

A Cycle of the Moon

by Uma Parameswaran

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Reviewed by Madeline Coopsammy

Uma Parameswaran, Fulbright scholar, retired English professor of the University of Winnipeg, has previously published poetry, drama, short stories and the novel, *What Was Always Hers*, which won the 1999 New Muse Award and the 2000 National Canadian Authors Award for the best collection of short fiction.

A Cycle of the Moon is set in Madras in the 1960s in a large family compound of an upper-class Brahmin family. The patriarch of the family is Judge Ramakrishna Iyer, who has built separate houses for his married sons on his two-acre plot of land graced by a grove of coconut trees. Underneath the judge's sharp wit and heavy-handed control of his large family is a man of great generosity, compassion and common sense.

Uma Parameswaran has created the daily life of the extended family in great detail, filled with colour, jealousies and conflicts. But the novel offers much more. There is the backstory of the older characters who lived through the Independence struggle, the threat of war from China and Pakistan, all of which give the story a wider canvas. In addition, the writing is awash with Hindu mythology and philosophy.

The startling incident with which the novel begins is guaranteed to capture the reader's interest immediately. It is the sudden return of Mayura, a newly married granddaughter, who declares that she has left her husband and will not go back. The family is naturally abuzz with gossip, conjecture and suspicion. Mayura says of her husband that he is "a boor and a sensualist." His crudity, socializing, gambling and jesting about their intimate life to his friends are all sources of disgust to Mayura. She wonders why she, an intellectual from a cultured and highly educated family, was paired with this businessman instead of with someone in law or academia.

Mayura's return is the catalyst that forces out into the open the hidden stories of the women and men in the family. Mayura provokes Jaya to reveal to her younger sister her past indiscretion. Mayura is not all vindictiveness and arrogance, however. She sees the change that Canada has wrought in her cousin Chander and knows that he is now sensual and corrupt. She is compassionate towards her brother about his impending marriage, the age-old arranged marriage being the bugbear of the young people of India since time immemorial.

Mayura has inherited her grandfather's personality. She does not suffer fools gladly and she returns home, not in humiliation and meekness, but with pride and arrogance. She will confide in no one and though she seeks out only the older women she respects, she barely takes their advice. Great-Aunt Kamakshi and Maya form a startling contrast to each other. The former is the conventional Indian widow, while Maya, moving among the Bombay film crowd, is glamorous and cynical. The encounter with Maya is just the dose of medicine Mayura needs to straighten out her confused ideas. Other characters are unforgettable. Savitri, who though granted a love match with a man of Brahmin caste, but poor, lives to suffer bitterly. Vasudevan, exiled from India during the Independence struggle, is invited back and returns with his daughter, raised in Greece, whose hybrid ancestry and upbringing become a source of conflict for her.

Though the family tree is a bit overwhelming, the novel is, nevertheless, an absorbing read. *A Cycle of the Moon* is a fine accomplishment. ♪

Madeline Coopsammy's work has been published in North American journals and anthologies. Her poetry collection *Prairie Journey* (TSAR) came out in 2004.

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