Chapter IV

Diasporic Voices of Assent
Uma Parameswaran’s and Lakshmi Gill’s Poems

And I shall bring Ganga
as Bhagiratha did of old
to our land our Assiniboine
and the flute player
dark as Kaya blossom
shall dance on the waters of La Salle

_Uma Parameswaran_

Generally South Asian Canadian women have written more poetry and the men more prose. But in poetry, these women writers express a vivid diversity that is indubitable and impressive – this diversity extends to voice, theme, style, setting and historical period, encompassing both political and personal experiences. A variety of perspectives; expatriate thoughts of the motherland crystallized in memory through diasporic shifts, the lived in reality of Canada and opinions collected from other immigrants, all make its appearance in these poems. But a closer examination of their poetic oeuvre yields some strains of commonality in their theme, style & poetic craft. Uma Parameswaran’s collection of poems unfolds over a twenty-year span as a sequence of sixteen distinct voices representing the different generations of
immigrants. Her poems are well crafted and present a positive attitude towards life, which includes not only the immigrants but the larger community of women too. Similarly Lakshmi Gill’s poetic persona also shows a progress from an immigrant consciousness towards a much larger political consciousness. The upheavals and turbulences in her expatriate life are expressed effectively by experimenting with imagistic techniques. Both these poets surpass their sense of loss by indulging in tolerant humour. Despite their new identities as Canadian women, there is a deeply embedded native orientation in their inner selves which is invariably connected to the ‘Samskara’ of a traditional South Asian woman. So they are able to proudly declare that though homelessness is a sort of freedom, home should also be the place where one’s feet are fixed. The chapter analyses these two distinctive voices in South Asian Canadian writing by reading their poems from a diasporic feminist perspective.

**Parameswaran - The optimistic lyricist**

A member of the South Asian Canadian diaspora from the early 1960’s onwards Uma Parameswaran fulfils one of the requirements of the diaspora which demands that the writer projects one’s own culture in the host country, and at the same time relates positively to the new culture. The immigrant’s literature should become meaningful to both the hosts and the native lands or it may be dismissed as exotic and irrational. Cultural dislocation needs a
relocation in the alien culture, which also entails a shift from the centre to the periphery. A sense of community has steadily enriched her work which deals with the interstitial spaces in between cultures in her progress to acculturation. She says about her poetic stance thus “Every immigrant transplants part of his/her own, and the alien native land to the new country, and the transplant may be said to have taken root once the immigrant figuratively sees his native river in the river that runs through his adopted place; not Ganga as the Assiniboine or the Assiniboine as Ganga, both of which imply a simple transference or substitution but Ganga in the Assiniboine which implies a flowing into, a merger that enriches the river. The confluence of any two rivers is sacred for the Hindu ethos perhaps because it is symbolic of an enrichment, a sanctity arising from the union of disparities. In the literary context of immigrant experiences this image has an added dimension. At the confluence the rivers are distinct, one can see the seam of two separate streams as they join.. but further downstream distinctions blur and fade away.” (Uma Parameswaran, ‘Ganga in the Assiniboine’, Writing the Diaspora, 71) Her creative world is not a fantasy world that cancels the reality of the past, but on the contrary it is a world of readjustment, adaptation, participation and fulfilment.

Uma Parameswaran’s Canadian diasporic experiences start with her immigration to this land in 1966. Her MA in American Literature helped her to land a job in the University of Winnipeg. The early phase of immigration was a collective one for her, with cultural activities of her ethnic group revolving
around the nostalgia for the lost homeland. This took the form of attempts to transplant the old, familiar environment to the Canadian soil. All the national events of India were celebrated and the poet wrote plays and short poems aimed at informing the host about India’s culture, its legends and myths. The personal histories of South Asian Canadians up to 1980’s see a clear demarcation of the phases of immigration—beginning with wonder and fear at the new world around, and nostalgia or constant longing for the world left behind, followed by an overriding impulse to survive in the new environment which makes one immerse in one’s career or family. These are clearly expounded in her poems. Job security and progress of family life see the immigrant turning towards organizational activity inside the community; which later gets extended to the larger political and social arena. In 1981, Parameswaran wrote *Sita’s Promise* a well known dramatic verse which tries to link epic India with modern Canada through myth and dance. She tries to put forth the idea that immigration is an extension of the exile undertaken by Rama, Sita and Lakshmana who had visited the Canadian shores too during their fourteen-year long period of forced exile. *Dear Deedi, My Sister*, another literary output, also belongs to the early nostalgic phase, and it is in the form of imaginary letters that the immigrant sends to her family back home. When she published her third volume *Rootless But Green are the Boulevards* in 1988, she has matured enough to encompass a wider vision which went beyond her community to embrace the world as a whole. The process of acculturation
cannot be escaped by an immigrant and the transplanted writer explores the traumatic experiences of relocation, alienation, acclimatization and later assimilation. Acculturation takes place when changes are made effective in external behaviour for a smoother acceptance by the new society and assimilation makes the immigrant react instinctively and emotionally to a culture that is not her own. These two processes involved in immigration entail the unlearning of what she has learned in her own country and culture to get assimilated in the new milieu. Parameswaran elaborates upon these two issues in her plays, *Sita’s Promise* and *Rootless but Green are the Boulevards*. The immigrant’s initial response to culture shock, loss of identity and location is to keep intact her ethnic identity and bond with the ethnocentric communities. But living thus in isolated compartments, clinging fiercely to one’s traditions alone will not help the immigrant, for she has to face either antagonism or indifference from the hosts because of this compulsory separatism. The poet’s has to willingly cross the border, to look into the other culture, accept the benefits of what it has to offer and pass on what she has brought from the best of her tradition and values. *Dear Deedi My Sister* (1982) is a play where she presents an assortment of immigrant women from ten different countries. The protagonist, an Indian woman, narrates everything that is happening in and around her to her Deedi who is in India, through her letters. Each woman compares her native land with Canada which has become now her home, half
seriously and half humorously. The Canadian community strikes them with its intense ostracisation and racism, which make them blurt out

Have we come from the Niger and Luzon
From the Antilles and Hong Kong
To these vast empty spaces
Only to see our young one’s faces slapped
By unthinking scorn, unfeeling barbs
From closed fists and closed hearts?
(“Dear Deedi, My Sister”)

But these immigrant women are fighters and survivors who are determined to live out their lives as honest citizens, as new Canadians in the adopted land. The fields are sown with gold, their lives too shall become bright with the golden sheaves of corn, so feel the immigrants. This positive, affirmative stand that they take reveals their inner strength and perseverance.

“Indians have a much wider moral domain than the mere issues of harm and justice, that is central to Western morality. So they have more restraint in their behaviour which is also attached to religious beliefs and inner contentment”, says Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Happiness Hypothesis* (qtd. in The Times of India, Sep 19, 2007) The Hindu philosophy of non-duality enables the poet who is a Hindu Asian to see the binary opposites of pain and pleasure, honour and dishonour, torture and compassion, merge in the universal divine mother, the Goddess Ambika. The continued dance, of the world of plurality, to the
rhythm of change and death is maintained in the presence of the ‘self’. The self can never be destroyed, the soul survives the body and will continue to exist in the world. So it is like the elements, eternal. Parameswaran worships the progenitors of life – the five elements of fire, air, water, sky and earth in her Kanishka poems too. The Kanishka tragedy left about three hundred people dead on the ocean floor. The poetic sensibility overwhelms her humane feelings, melting away all national, geographical and cultural barriers. This catastrophe gets deeply entrenched in her heart. She is acutely aware of the ephemerality of earthly time when she says that she is mourning for the “ever-young dead”. In the world of death or eternity one can remain young forever. The cyclical nature of time as understood by the poet helps her sail smoothly from the present location to the past and then from the immediate past to the remote past of the epics and myths and again relocate to the present. Reliving the Kanishka tragedy takes her also to the dark days of Komagatamaru when a ship full of immigrant labourers were driven off into the open sea in 1914 by the Canadian government. The diaspora consciousness cannot ignore these two major hallmarks in the immigrant journey, the poet feels, and it is these two major incidents that should form the basis of all South Asian Canadian diasporic writings.

