

Gender Parity in Uma Parameswaran's *What Was Always Hers*

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Abstract

Women studies aims to understand and explain the nature of gender equality. It examines women's and men's social role in a variety of fields. Feminist theories also focus on analyzing gender inequality. From the initial stage, women are dominated by the male society, for example The biblical text portrays of Eve, as the one who brought sin and death in the world. There are so many women writers and administrators attempting to change the social constructs about women. But still they are struggling to obliterate the gender inequality, reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay and give voice for women's suffrage, sexual harassment and sexual violence. They combat for social and cultural, religious equalities. This paper examines the plight of the immigrant Indian women through the Writings of Uma Parameswaran.

Key Words: Feminist, cultural, religious, inequality, domestic violence.

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Uma Parameswaran is Indian born Canadian writer. She was born in India and settled in Canada. She has published poetry, novels, drama and short-fiction. She is an expert in Diasporic literature but all her novels and fiction concentrate on feministic issues. She was born in Madras, India in 1938 and brought up in Jabalpur. She completed her BA at Jabalpur University and received her post graduate in English from Nagpur University, an MA in creative writing from Indiana University and Ph.D. from Michigan State University. She immigrated to Canada in 1966 and settled in Winnipeg. She is a retired professor of English at University of Winnipeg and she has a special interest in the area of South Asian

Canadian Literature. She has received so many awards for her contribution towards literature. Her main works are *A Cycle of the Moon*, *Mangoes on the maple tree*, *Riding High with Krishna and Baseball bat and other stories*, *Sons Must Die*, *Trishanku*, *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Tree* and *What Was Always Hers*.

She mainly focuses on Diasporic literature but all her novels and works concentrate on Feministic issues and most of her protagonists are women. And all her works suggest a positive solution for women's problems. In *What was Always Hers* she explicates women's issues and Lesbian relationships with the Feminist and Lesbian theories.

Veerbala (A) Veeru is the protagonist of the novel *What Was Always Hers*. In this novel Uma Parameswaran has used Lesbian Feminism and Queer Theory. Italian Feminist and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis coined the term "Queer Theory" for a conference she organized at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1990 and a special issue of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist cultural studies* she edited based on that conference. Queer theory attempts to debunk the stable sexes, genders and sexualities developing out of the specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable position. Queer theory examines the discourses of homosexuality developed in the last century in order to place the "Queer" into historical context, deconstructing contemporary arguments both for and against this latest terminology. One of the main themes of lesbian feminism is to denaturalize heterosexuality's "roots" in institutions such as patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism. Lesbian Feminists of color argue for intersectionality in particular the crossings of gender, sex, class and race as an important component of lesbian feminist thought. This theory is an umbrella term for those not only for those deemed sexually deviant but also used to describe those who feel marginalized as a result of standard social practices. It is not about analyzing the binary of the homosexual and heterosexual, it also studies there in relation to other contributing factors like race, class, religion, etc. which is grounded in gender and sexuality.

In *What Was Always Hers*, the author begins the story with the introduction of the protagonist Veeru. In the beginning of the novel Veeru was quietly waiting in the bed for her husband Niranjan. Both were not talking for the past two months, because Niranjan compelled her to abort her baby. She was in bed, he came to the bed and he wanted to say something to her. She wondered because already she did something that showed him still she was awake. He said, "I think it is best that you end it. I'll phone your doctor tomorrow. You know it is best done early in the first trimester"(9). Already Veeru had told Niranjan, "May be, God willing, it will be a girl this time" (9). Because already they have two male children, they were named Vikram and Adarsh. So Niranjan told her, already they have two children that was enough. Moreover the Government had insisted, "we too ours two" (10). Veeru replied to him that was outdated the current slogan is, "we are one ours one" (10), she said already they had crossed the limit, so she begged him for the third baby, but he did not want it. Her eyes were filled with tears. Every night she heard the sound, his fingers on the computer keyboard and the sound of paper rustle in the last six months. They lived in Vancouver, British Columbia. Canadian government has given free schooling, free Medicare, and free foreverything so they could feed ten as easily as one. So one, two and three had no relevance. She thought, "This was the golden land of golden todays and tomorrows"(10)whatever it is whether they can or not, men's decision is dominant among the Indian families. The above discussion clearly shows the male domination.

One day Niranjan sat in his bed and said to Veeru, he would call the doctor, to abort the child. Veeru thought him as murderer with those five words, he had unraveled the tapestry of twice five years. She was convalescing and then for no overt reason, they stayed on their own sides of the bed after the abortion and though Niranjan invariably stroked her hair or back before turning over and she acknowledged it indifferently, they seemed to have arrived at some mutual agreement. She thought for six months until the night he spoke, "we have to end this"(23) Then she thought life should go on. She stopped thinking of him as a murderer. He raised her hand to his cheek and let it drop on his lap and said, "we must file for divorce and it is best we do it soon and get it over with"(23) Veeru withdrew her hand and she was shocked. He said, "It is long overdue Veeru; I cannot go on, torn between the two of

you”(24) Veeru trembled, Two? She was confused, “what did he mean two? Jitin, of course Jitin. Who else could it be?”(24).

