

Diaspora Concerns and Female Subjugation in *A Cycle of the Moon*

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Abstract

The creation of a renewed identity for the diaspora is the main concern of the study. It is attempted through the survey of spaces for growth and resolution of conflicts, as reflected in the literature of Uma Parameswaran. The study attempts to understand such models and methods of adaptation exhibited by the diaspora through probing into the works of women diasporic writers. The select literature projects the impact of biculturalism and attitudinal variations of the diaspora in broad dimension. Models of adaptation explained in the works are suited well to the personal inclinations of the characters. Women often do not express their feelings of dislocation distinctly in the public. It is rather difficult to assess a clear knowledge of the feel of detachment felt by them through immigration since emotions are mostly screened behind the world of male dominance.

Keywords: *diaspora, marginalization, hybridity, alienation*

Feminist literary criticism is an interdisciplinary approach which focuses on gender politics. This movement was characterised by the founding of a number of consciousness-raising groups whose fundamental beliefs can be summarised by the slogan "The personal is political", meaning that personal experience is neither individual nor isolated, rather it is social, political and systematic. Mayura in the novel *A Cycle of the Moon* is presented as getting victimized to male dominance in marital matters as well as the clumsy impositions inflicted on the female by rigid patriarchal societies. There are a few hidden hints to convince the readers that she gets badly treated on bed and her womanhood gets painfully shattered. This should broadly be viewed as a blot on womanhood in general and getting considered merely as tools of carnal pleasures and lust-fulfilment. Her reaction is the sign of opening a struggle for sexual liberation of women from such men who do not regard the female with respect and self-esteem. The words of Maya, in this context, need to be refuted that she imposes Mayura to accept her husband's sexuality as part of accepted custom of marital life.

Mayura's marriage evokes feelings of traditional Indian wedding comprising close observation of religious rituals. Children often are found to absorb the patterns of culture and religious practices direct from their parents and it gets passed over to generations. This is the basic frame work of families and communities within the analysis of our homeland culture. The concept of diaspora strikes when one is compelled to break away from such rigid shell of family life insisted by marriage and related custom. The extended contact with the culture of their parents can help the children to perceive it as unproblematic. The acquisition of the attributes and norms of a culture can occur through the exposure to diaspora. Such a gradual acquisition of the character of another culture is called acculturation which often happens without any deliberation. Our people want their children to be moulded through similar experiences and influences they have undergone. They consider it as a process of continuation. This kind of transfer of thought and emotions from blood to blood has to be studied in detail when the concept of diaspora is discussed. Indian Diaspora spreads its wings all over the world. Indians abroad speak different languages, mingle

with various cultures and get engaged in wide social activities. Diaspora is a broad concept and based on its dimensions it has varied definitions. Homi K. Bhabha has mentioned in *The Location of Culture* (1997) that the Diasporas are 'unhomed'. Displacement is a concept that refers to the crisis of identity. This results from migration. It leads to linguistic alienation resulting from the domination of a specific culture. Geographical displacement creates a feel of detachment and aloofness in the minds of the migrated mind. There is a good deal of difference between internal and external exile. Internal exile is the forced resettlement within the country of residence and external exile is the expulsion from one's homeland. Apart from these, there is 'self-exile' which dominates itself in the form of protest and disagreement against the existing state of affairs.

In spite of possessing multiple talents, Mayura does not enjoy proper attention on the side of her husband. He never shows deserving enthusiasm in his relationship with her. He even lets her morale down since he finds it against the domain of patriarchy to appreciate the power and intelligence of the female. An analysis of Raghu Raman, her husband, provides with certain extended traits of diaspora determined by cultural hybridization. Someone, who is critical of the marriage of Mayura with Raghu Raman, comments that he has no culture at all though he runs a good business of teak and mahogany furniture in Bombay. He has acquired plenty of wealth from his grandfather who flourished well in Burma." What can you expect in the son of a Brahmin-turned-merchant who had lived in Burma long after the war...?" (8) The fusion of the cultures of the two countries has determined his character differently as this result within his non-appreciation of Mayura's mind and attitude. The mind-set of Raghu Raman deserves deep analysis in the study of diaspora from the point of provincial and cultural difference.

We have glimpses of the memories of Rama Krishna Iyer on the wedding ceremony of his granddaughter like the arrangement of the pandal one week prior to the ceremony, huge preparations related to the function, observation of mangalya mantras, consultations with expert purohiths and such elements. It is in this light that we have to read the mind of Mayura contrasting her home atmosphere with that of her husband's. This contrast

pushes her into an inescapable nostalgia that urges her to think about separation.