Unlike Himani Bannerji and Suniti Namjoshi, Uma Parameswaran is a vocal supporter of multiculturalism, as an effective and active ingredient in the quest for life in the diaspora. She is happy to be in Canada at this time of
excitement when a new national culture is being shaped, that is a composite of many heritage cultures. The Multiculturalism Act, according to her, gave the immigrant her own space to develop an identity and made the relocation in the new culture a possibility. Her sincere efforts to create a cultural space for Indians in Manitoba have manifested as various organizations for the diaspora to express their creativity. The deep divide between Western and Eastern feminists based mainly on cultural construction and the evasion of a meaningful dialogue between the two is seen by her as a policy of neocolonialism to maintain cultural supremacy. She has taken upon herself the task of conducting weekly television programmes on South Asian art, culture, music, people and myths to enable a beneficial interface between the diaspora and the hosts. As an immigrant, Uma Parameswaran aims not merely at an acceptance of each other but also a celebration of differences, allowing the diaspora to establish their identity within the overarching Canadian identity. Her truth is to see the glass as half full, which is not to deny that it is half empty, but in the process of acculturation to help it to fill. She acknowledges that given India’s diversity, anything one says of India is both true and false, there is no one truth, there are many truths. Raising one’s voice as well as cultural appropriation is relevant to minority cultures in a multicultural mosaic. It is all about who can speak for whom and about whom, and a matter of solidarity and resistance to preserve one’s culture. In this context the two interpreters of culture have to be feared; the neo-colonialist outsider who
research and interpret other’s cultures with little understanding or knowledge about it and the immigrants who are now cut off from their native land and its heritage living in an alien environment. Diasporic writers have to contend with the difficulty of trying to cross borders both literally and figuratively and erase lines and restrictions when they enter new territories and experiences, hitherto unexpressed in canonical texts.

*Trishanku* and other writings published in 1988 are considered her most important contribution to diasporic literature of the South Asians. It is a sequence of poems covering twenty years, spoken by various voices and depicts an encounter of different generations with the host culture. Though individual poems gain resonance through the narrative development of the sequence as a whole, each poem wins merit of its own, conveying the pain and pangs of bewildered dislocation, and the joy of spreading roots after relocation. Her able understanding of the form of sequence allows the poet to treat such topics as birth and death, education and career, and the impact of a generation gap in immigrant families, while the fourth dimension of memory enables the characters or ‘voices’ to measure their gains and losses. Her well crafted poems are distinguished by the vibrancy of personalities, by an intensely tolerant humour and the evocative power of Indian images and symbols. In a review of *Trishanku*, Tom Wayman pays tribute to its “startling and powerful collage of the experience of uprooting and resettlement, of the intermingling of the personal and social histories and of many other human dimensions involved in
transplanting an ancient culture to a new land.” (Trishanku, 9) In the multitudinous voices that throng the poem, Uma Parameswaran, delves deep into the question of multiple identities of being ‘a woman, a South Asian and a coloured feminist in Canada who is also a non white, non Judaea Christian, a non male in the academia. She also dons the role of a Canadian writer, born and educated in India. Her sense of rootlessness gets expressed in the description of the Canadian geography, its climate and people. In her imagination there is the intertwining of the imagery drawn from the landscape of her memory with the imagery drawn from the actual landscape around her. Though the geography reveals cedar and pine, brilliant expanses of sky and snow, endless winter and blowing wind; in the far recesses of memory, other sounds, smells and colours reside and emerge; of temple bells, mango blossoms, white jasmine and flaming gulmohur. She revives rituals and customs like tying the rakhi, pouring gangajal for the last rites, karva chauth, and such other celebrations which are integral to Indian culture. “She blends modern experiences with traditional myths and stories. Not only does this confluence of sacred and secular bring power and conviction to her work and elucidate her beliefs, but the inclusion of Hindu myths and rites broadens the literary map of Canada by allowing this mythology to join with Norse, Greek, Roman and of course Christian myths and beliefs.” (Diane McGifford, Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Source Book) As the poet vows, her goal is to bring Ganga to the Assiniboine, not only for Indo
Canadians but for all Canadians, so that the fund of Canadian allusions and sensibilities is extended and readers recognize literary allusions to the river Ganga, and to the Krishna cycle of stories as readily as the immigrant, growing up in India, recognized allusions to the Jesus cycle of stories. The title of the collection indicates a Trishanku status for the immigrant, the mythical king who left alive for Heaven but was neither accepted there nor received back on Earth. The immigrant feels that she belongs to both worlds but sometimes she is rejected by both. To avoid the pitfalls of being constantly torn between two worlds, she prefers to make a clear break from parochialism and embraces both pluralism and multiculturalism. Her short story titled “How We Won the Olympic Gold” is the culmination of the progress, both cultural and national, that the diaspora consciousness of the immigrant writer made through four decades of expatriation. It poses the question of identity, and translates the issues connected with the writer’s crossing the borders of location and culture into literal language. The famed Canadian poet and critic Diane McGifford vouches that the ‘we’ in the title is a statement made by most South Asian writers. This ‘we’ is Uma Parameswaran’s insistence that she and her writings are Canadian, that she has planted herself in this country, like a flag. The discourse of alienation that she deals with in her earlier poems - of “a lonely, barren, and dry heart which had lost its voice in the land which she feels is not for her”, gives way to a new Canadian identity in this short story. She finds her heart, hearth and her grave in the new country. But the story is also relevant as
it projects an Indian diaspora family in Canada and the way they fix their moorings in this far away land. The wife is a Canadian citizen and has left India many years ago, but her identity remains deeply embedded in her native Indian orientation, the ‘samskara’ or culture of a traditional South Asian woman. The new environment, the new nationality and new citizenship do not imply a giving up of old customs and values but an effective and mutual crossing over. The presence of the diverse ethnic streams in its midst will enable Canada to extend its frontiers, expand the vocabulary of its literature and accommodate the plurality of its multicultural reality and as McGifford vouches, women writers of ethnic, racial, minorities are building rooms of their own in the greater expanse of Canadian literature (Diane McGifford, *The Geography of Voice*, Introduction).

South Asian writing of which she is a representative is aimed at leading the Canadian society into a better appreciation of its multicultural and ethno centred fabric. In this respect the diaspora writers are warned by her not to restrict their settings to imaginary homelands which are beyond the scope of both the immigrant and the host as this dream land may differ much from the lived-in present reality. ‘Visible minority’ is a term that has dogged the path and progress of many expatriate writers. This euphemistic term used for the people of colour, who have to be invisible as members of the visible minority sees colour along with a politically oriented concept. Race or racism is a strong word in politics and is used to insult the powerless to make them subservient or
to silence their voices. But the racial discrimination which Uma Parameswaran experienced in Canada was not that much bitter when compared to the one that she experienced in the US. She sees racism as a politicisation of the social phenomenon called prejudice and feels that the effective way of resistance to it is indifference. The search for an ethnic identity in literature has to be left behind and the expatriate should go beyond sociological and political limits. The gradual transition from alienation to acclimatization is expressed by two of her characters in *Trishanku*, Vithal and Jayanth. Vithal, the angry young man is bursting with fury at the discrimination he experiences and wants to hit back at the racists. He asks the immigrants to show their strength, and to prove to the antagonists that they too ‘have as much right to live in Canada as anyone else who have come there in the past 300 years’. But Jayanth who is soft-spoken and well adjusted to the expatriate situation does not feel any ‘otherisation’ at all. He is fully assured that South Asians do have a place in the geographical as well as cultural environment of Canada. The two speakers express the two facets of the poet’s personality, which shows a transition from aggression to calm elevation. The strong female psyche nurtured well through family support, spirituality and a collective consciousness can transcend the mundane obstacles to embrace a global perspective. The whole evolution of the poetic persona, from a stranger standing at the cross roads of immigration into an acculturated Canadian citizen enjoying the contentment of assimilation, unravels as voices of different characters who appear in the volume. The sense of
wonderment and fear, curiosity about the new land, and a deep rooted nostalgia for the home left behind assailed the poet on her arrival. The voices of Dilip, Suri, Sharad and Bihari all differently echo these sentiments, in *Trishanku*.

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When the snow comes, Ma
I’ll get less brown won’t I?
It’d be nice to be white, 
more like everyone else 
you know? – (32)
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is the urgent plea made by Dilip to his mother when he returns from school. Sharad laments about everything that has become contrary to the norm, even the directions, the sky, the very face of Nature.

