

HYPERTEXTUALITY IN THE WORKS OF UMA PARAMESWARAN

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Abstract: Setting aside disputes between authors and readers for the ownership of texts, theories have emerged suggesting that texts seem to evolve out of existing texts and situations around them. Termed 'intertextuality', this method adds a new dimension to reading and interpreting texts and attempts not to alienate the text but read it as an extension, continuation, conclusion, comparison, and so on of the already existing ones. This research work aims to study Uma Parameswaran's texts in terms of hypertextuality, which serves as a tool to bring out the diasporic consciousness in Parameswaran's writings.

Full Text: Uma Parameswaran's works have been analysed from various perspectives (largely diasporic and feministic) for years together. Hence an earnest attempt is made to read and interpret them in the light of intertextuality, to create a sense of continuity (between the past and the present) and to bring to the fore the multivoiced community prevalent in her works. There is an explicit and conscious use of intertextuality and its variances employed by Uma Parameswaran in her works to bring out the various aspects of diaspora.

Intertextuality is the knitting of words every creative writer deploys under different circumstances to accord authenticity and not repetitiveness to the product. Intertextuality in simple terms focuses on the text's relationship with the whole of its culture; it may also look at the relationship between the author and the texts of the author's world or the relationships between the reader and the texts of the reader's world. The focus need not be solely on the author's intention of the text but also on the reader's response to the text. It is inevitable that all texts be read from the intertextual perspective given the age of enquiry and knowledge we live in.

A brief look at the various applications of intertextuality in the literary texts will help to understand the concept better. The contemporary world has brought forth many critical theories due to its pluralistic nature. These theories are deviated towards a more synchronic one. The relevance of the analysis of contemporary drama has been widely discussed here.

This paper employs Gerard Genette's theory of hypertextuality as a tool to examine the relationship between a text and its pretext in Uma Parameswaran's works. A first generation immigrant to Canada, she has reworked incidents from the great Indian epics The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. The physiological and

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psychological makeup of a woman and her expression with the external environment are reflected in the two dance dramas *Sita's Promise* and *Meera*. Sita and Meera symbolise women who try to gain their voice today. Although mythic images may remain fixed and matter of fact, the interpretation of the stories changes according to the period and the writer. To study this, the texts are put into the background and the tradition that it sequences with. This paper highlights not only ancient myths, but also the stereotypical bias and philosophical representation of women in such epics.

In the late 1960s structural theorists explored intertextuality to its core. Broadly, hypertextuality defines the relationship uniting a text B (hypertext) to an earlier text A (hypotext). This theory is associated with post-modernism and for the post-modernists, no text is an island. They represent a decentered concept of the universe, thus individual works are not isolated creations, but a reference is parallel to another literary work or extended discussion of a work or adoption of a style. Genette's works indicate that literature's existence is 'rewriting of what has already been written.'

Employing some of the intertextual concepts formulated by Gerard Genette, Roland Barthes and Mikhail Bakhtin, this paper attempts to shed light on Uma Parameswaran's representation of women. Uma Parameswaran, through the two dance dramas extolls culture and tradition of India in Canada and portrays women as individuals with diverse experiences. In *Sita's Promise* and *Meera*, there is a polyphony of voices and a diachronic blend and clash of languages. Through this Uma Parameswaran is able to demarcate between fiction and truth. She brings in a community's shared experiences to the forefront through the two dramas, much in line with Victor Barnovw's statement, "Myth is one of the building blocks to culture." Using myth as intertext, it is showed how prolonged references to literary texts is done in a second literary text (target text). While this may simply be brushed aside as a mere inspiration or even plagiarism, intertextual reading lends it a different authenticity of its own. This 'book in a book' feature of literary works can be exemplified as borrowing a mere character or its name from the source text, a lengthy scene, or the storyline itself.

