CHAPTER 4

UMA PARAMESWARAN

In recent times Canada has been witnessing a coming together of people belonging to many different countries and cultures that has resulted in the flowering of a multicultural ethnic mosaic. Among the new immigrants the South Asian group has emerged as the major ethno-cultural group in Canada. The South Asian literature deals with the problems faced by the immigrants in Canada like alienation, questioning, protest and assertion along with search for identity. People of ethnic minorities always find themselves in the margin. Their struggle to adjust to their marginal status frequently makes them nostalgic about their past and their country of origin. Uma Parameswaran, a prominent South Asian Canadian writer voices the anguish, aspirations and anxiety of the South Asian Canadians in her writing.

Diasporic writing addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. An expatriate writer fixed in two cultures, the one of origin and the other of settlement, carves a new identity synthesizing the old and the new, thus blurring the discriminating margins of the two social milieus—this phenomenon is referred to by critics as melting pot syndrome—, or he reluctantly bids farewell to his native soil. Internalizing nostalgia and suffering a forced amnesia he constructs an identity accepting the oddities of the soil wherein he has sought refuge. Here margins obstruct, confluence of
the binaries becomes a remote possibility as the past intrudes and the present dominates. The picture is that of a Salad Bowl where components exist with the distinct identities without any scope for merger. Uma Parameswaran herself has said that connecting two 'home lands' has been the main theme of her critical creative writings.

Diasporic writing requires the writer's projection of his own culture, relating it at the same time more positively to the host culture. As he moves from one culture to another, the writer may need to relocate himself afresh in relation to the centre. The visualization of his experience and the concretization of the immediate in radically different idiom is indeed a process towards the relocation of the immigrant's identity. The new world presented is not a fantasy that cancels the reality of the past, but on the contrary is a readjustment, adaptation, participation and fulfillment.

A study of Uma Parameswaran's work reflects the ongoing involvement of an immigrant writer with reality. Her first short story "The Door I Shut behind me" (1967) reflects the sense of wonder and fear of the immigrant at the new world around him, and nostalgia for the world left behind. The story is about a young graduate Chander, who secures a green card and goes to Canada, and his first impression of being in a new country. While his mother gives him a copy of the Ramayana and translation of Bhagavad -Gita as parting gifts, Chander himself buys a copy of Chandra Sekhar's
Radiative Transfer, though it is not his field of study, nor is it one that one could read during a journey. He simply is driven by an urge to hold that book to “see it was to think of its India-born author, and to think of him was to open a world of ambition and inspiration”. He was quite surprised to see that the Indian families in Canada not only create “Little India’ around them but also prefer to live in the memories of India of their childhood rather than the India of today. He comes to know that “When we leave our country we shut many door behind ourselves though we are not aware of it at the time”. At the same time, being optimistic, he feels that “there are many doors ahead of us”.

“What was Always Hers” a collection of short stories and winner of the 1999, New Muse Award and the Canadian Author’s Association 2000 Jubilee Award for Best Short Stories, is Parmeswaran’s latest work of fiction. The volume contains the stories “What was Always Hers”, How We Won Olympic Gold”, and “The Icicle”.

The title story What was Always Hers explores loss, death, betrayal and love, a powerful package very western and contemporary in theme and compounded by the protagonist’s Indian background and cultural traditions which do not support the modern trends of divorce and second families. Although it deals with painful experiences, this story is not about the death of love but on the contrary, its different ways of manifesting. The story deals with the
Indian immigrant experience in Canada. Niranjan, an activist for agricultural Indians working in the British Columbia fruit belt marries Veeru, a rather naïve young woman from India. Niranjan’s parents lived in Safdarjang Enclave, Delhi. But Nirannjan’s wife, Veeru came from a village in Punjab. When Veeru went to Canada, it was a new experience for her. She got an opportunity to know her husband closely and also the land where he lived. Her short stay in Canada was the most fascinating experience for her. It was also a moment of revolution for the village woman. She came to know about the greatness of her husband and, at the same time, made up her mind to elevate herself to this greatness, otherwise she would be a misfit for her husband:

Within a week of her first visit, she had made a pact with the goddess, that she would make herself his real helpmeet, his equal so that he could achieve his fullest potential for she knew that he was made for greatness. It was a surge of power she had felt as she made that promise. She did not swear that she would serve him and wait on his hand and foot, as any other woman in the village would have done. One week in this beautiful land—where sea and mountains and sky showered perennial benediction—one week in that student apartment—every surface strewn with newspapers or magazines or handbills printed for distribution among the farm labourers, with an endless stream of visitors debating, writing, quoting Ghalib and Shakespeare and Marx—and she knew she had to grow
so she could walk hand in hand with this giant mind who was her husband.³

Niranjan belonged to a city based family. All his brothers and brothers-in-law were in business of one kind or another, two brothers managing the family business of electrical appliances. Niranjan was the black sheep of the family: "he wanted to be a college professor, fortunately, he was the third son, and since the older two were already excited about the family business, Niranjan's impractical ideals could be indulged in. Niranjan was that kind of person, intense, argumentative, and totally inept when it came to the pragmatic realities of life. Sisters and sisters-in-law always made sure he had hot meals even if he came home, as he often did, long after the servant had left for the evening."⁴

When the time came for Niranjan to get married, there was no dearth of options. Proposals from high families came to him for marriage. The beautiful and the well educated girls were eager to marry Niranjan. In fact, Niranjan had a wide option of marriage with girls who spoke English with a good convent accent, girls who knew how to cook and sew, studying for a Home Science degree. But Niranjan would have none of them. He was dedicated to village uplift work, and he thought that native village was the most beautiful place for anyone to grow up in. Although his father had sold his land in the village years ago to build the house in Delhi, Niranjan felt a deep attachment to his village as his uncle still lived
Veeru to Nirnanjan for marriage as she was the grand daughter of his best friend. Veeru was exactly what Niranjan would want in a wife-she was bright, intelligent and lucky. Niranjan’s uncle went on describing the good qualities of Veeru:

“The day she was born was the day the monsoons came at last, after a drought that seemed it would never end. The day of her naming ceremony, the jewel on the crown of the village deity that had disappeared four years earlier, had magically reappeared on the crown, loosely placed in the delicate gold claws she had toddled off to alert other that grandpa had fallen off his chair: he had had a stroke and thanks to the baby he could be helped right away, and he lived another twelve years. Our child Veeru will bring good fortune to any man who clasps her hand in marriage.”

