

The Role of Storytelling in Preserving Cultural Identity in Uma Parameswaran's Works

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Abstract: *Uma Parameswaran, an Indo-Canadian writer of Tamil Brahmin origin, employs storytelling—through myths, dramatic monologues, dance-drama, family narratives, and poetry—as a powerful mechanism to preserve and transmit Indian cultural identity amid the challenges of diaspora. Her works, set against the backdrop of Indian immigration to Canada, negotiate the tensions of nostalgia, alienation, hybridity, and bicultural adaptation. By reinterpreting Hindu epics and legends (such as the stories of Sita and Meera) and weaving personal immigrant experiences into narrative forms, Parameswaran not only resists cultural assimilation but also educates both the diasporic younger generation and Canadian audiences about South Indian heritage. This paper examines select plays (Sita's Promise, Meera, Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees), poetry (Trishanku), and fiction to demonstrate how storytelling functions as a site of cultural continuity, identity assertion, and intergenerational transmission. Drawing on qualitative textual analysis, the study highlights storytelling's role in transforming "rootlessness" into a vibrant, hybrid Canadian-Indian mosaic..*

Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural Identity, Storytelling, Mythology, Indo-Canadian Literature, Hybridity, Preservation of Heritage, Immigrant Narratives

I. INTRODUCTION

Uma Parameswaran (born 1938 in Madras, now Chennai) is a prominent figure in South Asian Canadian literature. Raised in a Tamil home in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, she migrated to Canada in 1966 after completing advanced studies in the United States. A retired professor of English at the University of Winnipeg, she has authored poetry, plays, fiction, and literary criticism that consistently explore the diasporic experience. Her writing captures the painful phases of immigration: nostalgia for the homeland, alienation in the new land, and the gradual forging of a hybrid identity.

In the context of postcolonial and diaspora studies, cultural identity is not static but "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'," constantly positioned within narratives of the past and present. Parameswaran's oeuvre exemplifies this dynamic process. Storytelling emerges as the central tool for preservation: myths from the Ramayana and Bhagavata Purana are retold to anchor immigrants in their roots, while contemporary family dramas and poetic sequences document lived experiences of displacement. Works such as *Sita's Promise* (1981) explicitly link epic India with modern Canada through myth and dance, culminating in Sita's vow: "I through my people, shall surely come again and we shall build our temple and sing our songs with all the children to all the different countries who make this their home." This promise encapsulates the writer's vision of Canada as a multicultural mosaic where Indian traditions thrive rather than erode. The present study argues that storytelling in Parameswaran's works serves three key functions: (1) resistance against assimilation and racism, (2) intergenerational transmission of heritage, and (3) creation of a positive image of Indian culture for Canadian audiences. By analysing selected texts, the paper demonstrates how narrative forms—dramatic, mythic, and realist—preserve Tamil Brahmin cultural identity in the diasporic space.



II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative literary approach, specifically close textual analysis combined with thematic interpretation. Primary sources include Parameswaran's plays (*Sita's Promise*, *Meera: A Dance Drama*, *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*), the poetry collection *Trishanku*, and representative fiction such as *Mangoes on the Maple Tree*. Secondary sources comprise critical essays on her diasporic themes and Stuart Hall's framework of cultural identity as "positioning" within historical and narrative discourses. Data collection involved systematic reading and annotation of texts for recurring motifs: myths, monologues, songs, dance elements, family dialogues, and symbols of rootlessness (e.g., the boulevard trees). Thematic coding identified patterns related to preservation (nostalgia, ritual, language) versus adaptation (hybridity, biculturalism). The analysis is interpretive rather than quantitative, drawing on postcolonial diaspora theory without imposing external frameworks. Limitations include reliance on published English translations and editions; future studies could incorporate performance analysis of her plays. Ethical considerations are minimal as the study engages publicly available literary texts.

Analysis: Storytelling as Cultural Preservation

Parameswaran's drama and poetry exemplify storytelling's preservative power most vividly. In *Meera: A Dance Drama* (1971), the mythic narrative of Meera's devotion to Krishna is presented through monologues, songs, and dance. Meera rejects worldly ties—"I have betrayed family honour by leaving the palace for this garden"—to merge the finite self with the infinite Paramatman. Performed on Canadian soil, this dance-drama transmits classical Indian music, bhakti tradition, and devotional aesthetics to both immigrant families and native Canadians, countering stereotypes and reviving cultural pride among those disconnected from India. The form itself—blending monologue with performative elements—mirrors traditional Indian storytelling (kathak or harikatha) while adapting it to a Western stage, thus ensuring survival through hybrid innovation.

Sita's Promise extends this mythic storytelling. By invoking the Ramayana heroine's vow, Parameswaran transforms an ancient epic into a blueprint for diasporic resilience. The play familiarises Canadian-born children with Indian art traditions, fostering a sense of belonging that transcends geography. The narrative promise of building temples and singing songs in "all the different countries" directly counters the fear of cultural erasure. In *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* (1987), storytelling shifts to realist family drama. The Bhave family's dialogues reveal the trauma of migration: unemployment, racism ("Paki house!"), and generational conflict. The central symbol—the transplanted Ontario poplar that remains "rootless but green"—is itself a story told across acts, illustrating fragile survival. Younger characters assert hybrid identity ("This is our land and here we shall stay"), while elders cling to separation for preservation. Here, everyday storytelling—conversations, memories of India—becomes a repository of heritage, preventing complete assimilation. The poetry sequence *Trishanku* (1988) draws on the Puranic myth of King Trishanku, suspended between heaven and earth. Parameswaran uses this suspended state as a metaphor for the diasporic "in-betweenness." Poetic narratives blend personal memory with cultural symbols, positioning identity as fluid yet anchored in Indian roots. This mythic storytelling framework allows the poet to articulate alienation while asserting continuity. In her fiction, such as *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* (2002), family stories and oral histories preserve Brahmin rituals, cuisine, and values amid Canadian winters. The novella *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk-Wet Bodice* similarly uses intimate maternal narratives to explore the emotional cost of cultural dislocation while affirming the enduring power of Indian kinship systems.

Across genres, Parameswaran's storytelling resists the "squashing" of immigrant identity by racism and instead stitches a new canon of bicultural belonging.

III. CONCLUSION

Storytelling in Uma Parameswaran's works is not mere aesthetic device but a deliberate act of cultural preservation and resistance. By retelling myths, enacting dance-dramas, and chronicling immigrant lives, she ensures that Tamil Indian heritage endures and evolves in Canada. Her narratives transform rootlessness into rooted hybridity, offering hope to



diasporic communities worldwide. In an era of globalisation and increasing migration, Parameswaran's oeuvre reminds us that stories are the strongest bridges between past and future, homeland and adopted land. Further research could explore stage adaptations or comparative studies with other Indo-Canadian writers to broaden understanding of narrative preservation strategies.

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