Sita's Promise and *Meera* are dance dramas written by Parameswaran with deep connotations of diaspora also. *Sita's Promise* is written in the Indo-Canadian context of diaspora in modern prose, drawing largely for its premise from the Ramayana. The intertext is interpreted in a fantastical way to affirm multiculturalism which is a part of the first-generation diasporic consciousness. A sense of revisiting has been created through the discourses. The dance drama *Meera* implies both the name and role of this fantasy lover of Krishna's and represents the many faceted woman of the myth and the diasporic consciousness. Lillian Feder opines on myth and its characters as follows:

Myth is a story involving human limitations and superhuman strivings and accomplishments which suggest through action – usually of a ritual, ceremonial or compulsive nature – man's attempt to express and thus control

his own anxiety about those features of his physiological and psychological makeup and his external environment which he cannot comprehend, accept or master. The characters of myth maybe gods, men or monstrous creatures with the qualities both, but even in myths dealing exclusively with immortals, the narrative material, the portrayal of conflict and sorrow, and the resolution or revelation are all reflections of human concerns. (P.11)

The play *Meera* is adapted from the popular classical epic the Mahabharata which is construed in the tradition of the past and real life presented in a fictitious manner. Meera, a 16th century Rajasthan princess, was an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna, who rebelled against convention to liberate her spiritual yearnings. Her real life travel took her from Rajasthan through Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh in North India. Meera's life has total relevance today because her struggles are akin to many women in the present who are trying to live a fulfilled, creative life when society pressures them to settle down. They are shackled to the drudgery of mundane domestic obligations and duties, restricting them from exploring their passions.

Meera is a symbol for women fighting for their space in today's world. An astounding beauty, Meera was married off young against her will to the prince of Chittor near the ethereal city of Udaipur. Thereafter her ardent desire to compose, sing and pursue spiritual studies came to an end. Her family ostracized her and at different times tried to poison her and drown her. But legend says that Meera was miraculously saved from such heinous attempts by her Lord Krishna.

Uma Parameswaran has dramatized the life of Meerabai and the well-known playfulness of lord Krishna's from the Bhagavata and the Mahabharata. In the 'Author's Statement 'First Person Singular' 'Meera' is a script that evolved around our artistic resources, and set out to celebrate Indian art traditions and at the same time to educate the outsider about our culture" (Parameswaran 1918:9)

The drama opens with Meera blissfully engrossed in adoring Krishna with her songs. No matter what her physical life has been as the wife of Prince Bhoj and thereafter the widow of the Prince, her consistent devotion to lord Krishna has carried her through all her miseries. Meera has not listened to the 'voices' of her society reprimanding her as to how 'a woman should live' (p.38) as her being was always filled only with Lord Krishna. Meera here is a woman of strong mind, totally engrossed in her vision of Krishna. The toughest moments of her life were overcome miraculously by her supreme faith in Krishna.

In the play, Meera relives her life as Devaki, the mother who conceived the divine child Krishna. As Devaki, she remembers the atrocities of her brother Kamsa, who loved her till such day when the Oracle delivered the message that he would die in the hands of Devaki's eight child. Each of Devaki's child is killed but the eighth one is saved by the divine power and taken across to Mathura, where Krishna's grows up as the son of Yasodha.

In scene III, Meera relives the life of Krishna's childhood, blissfully enjoying Krishna's pranks. Scene IV captures Yasodha's honour of being Krishna's surrogate mother. Meera regales the wonders of Krishna killing his uncle Kamsa and his profound counselling in the battled field of Kurukshetra.

Meera brings alive, through her graceful movements, the mystical life of Krishna on stage, while the statue of Krishna's stays 'still' on the center stage. The physical detachment of Krishna from Meera is symbolic here in this frozen state of the statue. In scene V, Meera becomes one with Krishna. She is enlightened by truth as the 'veil of maya' (Meera 45) enshrouds her only with love and the love all for Krishna, as she becomes Radha, the mystical lover of Krishna. Thus Meera embodies a woman in pursuit of her objective which is the union with her Lord, God Krishna.

A simple compare and contrast of the Meeras takes the reader into a maze of understanding women in different backdrops like history, family, traditions, literature, and religion. Both Meera the legend and Parameswaran's Meera are one and the same in their pursuit towards unification with their lover Lord Krishna, but there is a volley of distinct approaches they take to the destination.