When Veeru came to Canada, Jitin was her first acquaintance in Canada, she taught her about Canadian Kitchen and everything about the new circumstances. Veeru looked around the kitchen and said to Jitin, “Deedi, I am so glad you are here to teach me everything”(15) the woman to whom Veeru took right away was Jitin. Jitin was a natural leader. She not only ordered people about in the living room but she managed much of the kitchen work also. she was not good looking. But she had a charisma that made her beautiful in Veeru’s eyes, the personality of one who was in control of herself, her surroundings, a leader. Veeru loved to watch Jitin and she wished Jitin would laugh more often, the laugh that drove away the sadness from that lovely face. But later only she knew Jitin was the reason for her unhappy life.

Niranjan was waiting for Veeru’s answer. She didn’t say anything. He waited for a long time and months, “Six years is a long time”(24) he said, “And it isn’t fair to her (to her, she thought, to her, what am I?) We are not getting any younger, and she has a right to her child, and to all that has always been hers...”(24). Veeru thought about him again, as murderer, she said to herself “How dare you let her child live after killing mine” (24). Niranjan said they have waited for so long time, they wanted to get married, Veeru thought who bothers in Canada if one married twice. Veeru thought to herself “my abortion, say it say it, abortion of my beautiful baby”(25). So he asked her, “I ask you please let me go”(25). He didn’t need the answer immediately but she had to think about that and gave him good answer. Niranjan didn’t care about Veeru as a woman and totally new to that land, her husband needs her to go away, it was terrible for poor Indian women. Veeru felt so sad because when she came to Canada, first she met Jitin and she called her ‘Deedi, Deedi’ perhaps Jitin advised her to avoid that word, ironically she knew it was correct.

From the beginning, whenever Veeru was crying with homesickness and memories of her child, she phoned Jitin, she came from school and consoled her. Veeru relaxed when she saw Jitin’s smile. Even whenever Niranjan was upset, Veeru called Jitin. Of course Veeru had noticed in the beginning Niranjan placing his arm on Jitin’s shoulder. But she convinced herself it to be normal in Canada. But now she

hated her, again Niranjana asked her, the answer about that Jitin's matter, Veeru replied no. Niranjana said to her, nothing will change, except his stay in the house, he would be ready to provide all her needs and children's needs. They would live in the same house, even he would leave his Volvo car also. And he finally needs her answer only. This statement proves that men are seeing women as flesh, if they wanted them they taste them and after getting bored they throw them away. But woman are losing their total life. Still both Niranjana and Veeru were living in the same house and sleeping in the same bed. As usual the boys spoke nonstop and Niranjana took them for hockey practice, swimming and playing video games with them. But she was quiet, again he came and asked her, "Give us our freedom"(29). These words hurt her much because "our" meant not for Veeru and Niranjana, it meant for Jitin and Niranjana. Veeru thought they were sisters, but now all seemed to be fake. Jitin was a hypocrite to Veeru. Niranjana left her. She felt powerful again, the power of how far she had come, how she had become the woman she was born to be, self-confident, energetic, she had carefully crafted herself into her role by growing, to become the woman she born to be. She hated Niranjana, but not Jitin.

Now Veeru was working and managed everything alone. Gerald was her colleague in her office. He was very handsome and a very talented person. He wanted to join her as his business partner as well as domestic partner. Everyone knew in the office, but Veeru did not care about that and she didn't say anything. Veeru didn't care about anything, her life was going on smoothly. one day she switched on the answering machine, having heard it beep during her meeting. It was Pritpal, one of the current group of workers around Niranjana. Veeru dialed the number. Pritpal asked her if it was Veeru, she replied yes, Pritpal said, "I don't know how to tell you this, Boss has been in an accident"(34). Veeru's heart missed a beat. She said nothing, but she wanted to say "why call me? Call her. His wife" (34). Her heart urged her to ask when? where?. Pritpal said, still he was in hospital, but very soon, they'll be taking him. Then she left from office, the phone was ringing, when she entered the house that was Niranjana's father, he said, "we got the news Veeru" (34) and he said he would find out the details but nothing could be done, he called them five minutes once in last six hours. Veeru was shocked as she knew only 30 minutes before. He said, "I am sorry, betti, to be bothering you at this time, but not knowing what happened is so much

worse than... Beti, beti I am so sorry; take care”(35). She thought about her parents-in-laws’ love for her and their tender voice. They did not know anything except that he was dead. Next day morning Veeru and the boys went to the funeral chapel for their private farewell.