But the elder generation takes matters in a different perspective. Even her mother, Parvati, takes it as a matter of misfortune to have a daughter like Mayura. She quarrels with her daughter at deciding things abruptly and sheds a lot of tears. Mayura gets provoked at the resentment of her mother and the intervention of her aunt in the matter. She shuffles upstairs, casting an air of extreme indignation. All these are suggestive of attitudinal differences between the young and the old generations which lead to great misunderstanding and difficulties at adaptation.

Mayura appears toughened by time and her sense of insecurity converts her into a stoic character. She is unwilling to express her burning feelings even to close relatives. She considers herself to be isolated from others. She says, "I don't care who knows; I am not a hypocrite, whatever else I might be" (127). This statement needs analysis in the light of discussing women emancipation and empowerment. The author writes from the character's inner psyche that one has to make oneself as happy as one can, no matter what others estimate one to be.

The individuals in the novel are part of a greater collective community who share almost identical heritage. The concept of national community, a term applied by Benedict Anderson, has its justice in the portrayal of the characters of the novel. They are directly or indirectly connected to each other as the people of a single nation. The image of a communion of that sort appears to be the main concept highlighted by Parameswaran. The communities in the novel are more close to Timothy Brennan's concept of a nation that it refers to both the modern state of the nation and the ancient one, considering many factors like local communities, families, integration of deferring cultures, collection of individuals and groups, ultimately forming a sense of national belongingness. The writings of the Indian diaspora are also known as expatriate writings or immigrant writings. The results of diasporic writings are overpowering sense of isolation and alienation. It has to be noted that words like immigrant, exile and refugee are often used to describe the diaspora. Of these words,

'Immigrant' points to a location in an alien settlement or physical movement and exile. It shows a variety of

relationships with the mother country. Alienation, forced exile, self-imposed exile, political exile are all included under diaspora. The Indian Diaspora is diverse with differences in caste, religion, language, region and other matters in the host society. Therefore it becomes difficult to arrive at a mode of construction of identity that is applicable throughout for all. The realm of Indian English writing often occupies a visible representation through the literature of such writers who discuss problems of existence of the diaspora.

The conflict connected with culture and integration depends on the degree or the amount to which the immigrants are willing to assimilate. While women are concerned, the question of compromise with male domination always comes up. There is even the attitude of the elder women to look down upon the younger generation as impracticable and unaware of the complexities of life. The words of Savitri to Mayura expose this attitude of underestimating the young. "No, you don't know anything about tracks and engines. Girls never do. Go play with your dolls" (176).

So far as immigrants are concerned, the main issues of concern are the biting feelings of being in exile, a sense of alienation, loneliness and the longingness for the lost world. Such feelings are more distressing for the second generation diaspora. They desire to remain within the family but a change has definitely been wrought. They have come out of the confining slots allotted to them by their patriarchal society. They have found freedom but in conformity with the society they live in, without trifling away from culture. All these are observable in the deliberate characterization of Mayura.

Parameswaran focuses mainly on thoughts and feelings of immigrants, cultural clashes, assimilation and adaptation. She tries to reveal how the socio-cultural forces, ethnicity and gender have influenced the expatriate characters, thus bringing out their anxieties, uneasiness, nostalgia, rootlessness and alienation. She has successfully delineated the existential crises of the exile. The migrant has to deal with two entities – internal struggle due to leaving home country and external stress given by difficulties at adaptation in a strange country. It gets shaped by factors colonial, cultural, ethnic and others. They reflect in the personal identity of those who come

under this feel of exile. Her characters deal with those polarities, at times rejecting or accepting at other time. Their stay in the new locale or country and interaction with the novel culture lead to altered thoughts about diaspora. They take pain to synthesize their inherent culture with the adopted one in the new atmosphere, leading to hybridization of identity. Characters like

Mayura cannot negotiate with this kind of culture and identity hybridization. It seems Parameswaran tries to relate her work in the light of Feminist movement in India which has brought out revolutionary changes in female society. Her characters appear to raise the voice of women predominantly over that of men to get their identity established specifically. Mayura and Maya is specimen of this. Such characters are the major focus of present day women literature that is capable of handling female problems efficiently, giving balance between tradition and womanhood.

The influence of western culture has inflicted a blow to Indian traditional life, especially to the image of upholding family rules or the concept of close interlink between husband and wife, despite their attitudinal differences. The literature of the female often induces women to search out their individual identity and discover real independence.

The problems of culture and integration reflect prominently in the return of Mayura to home. It is the main catalyst that forces to open the concealed stories of men and women of the family related to her unexpected and abrupt homecoming. It is true that a conflicting argument arises between the husband and wife. The writer wants to make the readers realize, through Mayura, how a woman struggles to come out of the stereotyped roles that are imposed on her as moral responsibility by the male-dominated orthodox society. Protracted silence between husband and wife makes matters worse. In matters related to family relationships, silence is not golden but acutely dangerous as it thwarts women liberty and individuality badly. So the writer justifies the decision of Mayura in breaking away from her husband in an attempt to hold her identity up.