Niranjan at once accepted the offer of Veeru. But he wanted to meet her and make her aware of his future plan. “.... he would go abroad to study, come back with Ph.D., get a job in one of his village uplift programs. That meant he could not guarantee anyone anything, except his undying devotion to any woman he married and any children they might have. He had already taken a vow of service to the community, and nobody could change that. “Like Vinobaji”, she said. That sealed his answer. He would marry Veeru and no one else. Any girl of seventeen who in the year 1978 knew about Vinobaji was a gem too precious to ignore.

Thus Niranjan and Veeru were married. Veeru was a symbol of good luck and soon Niranjan got good news. The University of British
Columbia had not only accepted him for graduate study but had offered him a fellowship. It took him six months to get all his documents and then he went to Canada to complete his studies while his wife Veeru remained in India. Afterwards his first son Vikram was born and it was a moment of great celebration for the entire family.

When Vikram was 2-year old, Niranjan arranged for Veeru to visit him in Canada. She stayed with him for four memorable months. Everything was new, everything was wonderful, and she loved and enjoyed each and every moment of her stay there. Jitin and Demmi were the first people that Veeru met when Niranjan brought her to his apartment from the airport. Both the young ladies cared for Veeru much as she was a new comer to this land. They taught her how to make tea and other items in the kitchen. Veeru was overwhelmed with love and care shown by Jitin and Demmi. Veeru respected Jitin very much and addressed her as Deedi.

Niranjna was an activist of the Communist Party and he was the leader of Indians working in the British Columbia fruit belt. He was always busy with political meeting and rally. His entire followers were greatly dedicated and devoted to him. The apartment where Niranjan lived was the centre of great activity. The people used to come there and discuss the diverse matter with their leader. Veeru and other women were always busy making tea for the visitors. The woman to whom Veeru was much attached was Jitin. Jitin was a natural leader, she not only ordered people about in the living room but she
managed much of the kitchen work also. "Veeru loved to watch Jitin and she wished Jitin would laugh more often, the laugh that drove away the sadness from that lovely face, it was not the sound, which was short and suppressed but that ways it lighted her face, blotted out that unfathomable sadness that dwelt in her eyes those times she seemed to withdraw into her private unfathomable world." 7

The initial appreciation of Jitin by Veeru, however, turned into a feminine apprehension regarding Jitin. It is but natural because Jitin was too much close to Niranjan. She used to accompany Niranjan both in domestic as well as public work. Their intimacy was so much that it generated jealousy in the heart of the Indian woman Veeru:

Niranjan turned to Jitin for everything, put his hand on her shoulder when consulting her. When she had hesitantly told one of the women about her fears, they had laughed it away. This is Canada, they said, and a man’s hand on a woman’s shoulder meant no more than on a man’s. And Jitin, oh no, Jitin was hardly a woman, just look at her, all bones and brains, don’t worry, she is just one of the boys. They themselves hugged and kissed Niranjan, with endearments - kanhaiya, Boss - baba, pyarelalla. And he was always warm and considerate to them, to everyone. And she had been reassured: they were older women, they wouldn’t lie to her. 8

In the above quotation, it is evident that Veeru’s apprehension regarding Jitin comes to surface and she expresses it before the elderly women. They assured her that there was nothing wrong in touching the shoulder of a woman in Canada and this did not suggest any relationship between Jitin and Niranjan other than that
of mere friends. Here the conflict between the Indian values and the western values has been highlighted. But we see that the apprehension of Veeru was not baseless. The relationship between Niranjan and Jitin was not only the relationship between the two party workers. It was the most intimate one akin to the husband-wife relationship.

The crisis in the life of the innocent Veeru came during the abortion of her third child. She had already two sons and Niranjan did not want to have more than two children. So he persuaded Veeru for abortion. But the village-based woman Veeru could not fully digest this idea. The abortion caused both mental and physical pain to her. She suffered from horrible imaginations regarding her two sons and craved for the third. But the real crisis came in Veeru’s life with the revelation made by Niranjan about Jitin. He clearly told Veeru about his relationship with Jitin. Jitin was not only a party worker but the second wife of Niranjan. Veeru was shocked to hear that Jitin was pregnant. This increased the agony of Veeru as Niranjan forced her to abort her third child while he was allowing Jitin to have her child. He clearly told Veeru about Jitin: “She has a right to her child as indeed to all that has always been hers, which didn’t at all mean she was but only that she wanted to be”.

Now the attitude of Veeru fully changed regarding Jitin. The docile woman of the Indian village i.e. Veeru would not allow the westernized Jitin to share her husband. She gathered her courage and rose to combat the situation.
“Jitin was the calm village pond to which she had retreated in moments of stress - with pink lotuses and wide green leaves, the clear cool water in which she took a dip before entering the village shrine. Jitin, Jitin. And now she had to hate her. Veeru lay very still all night, spewing hatred on Niranjan and Jitin by turns. At last it was morning and she entered into her safety net of routine. Breakfast for the children, laundry, vacuum and thankfully it was her day to volunteer at the day-care.”

Niranjan wanted divorce d from Veeru so that he could make his relationship with Jitin valid through marriage. He was ready to give her everything and in turn he demanded his liberty, “Nothing will change except I won’t be here at night. You can stay here, I think it is best not to disturb the boy’s routine. Tell me what you would like me to do, what you need, and I will make sure you have it. The house, an allowance that will let you live in the same fashion as we are living now.... that is only fair. I don’t need anything: I have my job and my needs are not much... I will take care of anything that has to be done for the boys, for you, your travels, everything. If it is right by you, I’d like to come often and spend time with the boys, but again, I will not insist. Anything you think is best for them is fine by me....” But Veeru would not grant him his liberty. Every morning before leaving for work Niranjan renews his request to her,” Give us our freedom". Any every morning she wanted to scream on hearing those words. He did not say “my freedom but our”. By our freedom, he did not mean freedom for her and him but for Jitin and him. Here the writer Uma Parameswaran brings out another important aspect of Veeru’s
character. Veeru is not selfish enough to keep Niranjan for herself. She is ready to share her husband with Jitin: "Deedi, deedi. They were sisters. Could they not share one more thing? And be friends, sisters?"  

