

LAND, MEMORY, AND DIASPORIC BELONGING IN UMA PARAMESWARAN'S "THIS LAND WHEREON I STAND"

M. SHIYAMALI

Ph.D. Scholar in English

H. H. The Rajah's College, Pudukkottai – 622 001

Affiliated to Bharathidasan University,

Tiruchirappalli

DR. S. GANESAN

Associate Professor and Research Supervisor

Department of English

H. H. The Rajah's College, Pudukkottai – 622 001

Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli

ABSTRACT

Uma Parameswaran's poem "This Land Whereon I Stand" presents the complex experience of diasporic identity in Canada. The poem brings together immigrant memory, Indigenous history, South Asian cultural inheritance, and Canadian multicultural consciousness. It shows that belonging in a new land is not a simple act of settlement. It requires memory, humility, recognition, and an ethical relationship with the land and its earlier histories. Parameswaran connects Indian rivers, Hindu spiritual figures, Canadian landscapes, Indigenous myths, and painful historical events such as the Komagata Maru incident and the Air India tragedy. Through these connections, the poem creates a layered vision of diasporic life. The immigrant does not leave the homeland completely, nor does she enter the adopted land without responsibility. She stands between cultures and learns to build a wider sense of self. This paper studies the themes of diasporic belonging, historical consciousness, cultural syncretism, Indigenous recognition, environmental imagery, and multicultural unity in the poem. It argues that Parameswaran's poem is not merely a celebration of multicultural Canada. It is also a call to remember racial injustice, honour Indigenous presence, and create a more inclusive form of belonging.

KEYWORDS: Diasporic identity, cultural intersectionality, historical consciousness, multiculturalism, Indigenous recognition, belonging.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Uma Parameswaran's "This Land Whereon I Stand" is a poem about land, memory, culture, and belonging. It speaks from the position of an immigrant who lives in Canada but carries memories of India. The poem does not present immigration as a simple movement from one country to another. It presents it as a difficult process of emotional, cultural, and historical negotiation. The immigrant in the poem stands on Canadian soil, but the memory of India remains alive. Rivers, gods, rituals, griefs, and ancestral landscapes travel with her. At the same time, the poem recognizes that Canada is not an empty land waiting to be claimed by newcomers. It already carries the histories of Indigenous peoples. The immigrant's belonging must therefore be built with respect for the land's older memories. The poem brings together South Asian immigrant experience, Canadian multiculturalism, Indigenous presence, and historical trauma. It remembers the Komagata Maru incident of 1914, when South Asian passengers were denied entry into Canada. It also recalls the Air India tragedy of 1985, which wounded the South Asian Canadian community deeply. These events are not treated as distant history. They become part of diasporic consciousness. Parameswaran's poem is also rich in cultural intersectionality. Indian rivers such as the Narmada, Kaveri, and Ganga meet Canadian rivers such as the Assiniboine and the Red. Hindu spiritual figures appear beside Indigenous mythic figures. The poem imagines a multicultural space where different histories and cultures can stand together, but it does not ignore the pain that lies behind this hope. This paper examines how "This Land Whereon I Stand" presents diasporic belonging and historical consciousness. It studies the poem's use of memory, landscape, spiritual imagery, and historical reference. It also explores how the poem asks immigrants to belong ethically to Canada by recognizing both their own histories and the histories of Indigenous peoples.

2. DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND THE SEARCH FOR BELONGING

Diasporic identity is often marked by double attachment. The immigrant belongs to the adopted land, but the homeland continues to live in memory. This condition can create both richness and pain. The immigrant must learn to live with more than one cultural inheritance. Parameswaran's poem presents this condition with tenderness and seriousness.

The poem begins with an image of collective strength:

Let us pledge to stand together

As the Inuit igloo

of packed snow

tight smooth edgeless

Withstands the Arctic's wintry wind.

Come, let us build our temple

Where the Assiniboine flows into the Red.

