collection of short stories What Was Always

Hers (1999) that she explores homosexuality with resounding success. While admitting that she does write with a lesbian sensibility, Parameswaran rues the reality that sexual orientation is given more importance than artistic sensibility. Elsewhere in Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees (1990) and Mangoes on the Maple Tree (2002), Parameswaran flirts with the notion of a nascent homosexual attraction/love between Jayant and Pierre that, for reasons left unsaid and unknown, was nipped in the bud. This particular angle is never developed in any rendition of the story; yet, given Parameswaran's penchant for repetition one might just find it elaborated upon sometime soon.

The bulk of Parameswaran's corpus of creative work grapples with the positive affirmation of self. The protagonists, most of them women, slowly evolve into archetypal Mother figures that sustain and empower both themselves and others. Latika, Namitha, Jyothi, Savitri and even Neela are in a state of constant flux as their various roles and identities – of wife, daughter, sister, colleague, friend, sister-in-law, step-mother, mistress and lover – swirl and drift over the sea of their selves. They are constantly re-inventing and renewing their various relationships to finally forge an identity that is malleable like an alloy and capable of infinite re-configurations like a kaleidoscope. All this appears possible only within the diasporic third space, that no man's land that suffuses them with the power to effect such transformations.

Male characters such as Siv, Ranjit, Sharad, Vithal, and especially Jayant, are portrayed as dreamers who flit from one idealistic notion to another. The woman is, paradoxically, both moored to ground reality as well as endowed with the unique ability to negotiate between situations that arise when one is entrenched in the magnetic field of two diametrically opposite cultures. Parameswaran's worldview is one that is perused

through the tinted lenses of a woman's vision and held in place by a framework of women-oriented relationships.

#### **Chapter IV:**

This chapter details a study of the literary aspects of Selvadurai and Parameswaran's work. Although belonging to the third phase of the spread of the South Asian diaspora, a time span of twenty years separates their arrival in Canada. Parameswaran, steeped in the traditions of Classicism and Romanticism, has a style that is at much variance from that of Selvadurai, a product of Post-Modernism. An analysis of their writing styles becomes a study in contrasts: Selvadurai writes straight from the heart and his finesse is at once poignant and gut-wrenching. His prose sweeps you right into the Sri Lanka of his youth and one can literally hear, see, smell and taste the sea. His writing encapsulates an entire way of life – of coming-of-age parties with dresses copied from Grease, of languid afternoons spent reading while an entire army of servants made preparations for the evening party.

Although young in years and slim in literary output Selvadurai is a force to be reckoned with on account of his firm control on plot, characterization and language, the use of innovative stylistic devices, keen observations on external and intrinsic nature, vivid descriptions of both landscape and seascape as well as a dexterous use of symbol and metaphor. Water, swimming and the sea are recurrent images in Selvadurai's work. Much of this group of imagery stems from the obvious fact of his childhood on the island-nation of Sri Lanka. In many places, most notable in Swimming in the Monsoon Sea, the metaphor of swimming and emerging cleansed and renewed from water (be it the

swimming pool or the sea) is found to echo Margaret Atwood's use of the metaphor in her seminal work Surfacing.

Selvadurai's linguistic dexterity is another very striking feature of his work. Nowhere has he used any specific derogatory word to refer to the homosexual tendencies and feelings of any of his protagonists/characters. There is much of Selvadurai's linguistic artistry in Amrith's poignant confession at the grave of his mother:

He whispered, 'I am ...,' but he could not continue, for he did not know a decent word to describe himself. And he refused to use 'ponnaya'. Finally, he leaned closer and whispered, 'I am ... different.' (SMS, 205)

The derogatory words used, if any, are all voiced by the various minor antagonists of the novels, such as Suraj Wanigasekera and his cronies in SMS and Tanuja or 'Her Fatness' and Salgado in Funny Boy. 'Funny' itself is a key metaphor of FB and is used to refer to Arjie by his father, his brother Diggy and uncle Cyril, so much so that although Arjie has no idea what the word really meant when used to describe him, he was sure of one thing: it was not a compliment.

Parameswaran, on the other hand, is almost clinical and detached in her descriptions. One is unable to connect with and relate to the protagonists and the other characters that people her fiction. Parameswaran's prose often reads like a manifesto and her characters are prone to suddenly breaking out in prosaic, verbose monologues and soliloquies that remind one of George Bernard Shaw's drama of ideas.

What Parameswaran loses on account of her periphrastic diction she more than makes up with her ebullient sense of humour and perspicuous wit. Humour is the *raison d'être* of her style and she is especially outstanding in her Maru cycle of stories. Maru,

the protagonist who is Parameswaran's counterpart of Conrad's Marlow, is sometimes used as her mouthpiece and sometimes as a mirror, at times as a reflecting glass and at other times as a refracting glass. While Parameswaran's humour is never bitter, Maru's is never rambunctious. Maru's insightful and honest, if slightly peppered, version of the truth is never scathingly satiric and the narrative is always taut with the anticipation and expectations of the reader.

One of the most striking features of Parameswaran's creative work is setting and landscape. Reflecting her belief that "home is where the feet are" (Writing the Diaspora, 216) the majority of her works are set in a Canadian landscape that is treed with conifers and maples and most of her protagonists belong to the first or second generation of immigrants. Parameswaran is one of the few South Asian Canadian writers who choose to confine their plots, metaphors, allusions and characters to the Canadian landscape rather than to the home left behind. Parameswaran is also credited with having enriched the ken of research in Diaspora Studies through two striking metaphors – 'Trishanku' (the Hindu mythological king who was rejected by both heaven and earth and thus forced to remain in a world midway both that had been specially created for him) and 'the Ganga *in* the Assiniboine'.

## **Chapter V: Conclusion**

The concluding chapter is a scrutiny of the aesthetics of the interstitial space of the diaspora that has afforded uncircumscribed creativity to writers and other artists who claim this space as their own. The aesthetics of the space of the diaspora is a confluence

of more than one kind of aesthetics: Eastern and Western, Modern and Post-Modern, pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial, male and female, etc.

The analyses of texts in the earlier chapters are used to set up a superstructure within which an aesthetics of the diaspora is seen to emerge. The fictional space is seen to imbue writers and other artists with the ability to fluidly negotiate between multiple levels of self, race, nation, sex and society while simultaneously facilitating the emergence of a multi-focal diaspora identity whose various facets either fuse or coincide or remain separate as the situation demands. Similarly, there is a melting and sliding, an ebb and flow that occurs in the dynamics of the consciousness, both personal and collective. The ‘alienated’ persona of the traditional diaspora is held up against the ‘accommodated’ persona of the present-day diaspora and found wanting. In more ways than one the ‘alienated’ persona is a fast-vanishing breed.

The dissertation is an attempt to set out the parameters that define the aesthetics of Uma Parameswaran and Shyam Selvadurai, two different representations of the South Asian diaspora vis-à-vis form, technique, style, setting, background and language. Parameswaran has experimented with almost every genre while Selvadurai has stuck to the novel form (although it is much too early in his literary career to slot him thus). Similarly, while Parameswaran’s style is anecdotal, both in her critical and creative work, Selvadurai’s is not. While Parameswaran fictionalizes characters and situations centring around actual events that occurred in Canada, Selvadurai revisits his past in Sri Lanka and views it across the space of intervening years. The dissertation attempts to show how the varying experience of the diaspora, in the cases of both Parameswaran and Selvadurai, has actually led to the development of two separate aesthetics. Thus, the



aesthetics of the diaspora is that of a rainbow aesthetics: the various components distinct but together making it a thing of beauty and a joy forever.

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