But now Veeru is a fully awakened lady and she can't show her husband with another woman. She has come out of her childish fancy and now she has become a mature lady realizing her rights and duties. She can't lead a hypocritical life. She craves for a real, happy life along with her husband. She thinks Jitin as an intruder. She starts hating even her husband Niranjan who is not giving her the proper place in his life. Instead he is demanding divorce from her. But how can she fulfill the desire of Niranjan? She can't fulfill the desire of Niranjan and Jitin. Let Niranjan live with Jitin and give her the place of his wife but she would not give up her claim on him. She would remain his legal wife. Here the writer comments:

"Had she been the village girl she was when she first landed here, would things have been different? Now, she had grown, grown out her childhood view of life, her village views, how she could respond except with shock and revulsion and hate, hate for Jitin, for Niranjan, hate, hate. Even if she desired more intensely, it seemed than she longed for the Niranjan of old, that god who had taken her by the hand and raised her to his sky."  

At the end, Veeru agreed for the divorce because she could not torture Niranjan much. Moreover, Niranjan gave her everything. He used to shower his love and affection upon her two sons- Vikram and Adarsh. After the divorce, Jitin became the rightful wife of Niranjan, and Veeru lost him forever. Sometimes she repented upon her
decision. But after her separation from Niranjan, she became quite bold and strong. She knew how to live even without the support of husband. She joined an office and did her work to put a proper make-up and wear proper dresses. Instead of becoming sad and depressed she became bold and beautiful after her separation from Niranjan. Her transformation from a village girl to a bold fashionable woman is quite unbelievable. She drew the attention of so many men and Gerald was one such. Gerald was her colleague. He was very handsome and well-dressed. He took much interest in Veeru. But Veeru did not take him seriously. She found out that after Niranjan there could be no other that she could come close to or allow to come close to her.

The serious crisis came in the life of Veeru when she received a telephonic message from Pritpal that Niranjan had met with a fatal road accident and he had died. Although Niranjan had already divorced her and now he was living with Jitin, Veeru was well assured that the father of her two children lived in Canada and he would gladly help her if the occasion demanded. But now she was really left alone in a foreign country and the test of her boldness begins now. She got a telephone call from India. It was from the parents of Niranjan who still think Veeru to be the legal wife of Niranjan. They requested her to attend the funeral rites of Niranjan. They further requested her to let Vikram, the elder son of Veeru to perform the last rites according to the Hindu method. Like Veeru,
Vikram also hated his father and he was not ready to attend the funeral rites of his father. The younger son Adarsh felt great intimacy with his father. But somehow Veeru persuaded her sons to go.

Saturday morning Veeru and her two sons went to the funeral chapel for their private farewell. Niranjan was not a common man there, he was the leader of migrant Indians in Canada. His followers had gathered in a large number to pay their homage to their leader. They chanted slogans in the honour of Niranjan. With the chanting of holy mantras, Vikram sprinkled Gangajal on the dead body of Niranjan. This Gangajal was specially sent to Canada by the parent of Niranjan. The hall was filled to capacity. It seemed the entire fruit belt had turned up, or at least one person from each generation of every sikh family who lived and work there. One of the men placed his hand on his heart and boomed, “Veer Shahid, Amar Shahid, may his sons liver forever.” Veeru thought they meant it in a general way, but then all of them bowed to Vikram and repeated the gesture and words, “Veer Shahid, Amar Shahid, May his sons live forever.” Once again, Vikram rose to the occasion. He stood up, bowed his head and greeted them with joined palms, with one gesture both accepting their tribute and asking their blessing. Jitin also came in the hall. She stood in the doorway, all in white, her dupatta draped over head, her face pale, dry, and utterly beautiful. She held the baby in her arms. Veeru wanted to rush down and embrace Jitin and never let her go. But she could not do it due to the crowd.
According to the will of Niranjan, his daughter by Jitin would be the beneficiary of his insurance policy while Veeru was the sole inheritor of all other assets. Both Veeru and Jitin were satisfied and none challenged the will in any way. Both of them restarted their life with new challenges ahead. Jitin had joined a job and lived with her daughter in a small flat. Veeru always felt that it was an injustice done to Jitin as Niranjan had given much of his property to Veeru. It was really difficult for Jitin to lead a decent life with the paltry sum left by Niranjan. Sometimes, Veeru felt that justice had been done to her because Niranjan had left her earlier and lived with Jitin. So she suffered the pang of separation while Jitin celebrated her union with Niranjan. But the death of Niranjan had brought both the women on equal footing. Both of them have lost their husband and thus they suffered the common sorrow. In such a situation, one feels pity and sympathy for one’s fellow sufferer. The earlier hatred of Veeru for Jitin turned into love and understanding for her. One day she decided to visit Jitin. Katie invited Veeru in. She introduced herself as the baby sitter who took charge of Nira, Jitin’s daughter for an hour. Jitin had not returned from her office. Veeru looked around the room. It was awfully small and closed in. It jolted her to see this state of destitution. She started talking to Nira, Jitin’s daughter. She was a lovely girl. Originally she was called Ranjan but after her father’s death her name was changed to Niranjana. Thus she was called Nira which was her short name. After a few minutes, Jitin came in. She was delighted to see Veeru there. Both of them embraced each other forgetting their bitter
experience of the past. It was the happiest moment of their life and they vowed not to separate from each other. Both of them would live together and share their sorrow and happiness. They would have two sons and one daughter. Thus the story ends with a happy note of reunion between the two women: Veeru and Jitin. In the review of this collection, Zaheera Jiwaji has rightly commented:

"This is the story of her (Veeru’s) awakening. Beautifully conceptualized, the reader follows her development from a newly arrived immigrant into a confident and secure wife and mother. The marriage holds secrets, which when revealed unleash a series of events that will bring Veeru a greater knowledge of herself. This story introduces several common elements present in the other four: self-knowledge and self-realization, both personal and cultural, from a woman’s point of view."  

