

X'mas
 moon-faced damsel
 barely covered
 with Simla snow

A paper-flower
 at the balcony
 hanging like a starfish
 moving its fins
 to steer through dark

Guests-
 a motley crowd
 assembled
 in Masonic hall
 decked with myriad flowers

a young girl
 with niagra in her eyes
 cascading
 a river of love and passion

I'm not a Buddha
 or a Christ
 to look the other way
 and ignore
 the liquid eyes.

Distance/Distancing

Uma Parameswaran

This is a piece about "home" and how my poetry reflects some of the highways and byways traversed between two homelands by the diaspora.

Back in my childhood days spent in Jabalpur in central India, we were force-fed a great many details and data, including multiplication tables to sixteen times sixteen; the histories of India, Britain and Europe; the geography not only of India and Europe but of the world, where we were told such trivia as that Winnipeg in central Canada was the "wheat granary of the world." Because of the massive infusion of relevant bedrocks of mathematical and literary skills, and seemingly irrelevant trivia about the rest of the world, many of us of the Indian diaspora have been successful in our careers and have found our individual relevancies, such as that the wheat granary of the world in the remote Canadian prairies can indeed be "home."

Some of the countless force-feedings consisted of regular doses of poetry to be learned by rote for recitation classes and competitions. Most of these poems have receded into unaccessed depths of my memory, but two have periodically surfaced to consciousness. One is from Sir Walter Scott:

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
 Who never to himself hath said,
 This is my own, my native land!
 Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd
 As home his footsteps he hath turned
 From wandering on a foreign strand!

The second poem is by Caroline Norton (the same poet who wrote that beautiful poem, "An Arab's Farewell to his Steed"). Titled "Bingen on the Rhine," it recounts the words of a soldier of the Legion dying in Algiers:

The dying soldier faltered and took his comrade's hand,
 And said, "I never more shall see my own, my native land"

These lines surface when I hear news of a fellow-Indian dying in north America. “I carry India with me wherever I go,” Raja Rao, the fine novelist, has said. But now, writing this essay, I have another question: If I should perchance lie dying in the U.S. or in Europe, would I remember the lakes and hills of Jabalpur or the sea-swept sands of Mylapore beach? Or would I say “I never more shall see the endless blue skies over my Assiniboine?” I don’t really want to know, not yet. For there are promises to keep, and miles I hope to go before I sleep.

The concept of home shifts with space and time, and the personae in my poems articulate the shifts. When one arrives in a new land, one has a sense of wonder and adventure at the sight and feel of a landscape so different from what one has been accustomed to; there is also a sense of isolation and fear, and intense nostalgia for nostalgia is a protective buffer to which many retreat. Here are several voices from my poetry that express some of these emotions:

Under a sky more vast than any I’ve seen
On snow more cold than ever I dreamed
I stand alone, amid masks that speak an alien tongue.
Far, far are those I loved and love
And far the fragrance of my native flowers
O’er which bees murmur homeland tunes.

Dilip:

Amma, I like school.
It is such fun.
We play most of the time
And sing songs in French.
Amma, fingerpainting is such fun!
So many bright bright colours!
And we can use all we want!

Chandrika:

Madras! I love you.
Your broad beach road where the polished tar
Flings mirages that vapour on my speeding car,

Your sands stretched out beside the sea
Where at my feet laps Eternity.

Madras! I hope some day to call you my own,
Though pledged now to the land
Which my love has made our home.

Sharad:

In our ancestral home
Every new moon day
Father, as his father before him,
 In silk dhoti,
vibhuti on forehead and chest,
sacred thread dipped in turmeric
sat on a wooden plank
facing the east
 to repeat the purohit’s chant,
 sprinkle holy water with darbha grass
 and call upon our ancestors.

But here the sun rises south-east
And the planets are all a-kilter.

Some never grow past the phase of nostalgia. Romanticising one’s native land has a place so long as it does not paralyze one’s capacity to develop new bonds with one’s adopted homeland. Nostalgia that excludes all else can become quite toxic, vitiating the living stream into a stagnant cesspool. I have known Indo-Canadians who have this propensity to downgrade and denigrate all things north American. I pity them because they can never be happy anywhere. Even more to be pitied are those whose over-romanticisation of India throws them for a loop when they have to face the darker side of conditions in their native land. It is no accident that the voices I have given to express these attitudes are male:

Chander:

City of my birth!
I come
Home to you.

