

Gender, Betrayal, and Female Selfhood in Uma Parameswaran's *What Was Always Hers*

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Abstract

Uma Parameswaran's *What Was Always Hers* presents the emotional, social, and moral struggles of an Indian immigrant woman whose married life in Canada becomes a site of betrayal, silence, and self-discovery. The novel places Veerubala, called Veeru, at the centre of a painful domestic world where marriage, motherhood, migration, and gendered expectation intersect. Her life with Niranjana begins with trust and admiration, yet it slowly reveals the unequal power given to men within family life. Niranjana's decision to force Veeru toward abortion and his later demand for divorce expose the fragile position of women who are expected to obey, endure, and preserve family honour. Parameswaran studies gender equality through Veeru's suffering, but the novel moves beyond victimhood. Veeru grows into a woman capable of moral clarity, emotional strength, and self-possession. Her response to Jitin and Nira also shows a wider feminist consciousness, for she refuses to turn one woman into the enemy of another. This paper examines how *What Was Always Hers* portrays gender inequality within marriage, migration, motherhood, and social respectability. It argues that Parameswaran's fiction presents female strength as a gradual recovery of selfhood, dignity, and ethical maturity.

Keywords: gender equality, feminism, immigrant woman, patriarchy, marriage, motherhood, selfhood, Uma Parameswaran.

Introduction

Uma Parameswaran is an important voice in Indian diasporic writing. Her works often move through the emotional worlds of Indian immigrants who try to build lives in Canada while carrying memories, values, and wounds from India. Her fiction is especially attentive to women who live between cultures. These women face the demands of family, marriage, motherhood, tradition, community expectations, and migration. In *What Was Always Hers*, Parameswaran studies these pressures through the life of Veerubala, known as Veeru, an Indian woman who moves from Punjab to Canada after marriage.

The novel is concerned with gender equality, yet its treatment of the subject is quiet and deeply human. Parameswaran does not present gender equality as an abstract slogan. She presents it through a wife waiting in bed after a painful abortion, through a woman who has been betrayed by the husband she trusted, through a mother who tries to protect her sons from bitterness, and through an immigrant who must rebuild herself in a foreign country. Veeru's life becomes a site where several social forces meet: patriarchy, migration, marital power, motherhood, female friendship, betrayal, and self-respect.

At the beginning of her married life, Veeru believes in Niranjana. He appears intelligent, committed, idealistic, and socially conscious. He fights for agricultural Indian workers in British Columbia and carries an image of public morality. Yet his public activism exists beside private injustice. This contrast gives the novel its critical force. A man who speaks of community welfare can still fail the woman inside his own home. Through this irony, Parameswaran exposes the gap between social ideals and domestic conduct. Veeru's journey is also the journey of a rural Indian woman who learns to live in Canada. She arrives with hope, uncertainty, and dependence. She slowly learns languages, social codes, public confidence, and practical independence. Her growth is neither sudden nor dramatic. It happens through daily experience, repeated hurt, and inner

questioning. The woman who first enters Canada as Niranjana's wife gradually becomes a person who can define herself beyond him.

This paper examines gender equality in *What Was Always Hers* by focusing on Veeru's experiences as wife, mother, immigrant, and woman. It studies the ways in which Parameswaran represents patriarchal control through marriage and reproduction. It also explores Veeru's moral growth, especially in her refusal to hate Jitin and her ability to claim dignity after betrayal. The novel finally suggests that female strength lies in self-respect, emotional courage, and solidarity with other women.

Gender Equality and Feminist Concerns

Gender equality refers to equal dignity, rights, opportunities, and freedom for women and men. It includes equal access to education, property, employment, decision-making, bodily autonomy, safety, and social respect. It also requires a change in attitudes. A woman's value cannot be measured by obedience, sacrifice, marriage, fertility, or domestic usefulness alone. A woman has desires, intelligence, judgement, and a moral life of her own.

Feminist thought studies the structures that reduce women's freedom. Patriarchy works through laws, religion, customs, family practices, language, and emotional training. From childhood, many girls are taught to adjust, obey, tolerate, and preserve family dignity. Men are often allowed a wider field of action. Women are expected to carry the burden of honour. Marriage becomes the place where this inequality takes its most intimate form.

Mahatma Gandhi's statement that "to call woman the weaker sex is a libel" remains meaningful in this context. Gandhi links strength with moral power and sees woman as superior when strength is understood in ethical terms. This idea is useful for reading Veeru. She is wounded by betrayal, yet her moral strength gradually becomes visible. She endures pain, but endurance alone does not define her. She thinks, judges, decides, and rises.