The second story, entitled *Maru and the M.M. Syndrome* told with a remarkable shift in voice and place from the first, is the charming tale of a woman who on the surface appears to be the opposite of the early Veeru. Maru, a married woman approaching middle age, lives a comfortable and successful life with Siv, her scientist husband. When Maru starts to suspect that Siv may be suffering from ‘male menopause’ (hence, the title, M.M. Syndrome), she decides to keep a watchful eye, fearing the influence of curvaceous blondes. Siv is fifty-four year old and with the advancement in age, a lot of change has come in his behavior and action. According to Maru, Siv now suffers from M.M. Syndrome.
Menopause is a stage that comes in a woman nearly at the age of 45. When menopause comes to a woman, she gets rid of the monthly cycle of mensuration and thus her body becomes incapable of conceiving and bearing a child. It means the end of her sexual hunger. The same stage comes in the life of a man when he approaches the age of 54. At this stage, the sexual hunger dies in a man. Moreover, he suffers from the erectile dysfunction also. But in this man – dominated society, man is not ready to digest this stage easily. So, in order to show to the world that he is still as strong and vigorous as earlier, he starts running after the young beautiful girls. But his wife knows the reality about him. When he encounters an actual sexual intercourse, he cuts a sorry figure. But he runs after the young, beautiful girls to show to the world that he is still sexually fit and strong. Maru comments on the m.m. syndrome:

“This m.m. syndrome is frightening. Of course, one knows the basic symptoms of male menopause as well as one knows about hot flashes and mood swings in women. We secretaries know a lot about these things: not just about our own husbands and fathers and brothers and neighbours but the ten or fifteen men that each of us works with everyday, and some of the women faculty who could just as well be men. In our collective wisdom, we share our knowledge over lunch: it is a quite formidable database.”

The symptoms of a menopausal man can easily be seen. The first symptom is that such a man runs after young and beautiful girls. Maru describes quite humorously:
George G, for years one of the placid balloons around campus, shed fifty pounds and the thing ever hear it was not his doctor who was behind it but some young thing for whom he has left his wife of twenty some years; Henry H, it seems met up again with his high school sweetheart at the Homecoming a couple of years ago, and now they are busy divorcing their spouse; Irving I didn’t bother about divorce but just latched on to a window ten years his senior.\textsuperscript{17}

The second symptom is cars. The menopausal men have great attraction for cars. They want to buy expensive cars and go on a long drive. They spend too much of their time with their cars. Instead of giving their time to their wives, they give too much of their time to their cars. Maru remembers those early days:

"When I came here a blushing bride, the henna scarce dried on my palms, and Sivaram had just bought one of those, already twelve years old but its chrome still gleamingly splashed across the side fenders ... At that time, it was a penniless student’s car, but now very definitely it is connected to the m.m. syndrome."\textsuperscript{18}

Other symptoms are workaholism and alcoholism. They are so interconnected that one can’t figure out which is cause and which is effect. Maru has analyzed everything and that is why she can quote the example from the real life:

"Edgar E has a recliner in his office because he is so hard at work, often till midnight as Tom in security has told me, but he also has a whole bar in filling drawer under his table, Fred F’s wife, we were told, deserted him because he spent so little time at home, what with his lab and his conferences all over the world, but when
we spoke about it we always said it the right way - that he deserted her long before she him".

These symptoms are obvious in all those men who are in their fifties. Due to these symptoms their wives have to suffer much because they don't get proper attention from their husbands. The quarrel between wife and husband takes place and their conjugal life is transformed into permanent alienation and depression. It is pity that no fruitful studies have been undertaken in this direction:

"...all these men are in their fifties. It is so clearly a menopausal thing, isn't it time we had some serious studies, for heaven's sake, that's what universities are for, to research into areas that most concern our everyday lives."\(^{20}\)

Maru works as a secretary in the Department of English in a University while her husband is a scientist. Maru has to receive so many telephone calls in the department. These calls are definitely from the wives of the professors. They want to check and cross-check the whereabouts of their husbands and they fear that their husbands may have developed some affair either with their girl students or the female faculty members of the university. Maru admits that she also goes to the Siv's lab once in a while to keep tab on his assistants.

In the university, an affair is going on between Will and Erika. Will is a professor in the department of English and he is in his fifties. Erika is a young beautiful woman with a managerial post in the university. It is quite strange that an affair is going on between the two. Maru comments:
“Of course, any man would be attracted to Erika, especially someone like Will. She had all that Will lacked — organizational skills and elegance. And, of course, sexuality.”

Erika’s husband, Jim is a nice gentleman. He is a manager at one of the departmental stores. He probably doesn’t have a clue about what was going on at the university. Perhaps he suffers from workaholism. This factor has affected the warmth of their relationship and Erika has drifted away from him.

Seeing all these things in the campus, Maru becomes very much worried about her husband Siv (Sivaraman) who is in Ottawa on a special 2-year assignment at the National Research Council. Sivaraman is fifty-four, that awfully vulnerable age when men seem to go batty. And he is still handsome as Adonis, his Adam’s apple as sexy as ever, and his grey-tinged hair above his flat forehead is charismatic no matter from what angle one sees him. Sensing the trouble, Maru resigns from her job in the university and goes to live along with her husband permanently. Maru clearly admits: “Yes, it’s been a good life, except for this epidemic of m.m. that is sweeping through my world. And which has made me resign my niche at the university and head out for the hill.”