Dry throat unquenched
by heat-cooled translucent cubes
from frost-free no-down-payment whitewalled smoothness
I come
to your coconut milk motherness
waiting for me.

Seven months.

Then,
Your sultry sky, your sweltering air,
Flashy rich, blind beggar's stare,
Wreck of twenty ruinous years
When the sheep looked up and were not fed.

Breaker roll.
No Aeneas I, I cannot bear you.
I ought, you ought, we ought love
Love toosoonhatebecoming love
The land where we've been born.

I fly super VC-10 that leaves the sound behind,
Louder the thudding guiltshame supersonic roaring
Stern daughter of the voice of god heartpounding
Back to the land where my sons their roots shall find.

Whereas Chandrika, his wife, is willing to bond with the land to which her husband has brought her, and can love both homelands, Chander cannot commit himself to either. Perhaps women, with centuries of cultural indoctrination and expectations, are able to adapt more quickly to accept and love two homes without conflict or ambivalence.

Having worked with and among the younger generation that have been born and brought up in north America, I'm aware of the vast differences between their attitude to "home" and their parents' attitudes. While many of them have felt the stings of racism in their school environment, most choose the survival technique of downplaying it. Often this works to their advantage because both oppressors and victims outgrow their roles in time.

A few carry the scars all their lives. As a poet and a parent, I am concerned for the second generation of immigrants from all countries, especially because changing patterns of immigration have made the diasporas more varied in background.

We are new Canadians
Come from faraway places,
The Alps and the Andes
Essquibo and the Ganges,
Our memories, our faces
Chiselled by ancient cultures
Whose course had been half-run
Long ere Cartier's had begun.

We are new Canadians.
Same as the old, we grew
Ten moons in our mother's womb.
Learnt to love and pray
On parents' knees.
Tasted youth's sad sweet greenness
And love's silver dreams.

Canada's fields are sown with gold,
Some said and so it is.
It will not be easy, some said,
And it has not, as we well know
Who have worked hard, or worse still
Have no work at all, though willing
And waiting for the break
That would set us on our own.

What we were not told, never guessed,
Is written on our children's faces
Furrowed with tears because of our race
Or colour, or tongue that stumbles
Over words so alien to the many places

From which we've come.

Will doors shut on them as on us?
Landlords', employers', neighbours'?
Have we come from the Niger and Luzon,
From the Antilles and Hongkong
To these vast empty spaces
Only to see our young ones' faces
Slapped by unthinking scorn,
Unfeeling barbs
From closed fists and closed hearts?

While concern for their children is predominant and natural in the first generation of immigrants from India, the attitudes of the second generation, born in Canada, are very complex and varied. "Home" for them is very definitely the country of their birth, but because of force feeding by their parents, "homeland" could still be India, a place for which they have ambivalent feelings. When they visit India as children, many tend to be bratty. This subject needs to be studied, indeed is grist for a sociologist's mill. The closest I have come to create such a character is Jayant, who has a love-hate relationship for his ancestral home in Pune. In the hate-mode he has this to say to his father, Sharad:

Distance makes the heart grow fonder,
to hand a cliché to you
my sententious Dad.
But Jesus, face it,
it is a sprawling shambles
passed down untouched
from the days of the Peshwas.
A half mile to the shithouse
and pigs slurping...

His cousin, Vithal, is an angry young man in my play, *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*, but in my *Trishanku*, he comes close to my own way of looking at where we are and should be:

Look you guys, we've gotta show them,
yeah, show the bastards we've as much

right as anyone who's come here
in the last three hundred years.
Yeah, show the sonsobitches that we
stand together, and they ain't gonna
divide and rule
no more

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We shall build our temple
Here where the Assiniboine flows into the Red,
And I shall bring Ganga,
As Bhagiratha did of old,
To our land,
Our Assiniboine,
And the fluteplayer,
Dark as kaya blossom,
Shall dance on the waters of La Salle.