Mayura is not all vindictiveness and arrogant. She is presented as frank and open minded within, moving closely well with those who understand her clearly.

For example, she expresses compassion for her brother on his impending marriage after forsaking the girl he loves. The concept of marriage on age-old fixed conventions gets challenged by the young people as it is reflected in the words and deeds of Mayura.

The male characters of the novel express their own different attitudes and concepts of life. Their practices are a blend of biased attitude towards women and false superiority as the true representation of domineering patriarchy. The attitudinal difference of superiority exercised by the male over the female is expressed at the best through characters like Ramakrishna Iyer, Chander and Vasudevan.

For example Vasudevan, the younger brother of Ramakrishnan Iyer, has been in long exile to Greece for his active interference in the independence struggle. The novel presents him as being back home with his daughter Radha, bearing hybrid ancestry of two countries that paves the way for tremendous cultural conflict.

Grandsire Rama Krishna Iyer is presented in the novel as the undisputed authority of the uncompromising attitude and outlook of the old generation. He represents the unrelenting obsession to tradition held by the senior male members of Brahmin families during 1920's and 30's. The novel projects his character in a single and crisp sentence:

"The judge gave the orders, the parties concerned worked out the details" (4). Though the first chapter of the novel discusses the return of Mayura home from her husband's house, the main description of it relates to the attitudes and inclinations of her grandfather, the retired justice Rama Krishna Iyer. He is absolutely in everything he undertakes. The way he has conducted the marriage of Mayura, the preparations and pains involved in it, his power of observation and skill at execution are all feathery attributes of a strong personality which have inspired the character of his granddaughter silently. He follows a pattern of life which had been perfected through plenty of years. There are a few noticeable contradictions in his character. Though a wise judge, he consults the family astrologer first whenever important events emerge in the family. We see it as a justification of his strong religious and traditional influence characteristic of the senior male members of his generation.

Parameswaran presents him as the unquestioned authority of the big ancestral family, capable of supervising everyone and everything with an uncompromising precision. The disciplined rigidity in his character is expressed while elaborating the preparations for Mayura's wedding. The judge supervises, in person, even when the workers dig holes for implanting the wooden posts necessary for the wedding pandal. His attention has no boundaries to get restricted and his convictions are strong as well as penetrating, as reflected in attitudes such as a girl should be married at home and not in a hired exhibition hall.

The judge is a solid symbol of old customs, values, tradition and the pride of noble ancestry. Such characters are plenty in the old generation who cannot easily approve of modern ceremonies. They can't reconcile with changes and modifications of the old. The text gives an instance where we find the judge's interference when the Pandit abridges the Sanskrit verses during wed-lock ceremony. He insists that the Pandit enunciate the verses clearly. "Don't murder Sanskrit" is his loud and angry protest (5). He stresses that the Pandit should explain in detail the meaning of different steps and vows that the young people are taking. This kind of inseparable affinity and link with old customs and traditions needs deeper reflections in the study of Indian Diaspora. Mayura has been unconsciously influenced by these attitudinal ingredients of her grandfather and she might have felt haunted by them in her husband's house where things are entirely different. So the problem of adaptation becomes prominent in discussion, which is yet another concern in the study of diaspora.

Justice Rama Krishna Iyer is the clear image of the intellectual aristocracy that had reached its peak during the 20's and 30s. The august presence of aging aristocrats like him at important functions marks the suggested cultural integration and adherence to strong tradition of a bygone generation, which again is one of the significant concerns in connection with the topic under study.

Vasudevan's characterization clearly brings out the salient features of diaspora forced to adopt life abroad and become part of an unknown culture. We find a synthesis of two cultures, the Hellenic and the oriental, when he tries to sculpt out images of both Indian and Greek gods in fusion.

This kind of architectural inclination in his character deserves a deeper analysis while referring to the question of culture and integration. As an instance we have sketches from his hand and mind as that of Uma on Venus, Hercules on Bhima and so on and we hear his descriptions as theories formulated on Indo- Hellenic culture. His stories on Hindu epics and Greek myths have inspired his daughter Radha and moulded her character deeply. The elements of diaspora associated with feelings for homeland emerge when he speaks about national struggle, the tri colour flag and such matters.

It is very clear and precise what makes a diaspora adopt life abroad and prepares himself to forsake his comforts of native place. It is with the intention of making money primarily within easy time, which is inaccessible in the homeland. The diaspora saves the rest of the money with calculated plans after spending their expenditure which they try to restrict as much as possible.