The image of the Inuit igloo is important. An igloo is made of many blocks of snow packed together. Its strength comes from unity, shape, and balance. By comparing immigrant solidarity to an igloo, Parameswaran suggests that a community can survive harsh conditions if it stands together. The image is also rooted in the Canadian Arctic. This gives the immigrant's pledge a local meaning. The lines also speak of building a temple where the Assiniboine flows into the Red. The temple is an Indian cultural and spiritual symbol, while the rivers belong to the Canadian landscape. Their meeting suggests the beginning of diasporic belonging. The immigrant does not simply reproduce India in Canada. She builds a new sacred space in relation to the new land. Yet this belonging is not without longing. The speaker remembers Indian rivers and sees them in Canadian rivers:

in whose rivers I've seen my own—
the singing waters of my native Narmada,
Kaveri, whose rapids feed ancestral fields—
I come, bearing votive incense and a pledge.

The rivers carry memory. The Narmada and Kaveri belong to the speaker's ancestral world. When she sees Canadian rivers, she also sees the rivers of India. This does not mean that the two lands are the same. It means that memory helps the immigrant form emotional bridges between them. The phrase "bearing votive incense and a pledge" suggests reverence. The immigrant does not arrive empty-handed. She brings cultural memory, ritual, devotion, and responsibility. Her belonging is an offering. It is not a claim of possession. The poem therefore presents diasporic identity as layered. The speaker is Indian by memory and Canadian by settlement. She belongs to both, yet she must learn to hold both carefully. The homeland remains present through memory. The adopted land becomes meaningful through recognition and participation.

3. HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

One of the strongest features of the poem is its use of historical memory. Parameswaran does not allow multicultural belonging to become a shallow celebration. She reminds the reader that Canada's multicultural present has been shaped by exclusion, racism, grief, and struggle. The immigrant community must remember these histories in order to understand its place in the nation.

The poem refers to the Komagata Maru incident:

July 23rd, 1914, dark day of ignominy,
When Komagata Maru was driven into the open sea,
while people and newspapers screamed:
Keep Canada white, true north strong and free.

(As though the first nations of this land never were, had never been.)

These lines carry anger and sorrow. The Komagata Maru incident becomes a symbol of racial exclusion. South Asian immigrants who sought entry into Canada were turned away because of racist immigration policies. The phrase "dark day of ignominy" records the shame of that moment. The poem also exposes the contradiction within the slogan "Keep Canada white." This slogan ignores the presence of Indigenous peoples. Canada was never originally a white land. The parenthetical line, "As though the first nations of this land never were, had never been," broadens the poem's moral vision. It connects immigrant exclusion with Indigenous erasure. This is one of the most important moves in the poem. Parameswaran does not present South Asian immigrants only as victims. She also asks them to recognize that they are newcomers on a land already inhabited by Indigenous peoples. Historical consciousness must therefore include both immigrant suffering and Indigenous history.

The poem also refers to the Air India tragedy:

June 23, 1985, dark day of ignominy,
stopping three hundred Canadian hearts
and breaking three thousand more.

The Air India tragedy becomes another wound in South Asian Canadian memory. The line “stopping three hundred Canadian hearts” gives the tragedy a national meaning. The victims were not simply Indian. They were also Canadian. Their deaths belong to the history of Canada and to the emotional memory of the diaspora. The phrase “breaking three thousand more” suggests the families, friends, and communities left behind. A tragedy affects more than those who die. It enters homes, memories, and generations. By placing the Komagata Maru incident and the Air India tragedy within the same poem, Parameswaran creates a history of diasporic sorrow and resilience. Memory in the poem is therefore public and collective. It is not only the private memory of the speaker. It belongs to a community that has struggled to be seen, accepted, and mourned properly. The poem becomes an act of commemoration.