Gender inequality becomes sharper when women are denied control over their own bodies. Reproductive decisions are often controlled by husbands, families, caste expectations, economic anxieties, or social pressure. In *What Was Always Hers*, Veeru's pregnancy becomes a point of conflict because Niranjana decides that two children are enough. His decision carries the language of reason, planning, and practicality, but it erases Veeru's wish for the child. Her body becomes a field on which another person's decision is imposed.

Migration also affects gender. Women who move to a foreign land after marriage often become dependent on the husband for language, legal security, social contact, and cultural orientation. The foreign country may offer new freedom, yet it may also intensify loneliness. Veeru's life in Canada shows this double condition. She learns and grows there, but her first years are marked by homesickness and dependence. Her later self-confidence is hard-earned.

Uma Parameswaran and Diasporic Feminist Writing

Uma Parameswaran's writing has a distinct place in Indian diasporic literature. Her fiction often portrays the everyday experiences of Indian immigrants in Canada. She writes about homes, marriages, friendships, cultural memory, generational conflict, and the search for belonging. Women in her works are rarely passive figures. They may suffer, but they also observe, learn, and change. Their struggles are domestic and cultural, yet they carry larger questions about identity and power.

In *What Was Always Hers*, Parameswaran brings feminist concerns into the immigrant household. Veeru's story is rooted in Indian social expectations, but it develops in Canada. This setting matters. Canada offers space for change, language learning, driving, public participation, and a wider social world. At the same time, Veeru's marriage carries older patriarchal habits into the new country. The immigrant home becomes a place where Indian patriarchy and Canadian modernity meet uneasily.

Niranjana's public identity makes this tension stronger. He is an activist who works for the Indian community. He appears socially responsible. Yet his treatment of Veeru exposes the limits of his idealism. Parameswaran quietly asks whether a man can speak for justice outside the home while denying justice to his wife. Through

Niranjan, the novel examines a familiar contradiction: public progressiveness may coexist with private patriarchy.

Veeru's growth gives the novel its feminist shape. She moves from admiration to disillusionment, from dependence to inner strength, from shock to judgement. Her voice becomes clearer as the novel advances. She learns that love, marriage, and respect must include her own dignity. Her final strength does not depend on revenge. It rests on self-knowledge.

Veeru's Marriage and the Illusion of Security

Veeru comes from a village in Punjab. Niranjan chooses to marry a village girl, and when he first meets her, he sees her as bright, intelligent, and fortunate. For Veeru, Niranjan represents a larger world. He is educated, active, and full of plans. He takes her to Talkatora Gardens and speaks of his ideals. He tells her that he can guarantee his devotion to the woman he marries and to the children they may have. Veeru believes him. Marriage begins for her with trust.

This trust is important because betrayal gains meaning only against the memory of belief. Veeru does not enter the marriage with suspicion. She admires Niranjan. She credits him for her growth. She remembers how he encouraged her, pushed her, praised her, and helped her become more capable. She had often said "thanks to him" and meant it. The phrase later becomes painful because it shows the depth of her dependence and gratitude.

After marriage, Veeru comes to Canada. She meets Jitin and Demmi and feels comforted by brown faces in a foreign land. She respects Jitin and calls her Deedi. This early respect makes the later revelation more devastating. Jitin is not merely another woman; she is someone Veeru trusted. Parameswaran uses this domestic circle to show how betrayal can grow inside intimacy.

Veeru's marriage appears secure from the outside. She has children, a home, and a husband with social standing. Yet the inner structure of the marriage is unequal. Niranjan makes decisions. Veeru responds. He frames his wishes as reason. Her feelings are treated as obstacles. This imbalance reaches its cruelest point during her third pregnancy.

Abortion, Bodily Pain, and Patriarchal Control

The novel opens with Niranjan's pressure on Veeru to end her pregnancy. He says it is best to end it early and that he will phone the doctor. His language is practical and controlled. Veeru's desire is simple and tender: she hopes that the child may be a girl. The couple already has two sons, and she longs for a daughter. For Niranjan, the matter is settled through the slogan "Hum doh, hamara doh." Two children are enough.

The scene reveals the gendered control of reproduction. Veeru's body carries the child, but Niranjan claims the authority to decide. He treats abortion as family management. Veeru experiences it as loss, guilt, and violence. After the abortion, the word "murderer" beats in her heart. The word is directed at Niranjan, yet it also shows her own unbearable grief. She has been made to participate in an act she cannot emotionally accept.

This moment is central to the novel's feminist meaning. Women's bodies are often governed through the language of family welfare, social respectability, population control, or economic practicality. Veeru's grief exposes the emotional cost of such control. Her pain is both physical and mental. She cannot bear Niranjan's presence because he has touched the deepest region of her motherhood.