According to the writer, the poem of T.S. Eliot “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a case study of male menopause. The protagonist of the poem Mr. Prufrock comes in contact with young girl but due to great difference in their age, he can’t express his love
for this young girl. He is a middle-aged man and he can’t gather courage to express his love for the girl. He fears that his love would be rejected and the girl would laugh at him. In order to gather courage he takes her to a hotel where fashionable women come and go talking of Michael Angelo. His problems remain the same. Maru thinks that her husband living at Ottawa is very much like Prufrock. Thus to support him and overcome his malady of M.M. syndrome she finally comes to Ottawa.

Siv met Maru at the airport. He gave her a bear hug and seemed genuinely glad to see her. Usually Maru is the one who keeps the conversation going, but she kept quiet to test what Siv would do. He seemed quite at ease, he didn’t even switch on the radio, he talked instead, of all the people in his project, and how it had to pick up pace in the next six months. Siv is a scientist by profession but he devotes too much of his time to prayers and worshipping. He used to chant holy mantra of Gayatri both morning and evening. He claimed to attain the divine power by chanting the Gayatri mantras. His wife, Maru on the other hand is not so much religious. She does not want to awake early in the morning and take her bath. She is a late riser. Moreover, she can’t think of performing ‘Sandhyas’ like her husband. Shiv’s too much obsession with worshipping is associated by her to the M.M. Syndrome. Maru expresses her fear:
A senior scientist at the National Research council. Maybe, I realized with alarm, this is m.m. ! Well, better crazy science than shapely blondes. Except, of course, it could be both."23

Maru is having a nice time at Ottawa. For the first few weeks, life was the way it had been with any of her other short visits- a flurry of parties that they had to host to repay for all those that Siv had gone to in her absence. Then, the pace slowed down. It started sinking in that she was here to stay. Siv had brought home one of his old computers for Maru and requested her to write her short stories. It was a good idea. Maru started writing her short stories by the help of the computer.

After a few days Siv bought a cottage near Meech Lake. Maru thought it as another of Siv's wildly extravagant ideas and once again associated it to his m.m.syndrome. It gave a jolt to Maru as she had planned to go back to Madras once he retired. The cottage was located on top of a little hill. There was a rocky road meandering up to the one-room log cabin perched at the top, with front door opening to the ground. Everything was alright with the cottage except one drawback. It had no water. Siv didn't think it was a problem because in modern age digging a bore well is quite easy.

Soon, Maru and Siv shifted in their new cottage with no water to be had for love or money. The cottage was a white elephant piece of real estate. The boys loved the idea: Giri said the area was bound to become a tourist paradise one day, and all they had to do was to wait till some developers came along and brought a waterline. But Siv
wanted the cottage developed now. According to Maru, "He is one of those who worked to deadlines: if something was to be done by a certain date, he did it with time to spare."²⁴

It is quite difficult to have a bore well in a rocky and hilly area. Three diviners had come and gone, and one professional company that cost as much for their professional expertise as a bore well would have cost gave their verdict, however, in no uncertain terms. There was no water on the land. However, they could draw a line from another place, just a mile down the road, where their affiliated building contractors were putting up a cabin. Without water, it was difficult to live in their heavenly cottage.

A few days later, Maru’s chance meeting with an old man from India solved her problem. He was a Tamil and he was visiting his son at Ottawa. Both Maru and the old man chatted together in the Tamil language. It is so wonderful to be able to talk in Tamil to someone in Canada. Their intimacy grew and Maru invited him home. Maru prepared all the south Indian dishes for the old man Mr. Chinnadurai Iyer. On the appointed day Mr. Chinnadurai came. Maru first made a good Madras coffee, bringing milk to the boil and giving an express whisk at the end so the top frothed over. It was a treat for him. As they chatted Maru poured out some of her problems, he jumped up. "I know the moment I saw you that I would come alive," he said "God's ways are known only to him, praise be. He has given me a purpose."²⁵ Fortunately for Maru, he was a water diviner. He wanted to set out that
minute in search of water as Wednesday was an auspicious day without the ill impact of Rahu. He took a handsaw and instructed Maru: "It is better if you stay in the house, lady," he said, "You know what our rules say. Ladies had best stay in!" "Don't you know however the perfume from a woman's dress can distract a man to madness?"

Maru remained inside the house while Mr. Iyer went out in the lawn. He walked towards the trees, testing branches, lopping off a few, discarding them, going farther in the lawn. After an hour he came back and took Maru to the spot he had marked and said, "Dig here, at fifty feet you come to dirty water, go deeper, another twenty, thirty feet, and you will get water sweeter than any you can get from any tap or well anywhere in the city." With stones and twigs and leaves, he marked out the area, sticking a twig where the exact place would be.

Next day Siv called the bore-well man to dig out the well on the marked area. Mr. Iyer also came to inspect the entire process. To the amazement of all, clear and sweet water came out from the bore-well. Here Mr. Iyer is the symbol of the oriental wisdom while Siv is the symbol of the western science. Earlier Siv laughed at Mr. Iyer and doubted his wisdom regarding the digging of the bore-well. But now he has to acknowledge the divine wisdom of Mr. Iyer. Sometimes science fails to solve our problems while the traditional wisdom comes to our rescue.

There was another problem with the house which Mr. Iyer sensed at once. There was something in the house which was disturbing the
peace and harmony of the dwellers. Moreover, it was casting an evil impact on the master of the house i.e. Siv. Mr. Iyer wanted to provide full relief to the family. That is why he started a thorough search of the house with the help of Maru. At last he got success. It was the Sri Chakra, a geometrical design that was casting an evil impact upon the house. Mr. Iyer instructed Maru to get rid of the Sri Chakra as soon as possible. It should be buried deep in ground or to be flown in the running water.