Veeru had been looking for her. She was so tired with grief and misery. Veeru wanted to rush down and embrace her and never let her go. She had a baby, just then the baby whimpered. One took the baby from Jitin’s arm. Veeru sat down and took Vikram’s hand and said, “Hold my hand, Vik don’t let go of my hand, ever” (49) the lawyer explained the will to Veeru. The will was written five years back, it was valid only if some other will did not turn up. According to his policy, his daughter by Jitin was his beneficiary but Veeru by default was the sole inheritor of all other assets, if no other turned up. Jitin signed wherever they needed after careful reading. Jitin had Niranjana and Veeru had the rest of his money, all was fair.

Vikram was playing Junior League hockey. Veeru parked her car on the street near the school. She did not care about her Audi car parked in the street. She turned into Craft Street and was overcome with sadness. That house was exactly the same as it had been ten years ago, the garage still somewhat teetering, and the window frames still peeling paint and the flowers still bright. There was a little girl with a teenager, she followed them and pressed the doorbell. That little girl opened the door. And Kate, caretaker of that baby, Kate came and welcomed her, she said to wait till Jitin came. And Kate took that little girl Niranjana to feed milk. After drinking the milk the child Nira came to Veeru and asked her name and some details about her. Then Veeru brought a gift to Nira and that was an ABC book. Nira asked her, if she knew about her already, she told, “yes, I knew, I’d find the sweetest little girl in the world in this house” (56).

Jitin came there and she didn’t see veeru, she told Katie, that she would have a shower and after the shower she quickly prepared the dinner. But before that Nira slept. And Katie also had gone, Veeru thought of Jitin with the same longing as ever that had not lost its edge of pain that would never lose that edge of pain no matter how many years passed. Jitin, Jitin, her heart cried. Jitin came in, her hair washed and still wet, “so nice to see you, Veeru”(58) and called her for tea. Veeru saw her moving towards her as

in slow motion from the stars. She felt her head drawn to the waiting breast, felt arms around her shoulders, tight, head pressed on her own, and heard Jitin's heart throbbing wildly. When the throbs turned from beats to rhythmic pulse, Jitin said, "Thank you for coming"(58) and then "How many nights I have lulled myself to sleep like this, Veeru, how many days I have imagined holding you just so when I've felt the ground sinking under me"(58).

Then time stopped still, Jitin held Veeru and gently ran her fingers over the outline of her hairline, gently. Veeru had remembered the sexual touch of Niranjan. She thought how she knew, the way of Niranjan touching. Then both were having an affair. Both were holding each other tightly and hugging. Both moaned their names Jitin, Jitin. Veeru lovely Veeru, like that. The words were his, or hers, but it didn't matter, at last at last they were together. "If there be paradise on earth, it is this, it is this,"(59) said the other. Both fell silent in remembrance of other times, the other voice, romantically deep and rich. They laughed, "This is crazy"(59) she said. Both were talking about their relationship, whether it is possible to continue or not and their conversation went long about the same topic. They said, they have wasted all these years, they felt they have a lot of living to do. And both were laughing. And Veeru asked her, why she took her husband from her. Jitin replied that was different. And Veeru said she loved Niranjan until he aborted her child. Jitin was shocked about that abortion. But she would not like to talk about that. And Veeru said, "Yes now that I have you, I can love him again"(61). Jitin said, she was pretty, lucky and she stole him from Veeru. Veeru said, "You only took what was always yours"(61) another said, "we knew, we always knew"(61).

Veeru said to Jitin, about that last day in the funeral, Veeru thought never let Jitin go. "If I had let go of your hand even a moment, I would not have survived that..those terrible days, that emptiness, that all-engulfing void"(62). Veeru said, Jitin had so many people, but she had no one. Then again the talk "That this will work out? That's been the trouble all along, this assumption of yours that I know everything, have been everywhere?(63). Then they said "we'll never be alone again, God willing" (66). Jitin said to her, this is paradise but Veeru had to get up and go back to her children. Veeru said, "Our Children Ours"(66). They said, "from this day forward, till the death do us part"(66) They said again they

would laugh, they would sing and dance. Both were very happy. They were going to be even happier. They think “God willing God had willed it so from the beginning, but we were too stupid to see or hear” (66). They said about their relationship. From the beginning of the story, Veeru was a naïve woman, but she was defeated by her husband, and she had spent her times in alone with self-confidence and her love on her children. But at last the story ends with lesbian relationship with her husband’s second wife. How crazy it was but the situation made her to do those things. In western countries lesbian relationships was normal, slowly it has spread among Indian communities too. Uma Parameswaran explained the lesbian relationships through her novel *What Was Always Hers*. She has explained the women empowerment too, her writings have inspired the next generation people and writers too, because her ending has given the solution to all the problems. Woman can stand alone without men support. Uma Parameswaran’s writing encourage the downtrodden women.

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