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here the sun rises South-east 
And all the planets are all akilter, 
And all my words questions (33)
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Everything is different from what he has known back home. Suri’s complaint brings home the quite natural but unhygienic practice indulged in by the Indians; obeying nature’s call in public. “Why can’t I soo soo on the grass, Pappaji?” The second phase the immigrant goes through is devoted to establishing oneself both professionally and socially in the host environment with a preoccupation about personal and familial welfare. The immigrant slowly gets assimilated into a way of life and set of values not unfamiliar to the one which he was accustomed to, but also shows a willingness, as William
Wordsworth has said, ‘one daily further from the east must travel’, to incorporate new values and new affinities. The inventory of loss and gain is not easy to tabulate but the losses are often more poignant than the gains that are joyous, as nostalgia tends to intensify emotions. “Tara’s mother-in-law” is a short satirical poem laden with irony and subtle humour, where the mother-in-law who has newly arrived in Canada, gently points out the vast divide between India and Canada in terms of geography, environment and social mores.

What kind of place you’ve brought me to son?
Where the windows are always closed
And the front door is always locked?
How can you expect Lakshmi to come, son?
Where the same air goes round and round? (61)

The old South Indian woman is shocked at the state of affairs abroad, the lack of sunlight and free flowing air and the beckoning rangoli before open doors of homes. She soon realizes these are the sacrifices one has to make… “Son, Son, it gives me great joy/ to see you so well settled, / children and wife and all/ … this lovely house and car” (Trishanku, 61). She is shrewd enough to note the better financial conditions that the family is enjoying as a result of this uprootment. Uma Parameswaran is very pragmatic and practical when she faces the diasporic situation, she is not willing to lionise any particular aspect of the diasporic dilemma, instead she shows out ways to survive the angst of
identity crisis or racism or sexism, which is both overtly and covertly expressed by the whites towards the so called usurpers of their nation’s luxuries.

The third, transitional phase calls for extraneous activities for the immigrants like getting involved in politics or in community work, voluntary social organizations, or in short efforts to become accultured. It is not smooth sailing as it entails working in a hostile, unfriendly environment where the white majority turns up their nose at the so called cultural inferiority of the coloured. The poet urges the immigrants to overcome this situation through patience and perseverance and by informing the other about our indigenous heritage, culture and social values. Once the message gets clear, both the host and the expatriate can live in harmony, with mutual respect and a sharing of perceptions. The last phase of immigration is immensely joyful because the immigrant feels settled in the new land, grows emotional roots and is willing to call ‘it’ home’. As Namjoshi has confessed, “the West belongs to me and I to it; this sense of possession becomes a reality.” (Suniti Namjoshi, Because of India, 42) The old landscape brought forth in the poems through memory and desire for imaginary homelands, recedes into the far background and is replaced by the Canadian backdrop. The poet deftly develops symbols and myths that link the two homelands in an emotionally satisfying way and is able to see Ganga in the Assiniboine and connect the epic Goddess Sita’s travel to the Arctic, with the immigrant exodus in the 20th century. When the two cultures meet, as the Ganga and the Assiniboine merge, it is the Indian psyche
of the poet merging with the Canadian experience. This is not an assumed or pretentious stand and as McGifford and Kearns, the editors of *Shakti’s Words* confirm, her poems evoke ‘a purer aesthetic pleasure’ for ‘personal truth is joined with the beauty of art’ in her lines. In her play *Rootless but Green are the Boulevards* she transplants the central symbol, from the Indian banana plant which leaves a young one before it dies to the evergreen plants that remain green throughout the year. The row of evergreen trees planted in the boulevard at Christmas time may be rootless but they are green and beautiful during the short length of their transplanted life. This optimistic vein gets reflected in most of her poems, plays and later in her critical discourses. Her poetic characters defy the image of the ‘Other’ as victims, marginalised or alienated or discriminated. The collective memory touches every person who is physically, culturally or emotionally displaced. They have to survive by creating a third space like the mythical king Trishanku. The women characters in her poems are able to adapt more quickly to the new environment and come to terms with the idea of two homes without conflict or ambivalence. They are able to embrace larger communities for they recognize that human beings are the same everywhere and hence their problems are the same too. Just as the poet has accepted the Canadian community as her own, the Canadian community, she feels, will eventually accept her as one among them too. “She is us, but a little newer and fresher and her poems are a little more honest and
passionate than ours. If she has found a country, our country has found a poet”, vouches Judith Kearns in *Shakti’s Words*.

Parameswaran has reiterated in her writings that “romanticising one’s homeland has a place in immigrant literature as long as it does not paralyse one’s capacity to develop new bonds within one’s adopted land. The third space that the immigrant can and has to create; by leaving aside the burden of cultural baggage or becoming excessively westernised; is a space of cultural osmosis, of give and take, where the immigrant and the host will be transformed and enriched. This space is free from the erstwhile unthinking scorn, unfeeling barb, closed fists and closed hearts of the days of alienation. The vigour and verve with which the poetic characters get immersed in the diaspora life is based on their inherent confidence and will for survival.” (Uma Parameswaran, *Writing the Diaspora*, 260) Parameswaran’s stance as a diasporic writer marks a slow and steady progress towards a South Asian Canadian female identity. The immigrant inevitably undergoes severe emotional and mind crunching situations during the beginning years of expatriation. Hence, her initial poems become preoccupied with all the questions that diasporic writers face. But the slow awakening of her female identity makes her realize that human beings everywhere are racists in one way or other, and since this is a sociological problem, enlightenment or awakening through education about the plurality of cultures and races that exist in the world is the viable solution. The immigrants whether they be Icelanders,
Hungarians or Japanese, experience the same situations like South Asians. But nostalgia or reviving memories as the only sustenance to overcome the plight will become toxic, preventing the vibrant on flow of life’s new experiences. Nostalgia, as she has found out, also never pays, for the over romanticized native land is purely imaginary or idealistic. Expatriation tends to highlight sentiments. But the sense of homelessness and alienation are accentuated by many South Asian Indian writers because the subcontinent from which they hail has a long history of literary and cultural tradition which has shown tolerance to numerous new communities and ethnic groups and the different cultures which have sought her shores. So expectations run high and Indo-Canadians feel distressed when faced with aggravating circumstances. Uma Parameswaran, through her poems, alerts the reader that each poem is a momentary flare of intense emotions or thoughts and it need not always reflect societal reality or the writer’s long ranging beliefs. The sense of frustration or a feeling of loss of dignity experienced by the diaspora results from a bitter experience of cultural imperialism that unjustly unrecognised ‘others’. She endorses the view that all immigrants should take a flexible stand to their own and their children’s Canadian realities. Her poems expose the bluff behind ghettoisation proving that most of the time it is self imposed.

Everything is possible if you know how,

At first I thought this was rakshasa land

where everything is opposite
Everything is fine here
One must make adjustments of course.

(Trishanku, 72)

Dilip and Vithal are able to downplay racial slurs like they would skinniness or obesity or any other disability that becomes a target for torment. The multiculturalism of Canada, much derided and scoffed at by Himani Bannerji, for she feels it is a ploy to encourage ghettoisation and segregate the ethnocentric communities, is lauded by Parameswaran as an easy measure for the immigrant to become part of the multifaceted cultural mosaic of Canada. Her hyphenated identity does not worry Parameswaran much inside Canada, for it is an act of reclaiming, to be worn with pride, to retaliate against the ‘demon tag’ that the white have hung around the minorities. She refuses to be cowed down by futile and fruitless dialogues on otherisation and marginalization. Her most recent poems show a movement towards the larger community of women, a sign which shows that her political consciousness has to some degree been supplanted by the consciousness of the problems of women than the immigrant’s problem alone. But her poems are not merely ‘political’ at the expense of craft. A recent poem “Vigilance” is a moving, taut, elegy that depicts her political ideology in a superbly artistic texture. In 1990, she submitted this poem as a public tribute to women activists and all women who have undergone systemic discrimination inside universities.

We… Now have come together to hold hands
silenced by missiles from powers that be

Take heart, hang in there

O my sisters, my loves

(Shakti’s Words, 83)

Though she forthright acknowledges the problem of discrimination, she has a solution, a feasible solution for it too. In a striking poem titled “The Interview” the four interviewers who question the ‘brown’ applicant want to know whether she will be a threat to them, if appointed. She calmly replies that “I am your problem/ But I am your answer too/ For I have been there under the rug / And I really do know/ how it can be cleaned/ without undue hurt to your ego” (Shakti’s Words, 82) The flipside of immigration which has been focused on so far should make way for its celebratory aspects too. Minority cultures and values are there by explained and validated in academic circles and the ignorance regarding other geopolitical sites, and heritages are all erased from Canadian minds. Parameswaran is able to project an impartial view of dislocation and relocation involving the individual’s efforts to forge an identity for herself and her community. She makes her characters plant their heart and feet in the same place, though it is not an easy task as Jayanth a voice in Trishanku exclaims, “it is no bed of roses here, mowing the lawn and painting the house and a hundred other menial chores which were done by servants in the luxury of an extended family back home.” (Ibid, 127) The Trishanku state
of mind of the early poems gives way to a renewed optimism, a new attitude and an unusual fortitude in her later works.