Meerabai was a formed person with a clear conviction regarding her devotion to her Lord though caught in the vortex of the normal woman's life of her time. A woman's existence found its definition and meaning through her father first, husband next, and son or sons later on until her death. These men had the highest stake in her life and they claimed it as and when it suited them or was required of them. Piety in women was acceptable as long as it adorned her as a piece of ornament. If she desired to embrace religion as a garb and indulged in the deity more than these men around her, she was looked upon with disdain. Piety was an asset but merely as a tool to pray for the family's wellbeing. High form of Bhakti for a women led to labeling her as insane. Meera is a victor in that she overcomes the worldly struggle and goes into the world enriching and enlightening the world with her song and hymns in praise of Krishna and thus towards a soulful unification

Parameswaran's Meera when she takes on the role of woman in Krishna's life, to experience the ultimate in bhakti, she transcends time and reaches Krishna through the roles of Devaki, Yasodha, and Radha. As pining as the legendary Meera, she expresses her profound love for Krishna through her dance expressions, not just as a devotee but as all forms of women in Krishna's life who were responsible for the incarnation to be born and nurtured to fruition of the purpose of his birth, that is to destroy evil. She transforms into the women involved in the moments of Krishna birth, childhood, and love life and experiences and expresses Krishna Bhakti beyond the devotee frame.

Thus she entwines with Krishna through her imaginary visions of the different deeds of Krishna and hence her union with the divine one takes place. In the myth, Krishna is an anchor of Meera's survival. She invokes Krishna in her life and

spreading his glory through her divine songs all across the world. On-stage Meera migrates to Krishna's very life in the antiquity i.e past, whereas legendary one has a futuristic ideal in spreading Krishna's lore to all.

Parameswaran's text is an attempt to draw the saint woman Meera from the legend and place her into the center of universe of the modern times to sing and spread the divinity's praise. It is simply indicative of how the modern world is deprived of the knowledge of such an incarnation and the extent of love a devotee can place on one's deity. Mere expression of the devotion may not serve the purpose in highlighting the feats of Lord Krishna and hence the author transforms the devotee Meera into the women in Krishna's life and regales the audience with information on Krishna. Krishna's tale cannot be told without the role played by the great women Devaki, Yashoda and Radha in his life and no better person than the pining Meera to narrate them to the world bereft of this divine knowledge.

Sita's Promise a dance drama by Parameswaran epitomizes Sita as a challenging character endowed with soft, submissive, docile traits but underlying face of a strong woman who has her will. The play has been adapted from the great Indian classical epic The Ramayana, whereby it is looked at in a new perspective. Rama, Sita and Lakshmana are in exile. Lakshmana brings home a beautiful bird, an Artic Tern, to please Sita. Likewise Sita is delighted but realizes that it is hurt. She takes care of it while Rama gives the zoological facts about the bird. Lakshmana, however, suggests that the tern should be taken to its home, Sita is all for it and suggest going on the wings of Jatayu. Nevertheless Rama reminds her about the call of duty as a king. Through the dances and songs of gypsies, the beauty of the native hills and the temples of Siva and Subramaniyan, are brought out.

In scene IV, Rama is portrayed as strict man of principles who does not believe in giving into a show of emotions. Rama believes in self control, to which Lakshmana is sarcastic and reprimands Rama on always going by 'the book' (p 54). Lakshmana questions Rama on his authority to preach, when he has never been in conflict between duty and love. Lakshmana accuses Rama of being an extraordinary person with the omnipresence of God. Rama confesses to Sita that he has been blessed with abundant knowledge but little wisdom which makes him conceited. Thus Rama is portrayed as a humane character far from the divine avatar of Vishnu. As a consequence of this conflict with Lakshmana, Rama finally relents to take the wounded bird to its home far north. Although Sita is portrayed as a queen in exile, she shows strong resilience in withstanding the toughness of the exile.

The Sita of the Ramayan was the daughter of mother earth and she lives up to it in the play *Sita's Promise*. Through her guileless persuasion she influences the duty-conscious Rama to indulge in the trifle act of transiting the artic tern to Agassiz. We see the classical Sita embodied in the Sita as a modern environmentalist concerned about letting go the Artic Tern amongst its kind, at the same time the author enhances the diasporic aspect of thriving among one's kind/community.