As an illustration, we have the words of Rama Krishnan Iyer,; "You do have an immigrant visa, I suppose. Canadian immigration is given to most fellows who come on a salaried job. Unfortunately, being a student, I don't have that passport to lifelong luxury. Have you calculated how much one can save in two years? He added up various expenses- for food, lodging, income tax, insurance, car, entertainment- and the total savings came to a six digit figure in Indian currency"(120).

This kind of calculation is the basic urge and instinct that boosts up the spirit of the diaspora, inspite of sufferings in an unfamiliar land.

Many societies all around the world have become increasingly multicultural in nature during the past decade. One of the reasons for this is the migration of people from one nation to another either for the want of better quality of life, education, stable economy or attraction for a life of materialistic pleasures. It is found, quite often, that people from developing country or under developed country migrate to developed countries with high-flow ambition. The migrating masses are heterogeneous in nature and consist of scientists, engineers, doctors, nurses, teachers, writers and other profession. The readers are attracted by the diasporic literature, irrespective of its language, form and style. Almost all countries of the world provide for the

setting and background for the works on Indian Diaspora, which occupies the second largest place in the world.

The words of Pamela Allen, in her Book *Free Space*, are worth mentioning here, "it is a space where women come to understand not only the ways to keep them oppressed but also ways to overcome that oppression psychologically and socially. It is Free Space"(8). Terms like 'struggle' and 'space' are matters of concern and introspection, when feminist literature gets discussed.

Feminist movement in India has brought revolutionary changes in the society and women writers have been playing a significant role to raise the voice of the female through their literature. The psycho-analytical studies of women form the main focus of feminist literature today. Culture and tradition connected with womanhood get discussed in it mainly. The access to western culture has given a serious blow to Indian traditional life and women who had an image of upholding the family roles and responsibilities gradually started focusing on the search for individual identity and liberation from male impositions.

Apart from the subordinate position of women discussed in the novel, we observe that most of the male characters exhibit duality of attitudes on important matters. Their practices are a blend of biased attitude towards women and false superiority as the true representation of domineering patriarchy. Still they exercise a hidden influence on the female characters as reflected in Mayura inheriting her grandfather's personality to a great extent. It justifies her pride, arrogance and rashness in breaking away from her husband and returning home. But the features of other prominent female characters like great aunt Kamakshi and Maya suggest a contrast to that of Mayura. It all amounts to the truth that diasporic women remain in a complex situation and is in a state of dilemma which is the outcome of the double marginalization they face. The culture of their land of adoption neither assimilates nor allows them to be similar to their Indian counterparts. Women, in general, retain the culture of their origin connected with home, parentage, tradition and familiarised patterns of life. A sense of moral obligation of maintaining the tradition and keeping it up is injected into their sensibilities through various traditional, mythical, and cultural practices. The writes expresses such an attitude through characters like Savitri and Mayura. Savitri lives to

suffer bitterly, though she was granted a fitting match with a man of Brahmin caste itself. Mayura gets victimised to the surrender of her free and personalised life instincts after marriage as they clash with the rigid attitude of her husband who does not appreciate her skills in the least. Immigrants often try to develop cultural and linguistic connections with their home country. They are concerned with the preservation of their mother tongue culture even abroad due to the feel of silent attachment with native country. For the first generation, keeping one's first language helps other family members to take pride in their culture and roots. Further, it helps in strengthening the bond of relationship among members of the family.

Gender norms have restricted the mobility of women diaspora abroad to a great extent. Even while moving along with their professional demands as nurses or domestic workers, some sort of regimentation is exercised on the female by the male dominated society. Still plenty of women are drawn towards occupations like nursing and teaching abroad due to the attractions of improved financial stability and accelerated recognition of standard of living.

Society moulds and controls human behaviour considerably. Social transition is an ever-continuous process which brings changes into conditions of life, tradition and behavioural patterns of individuals as well as groups. Uma Parameswaran, an Indo-Canadian writer of

plays and fiction presents her first hand observation of diasporic life. She maintains objectivity in depicting the several facets of multi-cultural Canada. She lives in Canada that undergoes the third phase of expatriation. Uma Parameswaran asserts that most immigrants reach the final phase of acculturation and adaptation ultimately but a merge into the cultural mainstream of the host nation involves tremendous pain and sacrifice. Pure assimilation and cultural fusion cannot be attained at all since the instincts of the blood of the diaspora come up against it.

Her work open up an endless cycle of past remembrance and the creation of the present. Through her full-fledged characters, Parameswaran manages to bring out the disparity between the hopes that the diaspora nurtures and the stark reality of life that come up against the spirit of fostered up hopes and aspirations.

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