Memory of the homeland is an important tool for the diasporic writer. The locale that one is familiar with, is relived, providing material to be blended with lately acquired experiences. A clinging to one’s past continuously will not work and there should be a phased out relocation. Salman Rushdie has also validated this idea – “my India – I tried to make it as imaginatively true as I could, but imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect, and I knew that my India may only have been one to which I was willing to admit I belonged.” (Salman Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands, 429) Homeland memories, revival of myths, and idealizing lost grounds are the nostalgic trips made by diaspora to its location. Language acquisition or ‘heteroglossia’ as Mikhail Bhaktin puts it, becomes an important criteria in the process of relocation and Parameswaran dwells upon it in her prize winning story “The Door I Shut Behind Me”. The first generation immigrants speak with a heavy accent whereas the second generation acquires the nuances of expressions as quickly as a duck takes to water. The younger generation can thus rise quickly in status in the adopted land by keeping the differences minimal. A character in Trishanku openly admits that the young are apprehensive when white friends come visiting for fear that their parents might embarrass them by their lack of linguistic acumen. Young Krish, Vithal and Jayanth are fluent in contemporary jargons and slang expressions. This acquisition of language shows in the
changed diction and usage of immigrant literature. The nuances and overt connotations of the words that the immigrant is exposed to, influence and transform his language. But the poet feels her very substance getting thrown into confusion. And much of the power and poignancy of her poetic imagination arises from this tension. The whole process is reciprocal too for the immigrant literary imagination is accepted by the white and they expand their borders of language to accommodate the new vocabulary. This cross cultural bridging through language is an essential aspect of diasporic literature. In her work *Inside the Outsider*, Meenakshi Mukherjee comments on the expatriate situation which is endorsed in Uma Parameswaran’s poems – “Today it is not at all rare to find a writer for whom the multicultural situation is not only a subject matter, but a mode of perception as well.” (Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Inside the Outsider* in *Awakened Conscience: Studies in Common Wealth Literature*, 86)

Coursing through four decades of literary creativity, Parameswaran’s agenda comes clear where one sees her personal views gradually becoming political, the immigrant consciousness leading to a political consciousness where she feels assured of fighting for all women’s causes as a Canadian citizen. The collective wisdom of Indian joint families has endowed her with a collective consciousness and a propensity of thinking for the group rather than the individual. Sexism is not a bone of contention for her as much as racism. “On the shores of the Irish Sea”, is an epitaph for the Kanishka tragedy victims
but it raises questions of racism that has assailed her mind from the days of immigration. On the Irish shore she feels peace pervading her mind when Shakti, the Supreme Mother, the Goddess of birth and death speaks to her. The Supreme self gives both pleasure and pain, grief and comfort. She is scattered among individual selves and this goes on in spite of losses and tragedies. It arouses her humane feelings, melting away all manmade borders. This Supreme Truth enables her to be at home equally in India and Canada. She first came to Canada “in caves of memory/ where there and here come together/ to make us who we be”. (Uma Parameswaran, *Sisters at the Well*) The poetic sensibility is able to create a perfect blending of the present reality and the past memories. Dislocation, ultimately worked out as an advantage for her, it made her delve deep into her own location, her past, and enabled her to connect with the present relocation. Her stance is not merely feminist, it is humanistic. It is the recognition and realization of other races and communities, mutually inclusive which can work for a harmonious world. It is a discourse that emerges from an increasing awareness of the fallibility of accepted norms. The endless talk about class consciousness or colonial and patriarchal oppressions is harmful, she believes, as it often makes out, the erstwhile colonized and especially women, to be a weak and helpless lot, which is the main agenda of the power of domination. She applies the neo-colonialist, post modern feminist literary critique in her work whereby the message is conveyed that women cannot be crushed by the onslaughts of patriarchy. Her initiative and self
esteem cannot be deprived from her and this is seen in her later poems where she grapples with the so called problem of dehumanisation. Her strong characters, all those who appear in Trishanku are sometimes pulled about by uncontrollable circumstances, but they are seldom torn apart. The anthology also shows the family and community trees beginning to take root in Canadian soil, where the immigrants see new doors opening where old doors have shut them out. She willingly takes up the various issues faced by the diaspora in her critical works too and gently reminds both the Canadians and South Asians to make certain adjustments which will lead to adaptability and acceptance. Instead of feeble lamentations or chickening out in the face of dilemma, she presents her ‘voices’ as conquerors. They have shown great perseverance for they have crossed lands and oceans to make new lives. They cannot be called failures even though they had disappointments. Though adventure dented them in many ways the bruising had built the immigrants as better citizens.

The Liberal Humanist – Lakshmi Gill’s diasporic journey

Of all the South Asian Canadian poets, Lakshmi Gill is perhaps the most interesting and intriguing woman writer, due to her multiple diasporic experiences, with regard to her life and origins. The reader becomes wary whether she can be called an Indo-Canadian but the poet’s own statement, “someday I will know home, India is enough to put the sceptic at rest.” Lakshmi Gill born in the early nineteen forties to a Punjabi father and Spanish-
Filipino mother spent her early childhood in Philippines, went to the US for her education and arrived in Vancouver, Canada in 1964 for her MA. Her totally different story of migration, beyond comparison with the other three poets, does not make her any less an Indo Canadian diasporic writer than others. The experience of upheavals, dislocations and the eventual shaping of lives within the Western, white dominated tradition has made her intensely conscious of racism and sexism, the two all comprehensive problematic for the diasporic writer. All these poets Namjoshi, Bannerji, Parameswaran and Gill join their voices together to clamour for a space for the ‘Other’ as the majority white tried to label them. Their demand was for social recognition, as well as mental, physical and literary space for their innermost expressions. The very act of recording the reality of their experiences; of the ‘other’, becomes a mode of creating a space of their own. Gill has brought forth many volumes of poems during her Canadian phase of expatriation which spans more than four decades. Among her works are “During Rain I Plant Chrysanthemums” (1966), “Mind Walls” (1970) and “Novena to St. Jude Thaddeus” (1979). She has also written in numerous magazines and anthologies. In 1998 she brought forth a compilation of all the major poems that she has produced between 1960’s and 1990’s, titled _Returning the Empties_, a profoundly provocative, moving and original poetic anthology. Her poems record a unique voice, a poetic account of Canada in the late twentieth century, as seen through the eyes of a veteran immigrant, and also a poet’s as well as a woman’s ongoing search for home.
She commands a place as one of the finest and most accomplished South Asian poets in the diaspora. Along with Dorothy Livesay, she was the first woman poet from Asia to join the league of Canadian poets. In her own words she is a fiercely private person who does no explanation for herself or her poems. But her poems speak for herself and the long journey of life unwinds before the reader as we get autobiographical elements scattered throughout her work. Most of her poems have Eastern Canada as their backdrop, where she lived and taught for many years, though she declines to be parochial. Through her poems Gill asserts that Asians or other hyphenated Canadians are not mere objects to be looked at as exotic beings, but they are subjects too who are capable of doing the looking or ‘returning the gaze’ as stated by Himani Bannerji. Gill’s poetry is different from the other poetic works of her contemporaries as she has a store of diasporic experiences to share. She came as a student to do her Masters in Canada, not as an immigrant. Women who entered as immigrants get immediately preoccupied with settling down and the responsibilities of setting up a home and family but Gill was a student first and then only a woman. She was able to look outward and around her much more freely, as settling needed only self adjustment. When a student looks at a new nation she sees drumbeats, colour and enjoyment and the first volume has ample examples of the *joi d vivre* that she felt in the beginning.