Parameswaran also links this event with later betrayal. After the abortion, Niranjan speaks of divorce. He tells Veeru that six years is a long time and that it is unfair to Jitin, who has a right to her child and to what has always been hers. This statement tears Veeru apart. Niranjan has made Veeru end her pregnancy, yet he speaks of Jitin's right to a child. Veeru's anger comes from this moral contradiction. "How dare you let her child live after killing mine?" is the question that burns inside her.

The title *What Was Always Hers* becomes deeply ironic here. What belongs to whom? Does Niranjan belong to Jitin? Does motherhood belong to the woman whose child is allowed to live? Does dignity belong to Veeru?

The title opens questions about possession, right, love, and betrayal. Parameswaran refuses a simple answer. Instead, she shows how women are made to suffer when men distribute affection, legitimacy, and recognition according to their own convenience.

Betrayal and the Male Claim to Freedom

Niranjan asks Veeru to give them their freedom. The phrase wounds her because it presents his betrayal as a reasonable request. Freedom, in his mouth, means freedom for himself and Jitin. Veeru's freedom is absent from the sentence. She is asked to release others while carrying her own humiliation.

His plan is also revealing. He says that very little will change. He will provide for her needs and the children's house. He may leave the Volvo car. Such statements reduce marriage to maintenance. They treat Veeru as someone who can be compensated materially after emotional betrayal. Parameswaran exposes a patriarchal habit here: men may believe that financial provision can replace loyalty, respect, and emotional truth.

Veeru's pain comes from multiple losses. She loses trust in her husband. She loses the child she wanted. She loses her image of Jitin as elder sister. She loses the marriage she believed in. She also loses the version of herself who had praised Niranjan as the source of her growth. Betrayal forces her to reinterpret her past. The man who helped her grow has also used that growth within a structure he controlled.

Yet this pain becomes the beginning of self-recognition. Veeru starts to see that she has grown beyond her earlier village view of life. She has learned Punjabi and English through daily use. She has learned to drive. She has become confident in public speech. She has learned to understand people and situations. These achievements came through life in Canada, but they now belong to her. They are "what was always hers" in a deeper sense: her intelligence, strength, and capacity for growth.

Migration and the Making of a New Self

Veeru's immigrant life is filled with emotional strain, but it also creates space for transformation. When she arrives in Canada, she misses home and her child. She depends on the familiar presence of other Indians. Over time, however, she acquires skills that alter her self-image. Language becomes one of the most important signs of change. Her Punjabi and English improve because she uses them daily. Language gives her access to people, confidence, and social movement.

Driving is another important sign. For many immigrant women, learning to drive in a Western country means practical freedom. It allows movement beyond the home. It reduces dependence on the husband. It brings contact with the public world. Veeru's ability to drive shows that she has entered a wider space of self-reliance.

She also becomes a capable speaker. She learns to assess an audience and speak in their language. This detail is significant because speech is tied to power. The village girl who once entered marriage with awe becomes a woman who can address others with confidence. Her public voice grows even as her private marriage collapses.

Parameswaran gives Veeru's transformation an inward quality. She asks herself whether she was born to be a jilted wife. This question shows her refusal to let betrayal define her. She has been wounded, but she searches for an identity larger than abandonment. Her growth is painful because it requires her to separate her self-worth from Niranjan's love.

Motherhood and Moral Instruction

Veeru's strength appears powerfully in her relationship with her son Vikram. After Niranjan's death in an accident, another crisis enters her life. Niranjan's parents see Veeru as his legal wife and ask her to perform the rites. The rituals bring together family, legitimacy, death, and unresolved pain. Veeru must stand in a position that has been both given to her and emptied by betrayal.

During this time, Vikram expresses hatred toward Jitin. His anger is understandable because he sees Jitin as the woman who broke his home. Veeru's response reveals her moral clarity. She tells him that he may hate a man for a short time, but he must not hate a woman. Her words are crucial to the feminist meaning of the novel.

Veeru refuses to train her son in hatred toward women. She refuses to make Jitin the sole cause of the family's suffering.

This is one of Veeru's finest moments. A betrayed wife might easily turn her pain against the other woman. Veeru chooses a larger understanding. She sees that patriarchy often divides women and encourages them to blame one another. By advising Vikram in this way, she interrupts that pattern. She teaches him that women should not become targets of male anger or social contempt.

Veeru's advice also protects her son from bitterness. She does not deny pain. She does not romanticize betrayal. She simply refuses to let hatred shape his moral life. Her motherhood becomes ethical instruction. She teaches him compassion, restraint, and gender awareness at a moment when her own wound is still fresh.

Veeru, Jitin, and Female Solidarity

Veeru's relationship with Jitin is complex. At first, Jitin is a comforting presence in Canada. Veeru calls her Deedi and respects her. Later, Jitin becomes the woman connected with Niranjana's betrayal. The revelation could easily turn the narrative into a rivalry between two women. Parameswaran chooses a more mature path. She allows Veeru's anger, but she also lets Veeru move toward understanding.