Thus we see that elements of the occult and paranormal are introduced, contrasting the God of western science with the God of eastern traditions. In a review of the story Morelle Smith writes: "Maru and The M.M. Syndrome is fast-paced, dealing with an obsession that's treated in a humorous style. Full of rich imagery, the author's sense of humor is explorative and quirky and close to the end depicts a scene that I think would make a wonderful film, as it tips over into the absurd. It mixes the actual with the imaginary dexterously, so at times you are not quite sure what is real and what is not. Some characters act as unpredictable inner guides, others symbolize the wisdom and knowledge of ancient Indian traditions, as they weave a seemingly impossible pattern of relationships with the hyper-rational, intellectual modern world. This story works so well because these two world-views, interacting very intimately, present a paradoxical picture of how life works and how we interpret it. Uma Parameswaran does not try to explain this paradox; she simply depicts it, with affection and humour."28

The writer Uma Parameswaran writes from the heart as an Indo-Canadian woman relating life in present day Canada, with all its riches and its flaws. We are convinced that some of the author's characteristics
may exist in the protagonists, lending an air of authenticity, resulting in powerful and enduring stories told with a touch of delightful humour.

The short story *Darkest Before Dawn* is about Indian Diaspora. It is about a family which had migrated to Canada many years ago. The protagonist of the story, Jayant remembers every detail of his proud family history that had been passed on to him though bedtime stories and grows nostalgic about it. His father was a nuclear scientist at Trombay near Mumbai. He belonged to the proud Maratha families which ruled over the greater part of India during medieval times. But he took a decision in haste and decided to migrate to Canada. Jayant remembered the trips of his father from Mumbai to Delhi for their immigration formalities. His father had legally renounced all claims to ancestral and paternal property. And now he is a real estate broker in Canada. It is a case of betrayal according to Jayant. They were leading an honorable life in India with a proud family history. But in Canada they are leading a life of oblivion. It is of course, a betrayal and the son is blaming his father for this unnecessary migration to an alien land.

The theme of racial hostility is highlighted in the story. Jayant had a sister named Jyoti. But when the story opens we find that Jayant is in a sad and depressed mood. The writer comments:

"Treachery had been his companion as far back as he could remember. Everyone to whom he felt close ended up betraying him. He should be used to it by now; yet each time he was caught unprepared, each time it was a sudden rapier thrust. No, that was too dramatic, too romantic an image, only Romeos and Caesars got hit that way...There
was this commercial fishhook, a fail-proof hook that twisted itself ninety degrees into the fish, and the fish died a long slow death. His sister's eyes had twisted the hook into him."^29

Jyoti and Jayant are almost contemporary in age. So most of the time they quarreled between them on petty issues. But this time the issue is not a petty one, it is something serious and it concerns their life and attitude. Jyoti has fallen in love with a Canadian young man Pierre and intends to marry him. Jayant, on the other hand does not approve of this relationship as Pierre is an alien man and he wants that his sister should marry with someone with an Indian root. Jayant has already tasted the racial discrimination in Canada and he does not want that the life of his sister should become miserable with Pierre. Jyoti is at the climax of her romance this time and so she is not ready to hear anything against it from anyone. That is why she talks quite roughly to Jayant:

"I am glad you are pitching out because that is the only way you'll get into that thick skull of yours that we are different, and no matter what we do, we are never going to fit in here. Take to the road, get high, sleep around, but still and all, we'll never belong except in our own homes." "Fuck off, Jyo, you'll see."^30

The writer Uma Paramaswaran has used the flashback technique in the story. Jyoti remembers how she studied in a missionary school in India. She was about ten. In an interclass recitation competition, Jyoti had been chosen to represent her section. She was already known for her talent for memorizing poems overnight and this was not the first
time she had competed. That evening, as she memorized the selected poem, the import of the lines hit her:

'Oh call my brother back to me!
I cannot play alone:
The summer comes with flowers and bee,
Where is my brother gone?\(^{31}\)

Jayant also remembered nostalgically his ancestral house in India. He remembered his grandmother, seated in the courtyard of their ancestral house on the familiar thick woven mat of silk straw. The courtyard was large and rectangular and seemed cut in two halves. The far half had trees, a bakul tree that spread its branches over the far right wall, and there were flowing bushes of jasmine and raat-ki-rani, and a clump of banana trees. At the centre was the tulsi plant where the clay lamps and incense sticks could burn despite rain. Near it under the shade of a parijata tree sat his grandmother with her violin. Jayant felt great attachment to his grandmother, because she had taught him how to play the violin and she had given her violin to him. In his quiet moments Jayant used to remember all these things in Canada:

"It was a scene etched in Jayant's memory, a scene to which his spirit returned in quiet moments, a scene which he sought out when storms came up. A scene where everything was in place, exactly in place. Aji playing her violin every day just after her three o'clock tea."\(^{32}\)

The narration shifts from Jayant to Jyoti. Jyoti is a young girl of the modern times. She has got self confidence by her education in Canada. She has imbibed many traits of the Canadian and that is why
she does not see any danger in marrying with Pierre, her lover. One day she encounters a strange experience. One day she parked her car on the road to pick up her cousin Priti. But when she entered the flat, she came to know that neither Priti was there nor her parents. Only Kamla, the younger sister of Priti was there. Kamla welcomed Jyoti and insisted on showing her science project. Thus Jyoti remained there for sometime. Just then someone rang the doorbell. Jyoti opened the door and saw the two newspaper boys who were collecting the newspaper subscription. Kamla at once replied: "Nobody" home" Kamla said, "you'll have to come later." "Nobody" home," the boy mimicked to his companion. "What you see aren't people but ghosts," and both laughed far more loudly than the joke warranted. Jyoti closed the door and was about to close the inner door when she heard the boys shout, "Paki, Paki house-Dirty, dirty."\[33\]

It was too much for Jyoti. She could not digest this insult hurled on her by these Canadian boys. It was a case of racial prejudice. Jyoti caught the newspaper boy by his coat collar and dragged him into the house. She slapped that boy and rebuked him severely. At last he told her sorry and then she let him go. Here the pride of the Indian girl was roused and she taught a good lesson to these urchins. But her mind became disturbed and she thought:

But how could she clear her mind, of those junior high boys she had never seen who made obscene and intimidating gestures to eight-year-old girls? What about Priti? Jyoti broke into a cold sweat. And what about Pierre?
Was he the man? Would he ever understand what and how one feels when they have the word "Paki" flung at them?\textsuperscript{34}