In her first volume of poems published in 1966, *During Rain I Plant Chrysanthemums* looking at Montreal she writes thus in the poem “Montreal
Drumbeat”, “The taxi drivers pouncing on you Bon/ Circling around St. Catherine Bon/ the red-sashed waiters clawing the change Bon/ the paws of Reine Elizabeth Bon/ Each new beat/stripping the first/ in Place Ville Marie/ all the Bon you need/ shaking the skyline.” (Lakshmi Gill, *Returning the Empties*, 142) The writer experiences ‘bon’- happiness wherever she goes and in whatever she sees, where as an older immigrant sees the land as a cold country, too large to contain, too good a paradise, where one seldom finds anything to hold on to. In the same volume, in the poem “Beneath the Purple Lantern” she writes with an intense awareness of contemporary political situations, of Canada’s refusal to send troops to Vietnam. “O Canada emerge from the bowels of the land/ with a Battle Hymn”, is her exhortation to Canadians (*Returning the Empties*, 144-145). Though very young, Gill casts a subtle but wickedly rounded eye on the Western attempts at being civilized. In spite of the daily Vietnam war stories ringing in its ears Canada refused to participate “because it doesn’t want to be involved”. She mocks at the indifference shown by the white civilised race. This volume of poems spoke strongly of a poetic persona unafraid to tread uncommon waters. The extreme jingoism which was present in the world of academia irritates her and she aims spikes and barbs at the so called Western polished society. Earle Birney, well known Canadian poet evaluates this volume of poems thus’ she splashes her strong Eastern colours over the grey Western provincialisms and casually drops her little enigmas into our smugness.” (qtd in *Returning the Empties*) Oriental cult
figures such as Buddha, Christ and Li Po are invoked by her in the earlier poems and though the jibes hurt one may call her an ‘honest exotic’. Her first volume itself was rated as unique because she used visual graphics, imagism, narrative clusters, concrete verse and such other techniques in her poetry. One of her poems “Peter, our Grapefruit plant” describes “the growth like mad each day” of the plant which needed only warmth and a make-believe tropical air. When it is left outside, the harsh winter kills Peter. Through the plant the South Asians’ life, born under the tropical sun is projected and Peter’s life and death becomes a metaphor.

South Asian Canadian writing cannot be seen as an isolated activity untouched by the continuous pressures of political and cultural life in Canada. The experiences of life obtained in the East are shaped and moulded in the Western milieu. The unfamiliarity or exoticism of the subject matter should be naturalized artistically as the ethnic writer overcomes the limitations of ethnic boundaries. Memory is the fourth dimension or an essential component of this discourse and as Rohinton Mistry confirms, “No matter where you live, even if you have lived in the same village all your life, you would look at the past, at lost moments, lost opportunities, lost loves.”(Rohinton Mistry, Other Solitudes, 143) This yearning for losses is a relocation of experienced space in the present and a realization of spatial dislocation. A simultaneous existence in native space/ location and dislocation is inherent to the immigrant and this gives rise to a new narrative interspersed with nostalgia. By discovering this space and
gaining a voice to express it, Gill is able to cross over, to become an interpreter of the culture specifics of her origins. Her poems are packed not only by an imaginative richness but by poetic craft which rapidly telescopes time and space. Her readers are constantly surprised, their expectations are never fulfilled, they are forced to re-evaluate their ideas/ perspectives. The poet wishes to transcend the borders of nationality through her poems but like any diasporic writer, the indigenous culture seeps through—both Filipino and Indian images are abundant in her poems. Kali and Kama, gods and goddesses of Hindu mythology are addressed along with the tenets of Buddhism. The poem “Magic” evokes oriental charm “I saw you / your beauty surprised me/ in all the universe/ i had not seen one so fair/ we have undone/ the Evil” (The Empties, 141). “OM” brings her self-realisation, the divine manthra encircles her soul with divine love. “Garret Wits” takes the reader on a ride first to the banks of the holy Ganges, and then back to Vancouver via Philippines, where the onslaught of Basho and Li Po’s ideology awaits him. She earnestly envisions a Canada where there is “no black, no white/ just one glorious Grey”. She has an intense knowledge of Buddhism and its major tenet Dharma and it is revealed in her poem “Mindwalls” “my grief is not mine/ my joy is not mine/ not/ nothing - i own nothing/ i am nothing/” (137). She is quite at home with the Chinese proverbs as well as the Panchatantra tales, stating with her life that diaspora is and had been an ongoing process in the evolution of the world and
Man can and will develop techniques to defend the problems it brings in its wake.

Many poems of the early years, of the Sixties and Seventies decades rely on New Brunswick landscapes mediating their meditations through nature as in “Marshscapes” or “Marshland Wind”. Gill works in a variety of forms and achieves much that is moving and memorable in her poems. In these poems her diasporic loneliness and uneasiness are a major concern. But she is able to come to terms with her displacement occasionally and embraces the idea in the poem “I Tell You, Mr Biswas”. In her dialogue with the central character of V.S.Naipaul’s book *A House for Mr. Biswas*, she advises him to ‘relax’, for “they (the white) too have their angst”. She proudly declares “my homelessness is freedom” (90) Vancouver and by extension, Canada remains a ‘foreign city’ for her, the place of beginnings stretches out over generations and homelessness is a shared inheritance. In a poem titled “Home” she writes, “Countryless, orphaned, we were sailors/ scurvy-ridden, eating rats/ who had thrown away the charts/ caught in the doldrum/ Land, ho, was a cloud in the horizon/ as we lay dying on the deck/ in this ship that stood still.” (62) This ‘we’ is the bonding with her fore-fathers, who accompany her always in her life’s struggles. In her poetry, the homelessness of which she speaks becomes a dimension of spirit and adventure - the only way to counter and accommodate a life that by its very nature affords no peace. Gill is no romantic, nature’s harshness is tangible in her poems and it becomes an object of her curious
gaze. Human nature’s harshness is more amorphous, and disturbed and is typically implied in her meditations rather than directly confronted. There is no single thematic as such in her poetry, she includes nature, people, her own family members; father husband, grandmother, sister, children as well as other poets in her poems. Birds, flowers, seasons, other manmade creations are crafted with poetic finesse. “Fredericton Highway Bridge” which appeared in the Seventies collection, titled Novena to St. Jude Thaddeus (1979) displays amazing poetic control, its rapid shifts underpinned by connections demonstrate an active and questioning sensibility. The swiftly flying thoughts of the mind span continents and oceans, the past and the present and skims through various cultures. The ongoing journey of the immigrant is explored and then she suddenly zooms to the present, which is a traffic snarl in Fredericton Highway Bridge that she encounters on her way to work. The turbulences of an immigrant displacement get effectively transferred by the imagistic experiments she tries out in this poem. A short poem titled “Light Canada” pinpoints the innermost turmoil and the problematic plight of the émigré. It articulates her/ immigrant’s continual search for home and it becomes a leitmotif throughout her works. The poet implores Canada to enlighten her soul, to ‘disembowel, its profound secrets’. She has walked all the streets and scooped up all the waters, but was not able to make an indelible impression in Canada’s geography, for she still feels herself to be an alien. Though the poems of the Sixties reveal her love for novelty, exuding exuberance, enjoying the new land
as a student, falling in love with the people and place, there is an undercurrent of veiled criticism against the covert racism she faced in her university circle. But the former out shadows the latter and the poems “Further Connections”, and, “To My God”, celebrate the joy of existence, the will to survive and the magical charm of discovering the new land called Canada, where the poet found herself “surrounded by/ talk, the lovely/ human voices/ singing bass/ and high tones/ towards my open/ face/ I love this contact.” (“Further Connections”)

The Seventies decade poems reflect a slight change in perspective, they were written after her marriage and parenthood. “Lesson”, “Brown, Wife, White Husband”, “My Bed”, “The Next Day”, “His Mother Visits from Ontario”, - all capture domestic scenes, where her three children Marc, Evelyn and Karam appear off and on. The phase clearly indicates her passage from the initial to the second stage of immigration The autobiographical poem “Me” finds a place of prominence in this section, where the poet comes to terms with her difference in the white society. She’s an Asian and ‘the Oriental’, and she realizes that the notion of orientalese evokes disgust in the mind of the white as they find anything oriental as inferior. But unmindful of the dirty looks cast upon her she turns to the elements, the rain pouring on human bodies and says “it falls/ no matter on whose hair/ without explanation/ of its descent and acute accent.” (Returning the Empties, 96) She deliberately twists the word ascent to ‘accent’ which is another mark of difference for the immigrant. Lakshmi Gill’s
most often quoted poem “Immigrant Always” and “Letter to a Prospective Immigrant” appear in this Seventies decade. “Immigrant Always” re-emphasizes the fact that ethnicity is carried with pride by the immigrant, it’s not to be derided for there’s no escape from one’s roots, if it is lost, it is like the ground giving away from under their feet.