The journey continues in Scene VII taking them to the palace of King Himavan who leads them to Jatayu. Scene IX carries the three travelers on the wings of Jatayu to the shores of the primeval ocean that is called as Lake Agassiz. Sita hands over the bird to its people. As they meandered along the shores of Agassiz, the people shower them with love, they also witness the Supreme Being Vishnu, who blesses and directs them to visit sage Agastya in scene X

In scene XI Sita is surrounded by the native children. They wonder about her prowess to give beauty to the surrounding where she is. When the children of Agassiz request her to stay, she promises to come back to this lovely land of lakes and blue skies and snow. She promises to come back 'through' her people and bring along with her the culture and tradition of her home.

The fascinating world of the Mahabharata comes alive on the stage to remind the world over the rich heritage of India. Uma Parameswaran has stuck to the original play till the eleventh year of exile after that it is a dramatization of something which is not in the epic. The fact that the wounded bird is picked up by Lakshmana and then persuades Rama to take it to its original place points out to the need of environmental balance in modern times.

Rama's eternal consort Sita can be envisioned as a woman who holds the guidelines for modern woman's better survival in this world juggling family and passion. Sita is the perfect wife following her husband's footsteps wherever they take and ends up in the 14-year exile. Fate has planned another exile for her in the domain of a wicked person from whom her husband rescues her only to later abandon her as a single mother of their twin boys. Sita goes through this rigmarole of her life with élan. Parameswaran's Sita is also seen in the exile but the next exile is self-imposed and taken up with a clear resolution towards a goal. It takes an animal to bring an about-turn in Sita's exile in both cases – a golden deer which is as a ruse; an arctic tern which has lost its way. Sita's concern towards nature and its elements stems from the very fact that she is mother earth's child and any hurt to the universe's species is her own responsibility to heal and care.

Parameswaran's Sita takes the tern to its own species and during her brief stay in the Agassiz, she brings new life and joy to the people there also. The children there entreat her to stay back to which she makes the promise of return through her 'people' later on. Sita is ethically and environmentally conscious to make sure a particular species coexist and survive among its own kind. She takes a painful journey just for this cause and but in a contrasting situation promises that her people will migrate to this foreign soil. Sita is thus a person who rises up to different occasions with discernment and hence it can be assumed that she made the promise with a sure knowledge of the future where her people will migrate to foreign shores. She is sure that with migration they will bring their heritage along with them and enrich the new land as Sita did with her confounding presence which brought colour and cheer to the places she trod. Through Sita's deeds, the author

signifies the rare combination of a tough and beautiful women out to prove her spirit of one with nature.

This modern text implies that while migration is inevitable given the rising phenomenon of globalization, it is important that the migrants carry their tradition and culture with them to the new soil when attempting to adapt and conform to the ways of the new land. Choice of Sita as a character to explore may lie in the fact that Sita had spent a big share of her life as an exile in different soils. She did so with cheer and instead of pining away for the lost glory and comfort, she embraces new places and brings richness to them. The current text *Sita's Promise* implores immigrants to keep this in mind and exemplifies it through the incidence concerning the tern. Though communal sense of oneness is important, it is also important to learn to survive and contribute to the land to which one transplants oneself.

The analysis sums up how hypertextuality adds a new dimension to the author-reader perspective of a text, relationship between old and new text. A text is not a standalone entity, it stays as a response to the past and leaves an interpretation for the future. Reading Parameswaran's text through hypertextual lenses is a tribute to both the author and her works. These works are witnesses to the societal changes at the time with panoramic view of those changes from yore. Parameswaran has taken stories familiar to the Indo Canadian community and re-interpreted them in the thought of contemporary issues and debates on changing philosophy of moral values. Sita and Meera may be mythical images but for the values that they symbolize lives in every women, no matter what their stand is in society, ideology and community. The will, devotion and the pristine virtues of Sita and Meera are inevitable through the age of multiculturalism.

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