At the end of the story, the hostility of Jayant against Pierre came to the forefront. He knows that Pierre is a guttersnipe. He feels that Jyoti is an extension of himself and he would not allow Jyoti to fall in the trap. “Jyoti loved Pierre: and if she was not as radiant as she should be, it was because of them - he and Dad and Ma - their instinctive resistance to this alien seducer who had pulled away one of their own.”\textsuperscript{35}

Thus Jayant has to reconcile himself to the situation. For the sake of his sister Jyoti he would also love Pierre and welcome him as his own. He remembers the traditional Raiput wedding rite where the bride’s brother stood at the gate of the house and challenged the coming bridegroom to a symbolic duel, after which they embraced and went in together to the bride who waited with roses to garland the groom. He would also do with due grace and honour like the Rajputs of the past. He clearly foresees the wedding of his sister: “When Pierre came on his white mare with plumed silk turban tasseled with red and white flowers, he would meet him with drawn sword; sheathing it, he would anoint Pierre with sacred vermilion and tumeric, and embrace him, with stars and moon and assembled guests as witness.”\textsuperscript{36}

In this story, the writer Uma Paraneswaram seems to suggest that the darkest thoughts of Jayant go out of his mind when he resolves to accept the decision of his sister. One can easily get rid of the horrible imaginings if one makes up one’s mind to do a thing. A lot of ‘ifs’ and
'buts' comes in our mind before an event but our clear vision clears our mind of unnecessary fears and doubts. Here 'dawn' is symbolic of resolution whereas the 'darkness' before dawn is symbolic of illusion.

The story *How We Won Olympic Gold* describes the glory and the shame experienced by the Canadians during the Seoul Olympic Games held in the year 1988. Ben Johnson, an athlete of Canada won the Gold Medal in the 100-metre race in this game making a world record with 9.79 seconds. It was the moment of the Pride and Jubilations for the entire Canada.

As we all know the writer Uma Parameswaran is a Professor of English at the University of Winnipeg. She is married to a mathematician. In the story the writer is Maru and her husband is Siv (Sivaraman). Now both of them have settled in Canada and got citizenship of that country. But their link with India is very strong and the writer used to visit India time and again. In this story the writer narrates her experiences during one of her visits to India. When the writer started her journey along with her little child, Bunto from Canada, it was decided that Siv would telephone her every Wednesday and Sunday mornings in India and in this way they would remain in touch with each other.

The writer has come back to India after a long interval and thus she becomes a centre of attraction for all. All her friends and relatives used to pour in her house and talk to her. There was no telephone in
her house. So she had to go to the neighborhood in order to attend her telephone calls from Canada. The writer describes the problem:

Those phone calls became a major exercise in timing and patience mainly because the telephone was three-doors away from ours, at Aunt Kamu’s (no relation of ours, needless to say), and every Wednesday and Saturday morning became a large-scale production effort that involved many people.37

Sometimes it became difficult for the writer to talk to her husband on phone quite freely because a large number of people used to hover round her. The parents of the writer became curious to know if everything was alright with their son-in-law in Canada. Siv loved his son Bunto very much and he used to ask all sorts of questions regarding Bunto. Sometimes the relatives of the writer felt that Siv should also come along with her to India as “it was downright inauspicious that I should come without my husband on this my first visit after my first baby.”38

It was a nice time for the writer in India. She got an opportunity to meet all her friends and relatives one after another and now the time of her departure from India came. Just at that time the telephone call from Siv came. The jubilant and excited words of Siv could be heard by any one: "we've won the gold". The writer also yelled back, "Fantastic we've won Olympic gold'. A boy named Nari heard their talk and understood that India had won the gold medal in the Olympic Games. He spread this news on the road. The family members of the writer thought that it must be P.T.Usha who had brought this glory to India
But later Siv corrected that P.T. Usha could not clear even the preliminary round. It was an athlete of Canada Ben Johnson who had won the gold. Since the writer and her husband had become citizens of Canada, they were sharing this happy news with each other.

The writer went back to Canada after her pleasant stay in India. When the plane reached Manila, Bunto fell asleep. Siv had come there to receive her. Maru had her first sight of Siv. He had grown a beard, or was trying to. He looked quite ghastly. Maru guessed that something was wrong with Siv. He patted Bunto’s cheek and asked about the flight etc. in a tone that said he didn’t really want to know. Maru hesitantly asked him if anything was wrong. Later during the journey back home Siv told Maru that his uncle who lived at Chicago, had expired and he had to go to Chicago to attend his funeral. “We reached home in silence. What a sad homecoming, I thought. Poor Siv. And now I supposed he’d have to go off to Chicago for the funeral. I felt tired, sick, empty.” 39

Siv brought in the suitcases from the car. Just then he saw the headlines of the morning newspaper. He flung the paper across the room and exclaimed:

“Dammit,” he shouted, “It’s not just his funeral; it is ours, all of ours. Dammit, every Canadian’s.” 40

As a matter of fact, it was a shocking news for every Canadian because the gold Medal had been taken away from Ben Johnson. In the drug test Ben had proved positive and that is why, the
Gold Medal was taken from him. The runner up, Carl Levis was declared the winner. Thus, it was a matter of national shame for Canada. But the important thing is that this common sorrow removed the personal sorrow of the writer and her husband and this was the time of celebration for the writer and her husband and his was the time of celebration for the writer who had just come from India:

"The relief was so great that, hugging Bunto to my heart, I switched on all the lights in the house and then consoled wholeheartedly with my husband and my country and our poor Ben for having lost the Olympic gold."

The short story *The Icicle* describes the life of a couple – Ranjit and Deepa in Canada and their problem of adjustment with Deepa’s craving for freedom. A large number of people migrate to the developed countries like USA, U.K and Canada for better prospect. But after living there for some time they forget their root and the traditional values of India. They adopt the Western values quite blindly and thus invite conflict and discord in their happy life. Ranjit and Deepa are one such couple living in Canada. Ranjit works at Manipeg while his wife is doing her Ph.D. in a University at Saskatoon. Their daughter Anji lives with her mother.