4. CULTURAL SYNCRETISM AND THE MEETING OF WORLDS

The poem weaves together Indian and Canadian cultural elements. This blending is not casual decoration. It shows how diasporic identity is created through the meeting of different worlds. The immigrant self is not formed by abandoning one culture and adopting another completely. It is formed through contact, exchange, adaptation, and memory. The meeting of rivers is one of the major symbols of cultural syncretism. The speaker brings the Ganga to the Assiniboine and builds temples where it flows into the Red. This does not mean a literal transfer of one river into another. It means that sacred geography travels through memory. The immigrant carries the spiritual meaning of Indian rivers and finds new forms for it in Canada. The poem also brings together Indian and Indigenous spiritual figures. Aditi, the Hindu goddess associated with cosmic vastness, appears beside Aataentsic, a figure from Indigenous mythology:

Aditi, goddess of the seven dimensions of the cosmos,

celestial light that flows through the universe,

...

Aataentsic, who, seeking for healing herbs,

tripped and fell through a hole in the sky,

...

where she gave birth to humankind.

This pairing is significant. Aditi and Aataentsic come from different traditions, but both are connected with creation, life, and cosmic imagination. By placing them near each other, Parameswaran creates a spiritual dialogue between cultures. The poem does not erase difference. It allows different traditions to stand together. Cultural syncretism in the poem is therefore not a loss of identity. It is an expansion of identity. The immigrant does not become less Indian by recognizing Canada. She becomes more deeply aware of the many histories that surround her. She learns to stand in a wider human and spiritual space. The poem also shows that multicultural identity is created through both celebration and grief. It includes temples, rivers, myths, festivals, public milestones, and shared mourning. This makes the poem richer than a simple praise of diversity. It recognizes that cultures meet through pain as well as joy.

5. RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS HISTORY

A major strength of the poem lies in its recognition of Indigenous history. Parameswaran understands that immigrant belonging in Canada cannot be ethical if it ignores First Nations peoples. The poem therefore pauses to acknowledge the older presence of Indigenous communities and the violence of their erasure. The reference to “the first nations of this land” directly challenges the idea that Canada belongs

naturally to white settlers. It reminds readers that the land has earlier histories, earlier names, earlier cultures, and earlier wounds. This recognition prevents the poem from turning multiculturalism into a story of only immigrant success. The inclusion of Aataentsic and Indigenous mythic imagery also gives dignity to Indigenous memory. These references show that Canada is not merely a modern nation-state. It is also a land of old stories, sacred relationships, and cultural depth. The immigrant who stands on this land must learn these histories. The poem suggests a shared experience of marginalization between Indigenous peoples and South Asian immigrants, but it does not make them identical. Their histories are different. Indigenous peoples are not immigrants. They are the first peoples of the land. South Asians arrived later and faced racial exclusion. Both histories must be understood with care. Parameswaran's poem therefore creates a responsible diasporic voice. The speaker does not say, "I belong here" in a simple way. She asks what it means to belong on a land where others have been displaced, ignored, or wounded. This question gives the poem its ethical force.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND SPIRITUAL IMAGERY

Nature plays a central role in "This Land Whereon I Stand." The poem uses snow, rivers, wind, sky, oceans, and land to express the immigrant's emotional and spiritual journey. These natural images are not merely scenic. They become carriers of memory, unity, endurance, and belonging. The opening image of the igloo brings together environment and community. Snow, often associated with coldness and hardship, becomes a material of shelter. The Arctic wind suggests the challenges faced by immigrants in a new land. The igloo withstands this wind because its parts are joined closely. This image gives the poem a communal and ecological meaning. Rivers are even more important. The Assiniboine and the Red are Canadian rivers, while the Narmada, Kaveri, and Ganga belong to the Indian imagination. Rivers move, join, nourish, and remember. They become symbols of cultural continuity. They also show that identity is not fixed like stone. It flows, adapts, and joins other currents. The spiritual imagery of Aditi and Aataentsic deepens the poem's sense of connection. The sky, cosmos, healing herbs, and birth of humankind suggest that cultures may differ, but they often ask similar questions about origin, creation, suffering, and care. Parameswaran uses spirituality to build bridges across traditions. The poem's environmental imagery also teaches humility. To stand on land is not merely to occupy it. It is to recognize its rivers, its climate, its myths, its earlier inhabitants, and its wounds. The land is not a blank surface. It is a living field of memory.