We carry
our spices
each time
we enter
new spaces
the feel
of newness
is ginger
between teeth

*(Returning the Empties, 110)*

She deliberately refers to spices which are oriental but the essence of immigration is caught in the phrase ‘newness is ginger between teeth’. “Letter to a Prospective Immigrant” prepares the new arrival for a culture shock, of encountering difficulties with the cold climate, the devil commerce of financial matters, the long, dull, ache which is ice hot of want or loss, and a clinging nostalgia which amplifies all emotions, so that joy or sorrow becomes too intense. It is not issued as a warning to ward off all future immigrants, rather it gives a hint of things to come. “This is no cotton candy country” frankly sums up the foreign city, followed by the advice that they (white) need sacrifice and
expiation from the immigrants. Apart from poems concerning the question of immigration, she is mostly occupied with the problems of adjustment which is demanded from a brown wife with a white husband. “Lessons” calls for expectations to be negotiated further in such a relationship. Her greatest appeal lies in her ability to articulate her feelings endearingly and not sob about imaginary losses. She weaves several metaphors into her work, each reinforcing her theme; she uses the journey, and the geography of Canada, as symbols to connect one culture to another and one perspective to another.

In her introduction to a collection of poems written by Asians in Canada and Asian Canadians published in The Asianadian in 1981, she vehemently protested against the step motherly treatment meted out to writers of Asian origin by white publishers. Her aim behind the conception of such a collection was to take in the numbers of writers belonging to Asia, “like counting off a row of vigil lights/ wanted to put the match to each individual candle and see the common uncommon glow.” (Returning the Empties, 14) But in the selection of poets the criteria went beyond Asian borders. It was a reply to the extreme parochialism shown by the western publishers to immigrant writing. Unless it was an exoticisation of the East which would make it saleable it was not accepted. She kept her options wide open and chose poems which wrote about the erasure of boundaries. The clash of cultures goes beyond immigration, according to her, and it is inherent in all races. Hinduism has a hierarchy of castes and sub castes which leads to a maze of attitudes that is
quite racial. Her grasp of the complex and metaphysical, which is natural to all Orientals helps her play down the militancy she feels when confronted with the derogatory term ‘Oriental’. Though Rienzi Crusz, the Canadian immigrant writer from Sri Lanka, uses the word oriental in the title of his poems, Gill balks at the word, for she thinks that all Asian Canadians consider it derogatory. Orient has its own merits like the Occident and it is her vowed mission to get the message across through her poems. She confesses of a personal reason behind seeing this collection of poems of Asian writers being published in Canada. Her children who are half Asian and half Canadian were growing up in Canada, knowing all the Canadian writers intimately, but were faltering after the names of writers of Asian origin. So, for them and for all other second generation immigrants from Asia or South Asia, she gathered the poems of Asian writers together and strung them together like prayer beads in a string. These poems present a total summing up of diasporic experiences where situations are presented which are applicable to the diaspora in general. Most of the poets write about the problems of dislocation and loss of identity that are an aftermath of immigration, but Gill points out that cultural shocks can be experienced even within boundaries. Gill is all praise for the poem “Assimilation” by Sean Gunn. According to her it is exceptional not because it is anti-white but because it is a clever satire, on white consumerism. The thrust of the poem lies in an exhortation to fellow Asians to retain their identity against the onslaught of Western images and their language. In the ensuing
struggle within the self, the immigrant has to emerge like sparkling jewels after the grinding and polishing that occurs during translocation. South Asian Canadian poets have written deeply philosophical poems which are steeped in the Asian attitude towards life – a collective cultural experience rooted in religiousness and stoicism. The poems convey the essence of hope and faith, the strong props on which human life is based, along with the love and tolerance for fellow human beings. Asians believe that life is cyclical, so old myths are constantly resurrected and old dogmas are constantly reinterpreted, so that old philosophies are revived and valued for the infinite wisdom that it imparted to tide over moments of crises. Gill prefers poets not using stereotypes or caricatures, for then imagery would enable the reader to identify poets, on this basis. For her poetry is ultimately language and not rhetoric. Poetry provides mental equilibrium and so it becomes a medium to transcend time and place. Borders are very vital but they are there to be crossed and recrossed for affirmation and not for negation. The Asian voices are not to be considered as bricks to smash out white windows but are to be used constructively to build Asian temples. Gill’s fond hope is that after they build Asian temples on Canadian soil they will have a blessing and invite every person. Then the people shall sit together in each other’s holy grounds and discuss poems.

The poems written in the Eighties are more voluminous than the others, comprising a wide variety of subjects. Some of the poems with titles like
“Cantata”, “Serenade” and “Fugue” are choral compositions which can be set to music. These poems are fragmented records of existence like an immigrant’s life. The landscapes near her home appear in various poems and with painstaking precision the poet notices the vagaries of nature in the marshland around. “Sister, what you mean” expresses anguish at the power of languages, how words control and overpower and heckle people to obeisance. The white man’s stories do not ‘unlock the meaning’ implied in words. It only yields a single aspect which is intended to be understood and that is domination. The sorrows and joys of bringing up her three children are themes to some of the poems. Her love for her siblings and her father permeates the poems of Canadian landscapes. As all immigrants from warm tropical countries feel, it is the winter and the cold that becomes Gill’s greatest enemy, a real barrier to get adjusted and accustomed to, in the process of assimilation. She laments, “why does the year end and begin in winter?” (Shakti’s Words, 31) She addresses winter as a perverse devil, disguised in light. She fondly dreams of other universes, “where flowers bloom from navels, hot lands of my birth” (Ibid, 30) Here she refers to the divine lotus bed of Lord Vishnu that blooms from Lord Brahma’s navel. The Canadian winter and the cold triggers nostalgia which rears up in poems like “Home”, “April 4” and “Doxology to Grandmother”. The poet unwillingly acknowledges her rootlessness, but is not filled with guilt or remorse for having abandoned her homeland. She realizes that in the present situation, the best recourse of action would be to go on as she “had come from
a distant land/ braved the winds/ climbed the gold mountain/ in search of this treasure” – which is Canada (72). The poems are metaphysical too where she enters into a dialogue with God, He listens kindly and she realizes that ‘the force that infuses life in Him suffuses her’ too.

Tracing the four decades of poems; written in the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties, reveal a clear and well phased development in her poetic sensibility and her growth as a well established South Asian Canadian poet. The Nineties selection of poems spanning a decade is neither fatalistic nor dripping in self pity but rather, there is a quiet curiosity expressed about change that is happening in the poet’s life and her surroundings. The poet introspects herself constantly wondering about “The Real Me, deeply hidden…. at night while I turned in bed waiting for dawn thinking … who is this woman?” She confesses “I don’t know when it got away from me/ or if I even had a say in it, say/ a little say in its transformations.” (“I Turn”, 4) The Nineties section contains poems of retrospection made more pressing by the advent of cancer. In the poem “House hunting” the poet seeks a house in which to die. “set off by a long narrow road/ deep in its five acres of woods/ the house greets me: will you be the one?” (15) She thinks it is a house to die in and imagines various possibilities by which death can claim her – “what novel deaths!” she exclaims. But her son who had accompanied her to hunt for the house objects and does not condone her choice. He observes that “we have a life in the city” and rejects her choice outright. He gently draws her back from the house, back
to life thus putting on hold the various ends she had imagined for herself. The second generation of immigrants are able to see Canada as their own home and she gives in to her son’s wishes. In another poem “What If” Gill observes that her sister too is struggling to come to terms with the same disease which had afflicted her. She writes “What it is, of course is/ she’s scared to die …. But I say, what if the cancer/ doesn’t get you?/ What if a falling piano splats you instead.” (13) Her belief in fate, the oriental philosophy that teaches people to come to terms with life, to accept things as they are, to cease the rebellion and rage within, to be at peace with oneself, is reflected in the above quoted lines. “Time Expired” contemplates a life’s span as the relentless movement of the hand of a parking meter. The last minute desperate attempts at clinging to life is seen in the lines “I run around in the shops of life/ pitched forward against the beat/ edging towards death. I run to cheat it/ of one second in a dying hour …. I scoff, I grin/ at time before its expiration.” (14) Life and what it offers is accepted as such, unquestionably towards the end, as ‘Karma’ is an integral part of the poet persona.