The conflict in their apparent happy conjugal life becomes obvious when Maru goes to borrow a tripod for her camara from Ranjit. Ranjit lives alone at Manipeg but he loves his daughter Anji very
much. This becomes obvious as his room is full of toys for his daughter. Maru observes this:

In one corner were stacked a couple of cartons, a child’s desk and a huge stuffed toy, a panda. This one was white with black eyes the way pandas are supposed to be, unlike our Rakesh, who was blue and had white-rimmed black eyes and a black-ringed blue tail. So we’d never figured out whether he was a panda or a raccoon.42 Ranjit visits her wife Deepa and daughter, Anji every weekend. He never misses to celebrate his weekend with his daughter and every time he brings a new toy for her. He waits for the weekend quite impatiently. His love for his daughter can be seen in these lines:

“Not me, Maru, Anji will never be four again. I just can’t miss out on this. It is so incredibly precious. Each week it is like she’s grown. She can’t wait to tell me what she has learnt at day-care. I am so glad we got her into the University day care. She loves it. And Deepa can study without worrying, that’s a great help.”43

As a matter of fact, Ranjit is like Santa Claus for his daughter all the year round. His house is so full of toys that Maru suggests him of donating the playpen and stroller and carseat before they get mildewed down in the basement.

Ranjit is a very supporting husband. He wants to see his wife Deepa happy and satisfied. He remembers when his wife came from India and wanted to do a job. His worry for his wife can easily be seen in this passage:
“I remembered, too, his frustration three years ago when Deepa was looking for work. "It burns me up, Maru," he said, "to see her working in Henry Armstrong's Instant Printing. For god sake, I mean, she is a straight A student and they are saying her Delhi degrees don't count, so she ends up replacing toners in bloody photocopy machines. Sometimes I think I should run for the Legislature and get some action going, really. Pisses me off, all this racism." 44

The writer Uma Parameswaran brings out in her stories the element of racial feeling. In the story 'Darkest Before Dawn' we have seen how a newspaper boy passed an insulting and racial remark 'Paki' for an Indian. In the same way, here, the racial feeling is obvious when the Indian degree of Deepa is rejected in Canada and she has to complete the same course in Canada which she had already done in India. This is a clear-cut case of racial disparity and discrimination.

On one weekend Maru intends to go to Saskatoon along with Ranjit. This time Ranjit is taking a panda toy for his daughter. He has given a funny name to this panda -- Panduranga. Maru meets Deepa after a long time. The first thing that hits her was that she (Deepa) is looking beautiful. Maru feels that this is a kind of glow that can come only from within. She had not seen Deepa like that since the time Anji was about due. The writer comments, "While Ranjit hovered and worried himself sick over her, she just sat smiling, with that glow on and around her, as though she knew everything about her birthing would be, could not but be, perfectly normal." 45

Deepa is looking quite bold and beautiful. She appears to be a self-confident woman enjoying her liberty. But what shocks and
for Raniit is totally missing. The following conversation between Maru and Deepa is very interesting:

“So when are coming to Manipal?” I said at some point. “You used to come often enough but you haven’t been there for, how long?”

“I am not counting,” she said, “The longer the better. Those weekends used to wipe me out. I ended up cooking and cleaning all day every day, feeding all the people who had invited him over in my absence; I had to slog to pay for what he had enjoyed. Ugh. And the house was always such a mess. Knowing I would come, he never lifted a finger between my visits. Not that he helped in any way when I was there, for that matter. He has been a couch potato ever since I went back to university. I had to earn my tuition fees, that is the way he saw it, I guess. Wonder what he does now. Gets a cleaning woman, I suppose.”

Raniit wants to visit his wife and daughter every weekend but Deepa, on the other hand does not want it. She thinks that Raniit's excessive love for Anii is just spoiling her. Here, Maru can’t control herself and she retorts: "Children can be spoilt but there's no such thing as being spoilt rotten," I said. “Love is one commodity that never stales.”

Deepa justifies her grudge against Raniit by showing Maru the room which is stuffed with toys. The end of the story is very interesting. Deepa says to Maru, "...I sure am looking forward to the day when I can go farther than his driving distance and have Anji all to myself."
"But he loves her" I said, "It would break his heart." "Oh," she said, "how I wish he'd just find some other woman and get out of my hair."\textsuperscript{48}

The writer Uma Parameswaran seems to suggest that the immigrants lose the traditional values of their native countries and adopt the new values of the country where they have come and settled. The husband Ranjit is clinging to the Indian values whereas his wife Deepa has fully adopted the new values of Canada and that is why she wants to go farther from her husband to enjoy her independent life. Bharati Mukherjee also suggests the same idea in her stories. The title, Icicle, is symbolic of external beauty. But this external beauty of Canada has been contrasted with the inner hollowness in the husband-wife relationship.
References

1. Uma Parameswaran, *The Door I Shut Behind Me*, TOW, Canada, p. 94
2. Ibid., p. 105.
4. *What Was Always Hers*, p. 9
5. Ibid., p. 10
6. Ibid., pp. 10-11
7. Ibid., p. 14
8. Ibid., p. 20
10. Ibid., p. 20
11. Ibid., p. 21
12. Ibid., p. 22
13. Ibid., p. 23
14. Ibid., p. 36
17. Ibid., p. 55
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., p. 58

22. Ibid., p. 59

23. Ibid., p. 71

24. Ibid., p. 80

25. Ibid., p. 88

26. Ibid., p. 89

27. Ibid., p. 90


29. Darkest Before Dawn, p. 115

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 116

32. Ibid., p. 117

33. Ibid., pp. 120-121

34. Ibid., p. 123

35. Ibid., p. 124

36. Ibid., p. 124

37. How We Won Olympic Gold, p. 126.

38. Ibid, p. 127
39. Ibid., p.132

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., p.132

42. The Icicle, p. 134

43. Ibid., p.135

44. Ibid., p.136

45. Ibid., p.139

46. Ibid p.141.

47. Ibid., p.144.

48. Ibid., p.14