7. Multicultural Unity and Diversity

The poem presents multiculturalism as a promise, but also as a responsibility. It celebrates unity, yet it remembers conflict. It honours diversity, yet it does not forget racial exclusion. This balanced treatment makes the poem important in discussions of Canadian multicultural identity. The opening pledge to "stand together" gives the poem a collective voice. It is not the voice of an isolated immigrant. It is the voice of a community seeking strength, dignity, and recognition. The image of the igloo suggests that unity is built piece by piece. Each part matters. The poem also celebrates moments of connection between Indian and Canadian histories. References to public milestones, leaders, and cultural crossings suggest that immigrants have contributed to the making of Canada. The speaker's Indian inheritance does not remain outside Canadian life. It becomes part of it. At the same time, the poem refuses to ignore the darker parts of multicultural history. Komagata Maru and Air India remain as wounds. They remind readers that multiculturalism cannot be built only through festivals and public slogans. It must also include justice, memory, mourning, and truth. The poem's final vision of people of many colours dancing around the Canadian Maple Leaf creates a hopeful image of unity. But this hope has been earned through memory. The poem does not ask people to forget difference. It asks them to bring their histories into a shared space. This is the poem's deepest understanding of multiculturalism. Diversity becomes meaningful when it is joined with historical awareness and mutual respect. A society becomes inclusive not by hiding its past, but by remembering it honestly.

8. POETIC DEVICES AND THEMATIC FORCE

Parameswaran uses several poetic devices to express the complexity of diasporic life. Metaphor is central to the poem. The Inuit igloo becomes a metaphor for immigrant unity and resilience. Rivers become metaphors for memory, movement, and cultural blending. The temple becomes a metaphor for the sacred space created by immigrants in a new land. Allusion is another important device. The poem refers to historical events such as the Komagata Maru incident and the Air India tragedy. It also refers to spiritual figures such as Aditi and Aataentsic. These allusions expand the poem's world. They connect the personal voice of the immigrant to history, mythology, religion, and collective memory. Imagery gives the poem emotional richness. The snow, rivers, sky, oceans, herbs, temples, and maple leaf create a visual and spiritual landscape. These images help the reader feel the immigrant's movement between places and cultures. Symbolism is also strong. The Canadian Maple Leaf stands for the nation, but in the poem it becomes a space around which many peoples may gather. The rivers symbolize cultural continuity and movement. The igloo symbolizes survival through unity. Aditi and Aataentsic symbolize the meeting of different spiritual traditions. Through these devices, Parameswaran creates a layered poem. It is at once personal, historical, cultural, ecological, and spiritual. The poem's language carries the weight of displacement, but also the hope of shared belonging.

9. CONCLUSION

Uma Parameswaran's "This Land Whereon I Stand" is a powerful poem about diaspora, memory, and multicultural belonging. It presents the immigrant's search for a place in Canada while preserving emotional and cultural ties with India. The poem shows that diasporic identity is not a simple choice between homeland and adopted land. It is a layered condition in which different memories, rivers, gods, histories, and griefs meet. The poem also insists on historical consciousness. By remembering the Komagata Maru incident and the Air India tragedy, Parameswaran gives voice to the wounds of the South Asian Canadian community. These events become part of the collective memory through which the diaspora understands itself. At the same time, the poem recognizes Indigenous history and presence. This recognition gives the poem moral depth. It reminds immigrants that they stand on land with older histories and that belonging must be built with humility and respect. The poem therefore moves beyond immigrant self-expression and enters a larger ethical conversation about land, memory, and justice. Through its use of environmental imagery, spiritual symbolism, historical allusion, and multicultural vision, "This Land Whereon I Stand" becomes a poem of connection. It bridges Indian and Canadian landscapes, South Asian and Indigenous memories, grief and hope, difference and unity. It asks readers to look beyond narrow identities and to embrace a shared but honest sense of humanity. The poem finally suggests that true multicultural belonging is possible only when communities remember together. Unity cannot be built by erasing pain. It must be built by recognizing many histories and allowing them to stand beside one another. In this sense, Parameswaran's poem remains a meaningful contribution to diasporic literature and Canadian multicultural writing.

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