The poet is perfectly at ease, whether she is dealing with social, religious, racial or political issues. She writes as many domestic and passionate lyrics as she does explicitly political poems. Nostalgia peeps in when she describes the old house where she spent her childhood in “Third Street Revisited”. On a revisit to old premises, she realizes to her dismay that everything has changed. Her mental clinging to lost geographical spaces gets a
jolt and this prepares her for accepting new spaces – both physical and mental. “Puja for Papa” is a journey in memory back to her father’s land in Punjab where she hopes to find the sacred last remnants of her father, which was already immersed in the Stanley Park waters in Canada. The ashes might have been carried all around the globe by the wind and waves so that a part could have reached a river in Punjab. The Hindu religious customs and practices, the observance of death rites and the belief in an afterlife transcends the borders of migration and the frontiers that she has crossed and recrossed during her journey to Canada. “A Winter Scene”, “The Poeteacher”, “I Turn” are poems that present vignettes of domestic life and personal situations, giving the reader a glimpse into her intensely private life. Some of the poems of The Nineties are loaded with passion where she describes her love for Canada, for nature, for this beautiful life that God had granted her. Her poetic sensibility allows her to rise above the mundane and enjoy the glory of natural blessing. On a trip to Scotland while the other tourists cursed and blamed the difficulties encountered and experienced, seeing only the grim and the dreary, the tragic, the dark and the baneful, she is able to relish the bleak mists of Ben Lomond – “at which I peered, seeking that purple hue/ promised in song, salvaged in soul/ bright, eternal heather in my heart’s youth.” (23) This undying optimism, the positive affirmation of life and beauty and a love for life and fellow humans are the sustaining forces that nourished the poet in her life’s diasporic journeys.
Nostalgia as such heightens and offsets other emotions so that sorrow or joy becomes too intense for the immigrant. It is the burden that has to be carried by the diaspora. Poets of the hyphenated identity have chronicled this heightened longing. The more one gets severed from family and friends the more desperate becomes the need to connect to the homeland. But nostalgia should never become an all pervading emotion for it bars entry into the host civilization. Gill, due to her multi religious, multi linguistic diversities inherited through her parental lineage was able to maintain a clear perspective in her mission as a South Asian Canadian diasporic poet. “Mixed Conditionals” celebrates her fiftieth year where in retrospection she passes through all the ups and downs of her immigrant life. In particular she fondly remembers her old house in Point Grey where she brought up her children who found their way up in life and who are now standing by her. The strong relationship between family members is enhanced and she devotes several lines to describe her three children Marc, Evelyn and Karam Keir. “Across the Amherst Bridge” is all about mother-daughter bonding, as they cross and recross, this country from coast to coast. The daughter, representing the second or third generation diaspora, has attained footholds in the new land and advises her mother to stand firm ‘amidst this alien corn’, which has become no longer alien. But the poet admits that she occasionally “slips in the moving marsh” as she is carrying corpses, the generations of memories on her back. The residual baggage of memories, of nations, locations and culture, accrued from the long journey,
sticks to her back as she struggles to move forward in the new space. Her daughter urges her to bury them. Though she is young and only sixteen, she believes in Canada which is now her home and which offers solace to her. She has found her designated location unlike the poet who stumbles and staggers off and on from the burden of nostalgia. “Lessons” is a veiled sarcasm at the fate that life had kept in store for her. She learnt the hard way to cope with a white husband whom she put through college to gain a degree while she herself worked hard to earn a living. But he always remained a student, “though he studied and studied he never learnt anything.” She uses the analogy of the plastic wrap, covering leftovers, to describe her life ridden with incongruities after marrying a white man. Like a true blood Asian mother she fiercely protects her children through all the turmoil of life carrying the double burden of a career woman and a protective mother, she suspends her own dreams for their sake. Even on nights when all is well she sleeps with one eye open, she confesses. Her poems take the reader on a whirlwind trip to her ancestral paternal village situated in Punjab where she sees her grandmother ruling the ‘haveli’. She addresses her as the ‘Mahawoman’, whose loins have given birth to illustrious children who braved new worlds in search of adventure.

*Returning the Empties* published in 1998 is her acknowledgement of the significance of poems in her life. She is sure that these poems alone will suffice to show the unfolding of her diasporic existence since they express her inner conflicts and desires. She compiles four decades of poems in this volume,
beginning with the Nineties, going through the Eighties, and Seventies to the earliest poems written in the Sixties. The collection renders a life’s chronicle especially the chronicle of an immigrant life and immigrant consciousness. Beginning as it does in the present and read in continuity, the poems reduplicate her imaginative journey and the yearnings of which she speaks in the epilogue “Puja for Papa”. The volume of poetry is comprehensive, describing a diasporic journey spanning continents, giving the reader occasional glimpses into her roots, the village of Posi in Hoshiarpur, Punjab where her father was born and another village in Philippines which was her mother’s birthplace. She always nurtured the hope that she would be able to see India, to return to her home, enabling her to flow back into her beginnings. But from another poem “Home” we come to know that she could never make this journey back home, to the land of her father, who lived with her in Canada till his end. The poems are strung out along the forty years of her poetic career, like the flowing ashes immersed in a river in Canada, they too reach back and mingle. Leslie Sanders’, in The Toronto Review (Summer 1999) has expatiated on the volumes of poetry written by Lakshmi Gill. She is of the opinion that it is difficult not to read her intensely personal poems as autobiographical. The title ‘Returning the Empties’ evokes the image of a striking and resolutely Canadian housekeeping ritual that marks the aftermath of a party, the last act of moving house, or merely a weekly routine. The gesture of returning the empty bottles of alcohol, is ecological, tidy and somewhat melancholic. Gill writes in
her note at the beginning that the poems of the initial decades were inspired by the Canadian cold, the bleak winters. “After the case of beer has been drunk one gathers the empty bottles, and returns them for deposit change. As I didn’t acquire this winter habit from people I once knew, I just took it to the next level, I quaffed. I thank you for the fill of life, Canada.” (Lakshmi Gill, *Returning the Empties*, Introduction) Shattering the many myths around migration the poet asserts and reasserts the positive effects of a diasporic experience and existence. The enhanced opportunities for the wider community back home as well as the empowerment gained by women in the land of migration have become the beneficial aspects of human mobility worldwide and the literature of South Asian Canadians, especially that from the Indian subcontinent is evidence enough to state that human influx, though problematic initially, turns out to be stimulating, both for the self and the host.

As far as Lakshmi Gill is considered, her life from its initial stages itself had been diasporic, her education, marriage and career all took place in distant soils. But the poems which are witty and humorous and unwickedly malicious are never self deprecating or sarcastic. The reader goes on a fast ride along with the poet from the early sixties to the late nineties to the early part of the 21st century. Even the disappointments in her married life to a white man, is narrated with dry humour, “the man on the recliner with beer on the floor, flipped her channels, turned her off after the news at eleven and broke her
heart.” (18) She had to raise three children on a half time job in a city where jobs were scarce. The phases of her married life are encapsulated in precise clipped notes “Once it was complete then it fell apart Now it is quiet”. She has come to terms with life, accepting her share of its vicissitudes, she acknowledges Canada as her own in the opening poem “LA Cyborgs”. The spirit of fight within her, her resistance and inner strength, the power of faith and confidence prompts her to call upon the human, hardy Canadians to defend themselves from the enemy the LA Cyborgs. It was the practice of America and Britain to come recruiting young Canadians for technical jobs in their countries. The apparent refuge that Canada holds for the misfits, the drifters, the refugees and the exiles is slyly compromised by the ways in which the poem depicts a return to what is left of the land. She warns Canada which has now become her surrogate homeland to wake up from her stupor to hold her population together. It is at once a rebuke and compliment to Canada and Canadians, it reminds the hosts to take into consideration the needs of the country’s multicultural population, to provide them with enough incentives so that they will retain their citizenship. The cyber era has begun and all countries should become as tech savvy as possible to meet the burgeoning demands, she gently admonishes her country, Canada or she will be left far behind by way of technological innovations.