Veeru's later affection toward Jitin and Nira shows her growth. Nira, the daughter of Niranjana and Jitin, is innocent. Veeru's acceptance of the child is an act of emotional generosity. It does not erase her pain. It shows that she can separate the child from the betrayal. It also shows that she has moved beyond possessive definitions of family.

Female solidarity in the novel is difficult, wounded, and incomplete, yet it matters. Veeru's refusal to hate Jitin creates a feminist ethic. Women in patriarchal societies are often judged through their relationships with men: wife, mistress, mother, daughter, widow. Parameswaran invites readers to see them as full human beings trapped in overlapping systems of desire, dependence, and social judgement.

Jitin's position also deserves attention. She is seen through Veeru's pain, but she too lives within social vulnerability. Niranjana's words suggest that Jitin has waited for recognition for six years. She has a child whose place within the family is complicated. The novel does not present her merely as a destroyer of domestic peace. Through Veeru's later response, Parameswaran makes room for compassion between women who have been placed in painful relation by a man's choices.

Niranjana's Public Idealism and Private Failure

Niranjana is an activist who works for agricultural Indians in the British Columbia fruit belt. His public role gives him an aura of seriousness and moral purpose. He appears committed to service. Veeru herself admires this quality when she first knows him. Yet the novel steadily reveals the contradiction between his public values and private conduct.

This contradiction is one of Parameswaran's sharpest critiques. Social justice work can lose moral meaning when domestic justice is ignored. A man may speak for workers, community, and public causes while silencing the woman who shares his home. Niranjana's activism does not protect Veeru from emotional injury. His ideals do not prevent him from controlling her reproductive choice or asking her to step aside for another relationship.

The novel's feminist force lies in this exposure. Patriarchy often survives even among educated, progressive, or socially active men. It may hide behind affection, persuasion, reason, or noble causes. Niranjana persuades, praises, guides, and pushes Veeru. Some of this helps her grow, but it also reinforces his authority. He becomes the one who shapes her while claiming to love her. Later, when she grows into herself, she must separate gratitude from subordination.

Female Strength and Selfhood

Veeru's strength is not loud. It develops slowly. She suffers deeply after the abortion and betrayal, but she does not remain broken. She rethinks her life. She measures Niranjana's actions. She sees Jitin and Nira with

emotional complexity. She guides her son away from hatred. She accepts that she has become a woman with confidence, energy, and judgement.

Her strength also lies in her ability to feel. Parameswaran does not equate empowerment with emotional hardness. Veeru cries, grieves, remembers, and feels anger. These feelings are part of her humanity. Her recovery comes through facing them rather than hiding them. She becomes strong because she understands pain and still chooses dignity.

The novel also presents selfhood as something already present within the woman, though social life may delay its expression. The phrase “what was always hers” can be read in this way. Veeru’s self-respect, intelligence, courage, and moral strength were always hers. Marriage, migration, and betrayal force these qualities into visibility. Niranjan may have helped her acquire public confidence, but he did not create her inner worth.

This understanding is crucial for feminist reading. Women’s growth is often credited to men who “allow” or “encourage” them. Parameswaran complicates this idea. Veeru may have learned through marriage and migration, yet the capacity to learn belongs to her. The final recognition of selfhood is her own achievement.

Conclusion

Uma Parameswaran’s *What Was Always Hers* is a sensitive exploration of gender inequality, immigrant womanhood, marital betrayal, and female selfhood. Through Veeru’s life, the novel studies the pain caused by patriarchal control inside marriage. Niranjan’s pressure for abortion, his relationship with Jitin, and his demand for freedom reveal how women’s emotions, bodies, and dignity can be pushed aside in the name of male desire and convenience.

Yet the novel’s deepest interest lies in Veeru’s growth. She begins as a village woman who trusts her husband and depends on him in a new country. She becomes a woman who can think, speak, drive, judge, and stand with dignity after betrayal. Her response to Jitin and Nira gives the novel its ethical maturity. She refuses to turn one woman into the enemy of another. She teaches her son to avoid hatred toward women. In doing so, she moves from personal injury to a wider feminist understanding.

Parameswaran presents gender equality through lived experience rather than theory alone. Equality means the right to bodily choice, emotional respect, marital honesty, social dignity, and self-definition. Veeru’s story shows that female strength can grow out of pain, but it also shows the cost of a society that expects women to bear such pain silently. Her final image is that of a woman who has suffered, understood, and risen into her own selfhood. What was always hers is finally recognized: her courage, her moral intelligence, and her right to live with dignity.

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