Gill’s voice rings more or less the same sentiments of the diaspora and particularly its women writers. She refuses to accept the sexism, materialism
and lack of ethics that is experienced in the adopted space. The uncertainty of
an immigrant existence was cause enough to worry in her earlier poems, it was
obviously an uncomfortable situation. The wavering of the mind makes her a
prey to nostalgia and she fears that she is in the grip of a no-win situation. This
is a well known and acknowledged aspect in diasporic literature that the initial
phase is spent by many an immigrant in pining for the lost land and recreating
imaginary homelands in the mind to tide over this loss. She is swamped by the
memories of her race and sex and a number of realities that systematically
marginalizes and persecutes her. She finds that it is not easy to escape from the
predicament of alienation by taking solace in the frozen memories of her
homeland. But a Canadian identity is not easily forth coming too. The
dichotomy between the subjective and objective experiences of the self
becomes a major issue. Experiences in this new country, this new language and
environment become codified within an Eastern context when the writer
refuses to let go off the past and her ties with her home. She consistently
revives Asian myths and metaphors to rewrite her experiences as an immigrant.
In the poem “In Search of New Diction”, the poet metaphysically ruminates on
the variety of ways humankind (herself) has imagined its relation to God, such
as humouring, accepting, worshipping and sometimes even denying Him.
Sometimes it proves to be of no use. Even the Gods do not lend a hand to
resolve the predicament. So she says “what lifetime of Gods in our minds, what
fascination with omnipotence/ Immortality, hierarchy who will burn the old
words.” Her poems express the mental condition of the poet as she passes through the myriad issues connected with immigration; alienation, settlement, racism, male chauvinism, politics, feminism and the wild urge within to return to one’s own nation and cultural milieu. Racism, and the Western white supremacy is subtly scoffed at, sometimes strongly dissented against, but sexism is a major issue which brings her into relationship with the very entity and existence of women in a wider, global perspective. The host country has to make space she feels for the societally imprisoned woman who is ethnic and visible. Rejection, disparagement and effacement, the subtler and grosser forms of injustice which are personally experienced or experienced by others are viewed as the indisputable norms set up by the hegemonic society which has always indulged in role fixing. The added burden of dislocation forces the poet to create a space for herself through words, her language. In an attempt to narrate the space travelled from location to dislocation, in her attempt to bridge across physical spaces, she gives voice to her yearnings, her desire to be accepted in the new country. Flaunting a hybrid space and trying to stay afloat in it is a daunting challenge faced by the South Asian writers. But by carving a niche for herself, Gill was able to become cross cultural, the culture contexts and specifics of her country is reinterpreted for a Western audience.

The upheavals of relocating and reshaping life in new continents spanning half of the world, the advantages of untutored vision and less jaded responses, the confrontation with racism and bigotry all means personally won
knowledge for the poet and she has lots to say about these matters. She fully understands and represents her role as a woman immigrant and a member of a minority community, her hyphenated status is no secret. She is also aware of the systemically discriminating sphere where she is forced to enter. But she unflinchingly attacks the racism and sexism practised by the civilized society of the West. The Vancouver Philippine community is her own group and she expresses solidarity with them, “But we will be steadfast to the last”. Gill’s worthiness perhaps lies in the fact that she never lets go off her roots and her ethnic culture though she has adjusted, adapted and got herself acculturated in Canada.

The South Asian Canadian poets especially Lakshmi Gill and Suniti Namjoshi use subversion in their language and idioms in order to make Canada and Canadian English their own. South Asian Canadians deliberately stretch Canadian English to new frontiers. This post, post-colonial group of writers are opposed to adding explanations and meanings in the poetic context when they use unfamiliar words, and unfamiliar situations, it is left to the reader to make references and get to know more about the country and cult figures in these poems. Individuals, icons, forgotten scenes from the past, all reappear in Gill’s poems, sometimes they are intimately presented, sometimes passingly observed, yet again acknowledged as family legends. The portraits of people cover a wide range of family relations, friends, street entertainers or activists. These portraits are etched in every detail and framed, bordered and bounded;
the essence of each individual is captured in them. They present a comprehensive account of her diasporic translocations, her tensions within the self, the yearnings to create an identity of her own in the new locale. In post-colonial literature, language assumes great significance. It can stand for the roles of dominance and centrality. The poem “Legacy” ironically depicts the situation of an Asian student complaining about her acquiring the English language. She is now unable to speak anything else, such is the powerful control of this language of domination. This power structure of the language is understood and collapsed deliberately by the poet through effective subversive techniques. The strategies of both abrogation and appropriation are used to cut across the dominant white hegemonic structures. A categorical refusal of the aspects of imperialist culture and the normative standard or correctness prescribed by it is a chief characteristic of diasporic literature. The traditional fixed meanings of words, syntax and grammar are deliberately twisted and turned. Appropriation takes place when the language of power is taken to bear the burden of the immigrant’s cultural experience. Gill uses both these notions in her poems when she easefully alters Robert Frost’s poem “Home Coming” in two of her poems “Home” and “School”. “School is where when you get there, you have a seat”. In “Home” she writes, “That’s where your hat was. That’s where they’d let you in!” But the real home remains elsewhere. “Never got back to India/ village Posi, District Hoshiarpur/ Punjab, mother’s womb.”
The language used by the poet may become cultural markers of the minority South Asian diaspora.

The ethnic nuances are mixed with English to accentuate code switching and code mixing. These untranslated language nuances become an interlanguage a bond, between two cultures. The language adaptations help to replace the language in another cultural location, even though it is significantly situated in the larger dominant culture. It is a process of reaching the ‘other’ as well as becoming the ‘other’. Since multiculturalism implies other cultures too they cannot be seen as lesser ones, nor can the poet deny her roots. The poet tries her best to retain the essence of her culture, as culture pervades socially among a class of people. The various biases of society towards the minority are overtly and covertly worked at by the poet sometimes humorously, sometimes viciously. She does not want to usurp the centre but sets out to state that the margin cannot be wiped away but has to be blended with the centre in a multicultural society.

Lakshmi Gill and Himani Bannerji have loudly questioned the injustices that exist within a system that perpetuates isolation. She articulates her concerns with these issues in many of her poems. But her landscapes and diction are more Canadian than other poets’ because Canada is more familiar to her since she reached its shores at a very early age. The deeper significance of her poems lies in their portrayal of an Indo-Filipino immigrant who is a
dreamer and survivor, highlighting her resistance in the face of adversity at home, and in the country many consider their home. Her writing collectively demonstrates that survival is instinctive, the right attitude is pertinent, the realization of one’s hyphenated identity need not be a debacle but a situation to be manipulated to attempt cross cultural readings and dialogues, to make a home for oneself in the diasporic space. The diasporic writer that she is, belonging both to India and Philippines, she makes an effective crossover to Canada where she is amply supported by her Asian origin and the valuable support that her extended family is able to accord her. “In This country”, one of the poems in the Nineties section shows a mellowed, mature poet, quite able to comprehend, her position as an immigrant in Canada. The poem traces the various seasons in Canada which are so far removed from the weather and landscape of tropical countries but the poet claims that “standing astride/ the seesaw of seasons in a balancing act”, she is able to manage and control the vagaries of nature and thereby its population now. The Nineties selection of poems are the most personal, the poet here conjures up visions of her death and eternity and also a “poem that will write itself, at the last minute”. The epilogue of the collection “Puja for Papa”, epitomises her whole ideology “you will flow back into your beginnings”, revealing that the immigrant’s life has come a full cycle.

Taken together her poems are haunting, individually they are memorable. There is no single thematic in the poems, but rather the lifelong
reflections of a woman who sees, thinks and feels deeply, turning her estrangement from the homeland and the resultant pain into understanding and insight. Her Indianness, she does not hide, but proudly displays, paying rich tributes to her father, her grandmother the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Gill reveals that she is perfectly at ease in the host country, but for certain outbursts against racism which she had personally experienced as an Asian, her poems cross and recross Canada and its literature too, they evoke its writers as well as its history and politics in the latter half of the 20th century. Her poems truly inhabit the Canadian space, smoothly passing from phase to phase, from despondency to euphoria as is wont to happen in an immigrant’s life, as part of her diasporic experience. Her illustrious career as academician, poet and a social activist conveys the message of keeping her targets right, a proud South Asian Canadian a survivor who knew how to pay respects to her own culture without hurting the other cultures. The crossing of boundaries of nation and cultures resulted in engaging the two countries in creative dialogues. Diaspora had enriched her vision, outlook and perspective and enhanced her prospective. Summing up her poetic career, as an exponent of the diasporic genre, one can conclude that contrary to the title she has given to her selected poems Returning the Empties, she does not return the empties, but she returns plenitude to her host country and the diasporic consciousness.