

The Entwined Threads of Memory and History in the novels of M.G. Vasanji

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Abstract

M.G. Vassanji's novels intricately explore the intersections of personal and collective memory with the histories of colonialism, migration, and diaspora. His works, such as *The Book of Secrets* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, illuminate the often-overlooked stories of marginalized communities, particularly the Indian diaspora in East Africa. Vassanji delves into the complexities of colonial rule, highlighting its racial hierarchies and power dynamics, while also capturing the precarious position of South Asians who were simultaneously privileged and alienated. His narratives critique the romanticized ideals of postcolonial nation-building, exposing the injustices and exclusions faced by minority communities during periods of political upheaval. Memory plays a central role in his storytelling, serving as a tool to reconstruct histories that are fragmented or silenced. By weaving cultural and religious histories, such as those of the Khoja Muslim community, into his novels, Vassanji emphasizes the resilience and adaptability of diasporic identities. Furthermore, his works challenge the dominance of official histories, giving voice to the forgotten and the silenced. Through his nuanced portrayal of immigrant experiences, both in East Africa and Canada, Vassanji bridges the personal and the historical, ensuring that the echoes of unwritten histories are heard and acknowledged. His writing not only revives these stories but also invites readers to reconsider how history is constructed and whose voices are preserved within it.

Keywords: memory, religious history, cultural heritage, alienation, identity crisis.

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Introduction

M. G. Vassanji's enquiry into the past is remarkable. He visits past with a purpose. In *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* he travels through the past with the guidance of the sack and the diary. He beautifully establishes the tradition and culture of Shamsi community, which finds a place in the narration of all the novels. He plans a character, who hails from the Shamsi community and gets displaced in East Africa and then moves to either

Canada or United States. The past acquires a lot of significance to understand the present in the novels of M.G. Vassanji's. As Michel de Certeau remarks

The past, in a sense, becomes the inert blank page on which the present writes and on which the ink of the present etches its own narratives. (10)

He interweaves past and present exceptionally well in the novels like *No New Land*, *Amriika*, *The Assassin's Song* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. In *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* the narrator undertakes a sojourn through the past. In *No New Land*, *Amriika*, *The Assassin's Song* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* the characters recollect the past to understand the present very well. The protagonist tries to recapture the past and confronts with it as a way of moving forward. The past clarifies their existence in the present. Vassanji's purpose is to probe into the past and to write about the present. As Harish Narang observes. Talking about his own use of the past, he observed that the past helped him create a space - of words, images and landscapes - in which to work with and install the present. (43)

His first two novels try to bring out a history about a set of people who migrated to East Africa. In the novels *No New Land* and *Amriika*, Vassanji tries to analyze the postcolonial despair: homelessness, with a historic consciousness. The colonial and the postcolonial world have witnessed two waves of migration. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* narrate about the first wave of migration. The Indians from Gujarat migrated during the end of nineteenth century. These two novels portray the condition of Vassanji's fictitious Shamsi community in East Africa. They are described as traders and enjoying the ambivalent positions between the native blacks and the colonial whites. The first generation of migrated people have an opportunity to shuttle between their homeland and the adopted countries. The characters like Dhanji Govindji, Ji Bai and Pius Fernandes make a visit to their homeland. Though they are physically displaced they are mentally attached to their homeland. Men of this community prefer women from their own origin to get married, though they have lot of European concubines.

The subsequent novels, *No New Land* though it is the second novel of Vassanji, *Amriika* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, narrate the second wave of migration which happened during the decolonization of Africa and particularly after Idi Amin's proclamation that there is no place for Asians in Africa. These characters are caught in double displacement. Unlike the first generation of migrated people the second generation feels the agony of homelessness and displacement. They are sandwiched between past and present. They are neither there nor here. The people who are caught in the second wave of migration have opted for going to Canada or America. These novels reflect Vassanji's own predicament: Moving from one geopolitical space to another also involves moving from a certain emotional, psychological and mental state to the other. Such crossing further affects identity- formation. (Sayed 11)

This crisis oscillates between two senses: between a sense of homelessness and a sense of reclaiming one's past. As Vassanji himself has lived in double displacement, he is overwhelmed by a thought of homelessness. When Vassanji is asked about the predicament of his "home" as a writer, Vassanji replies that his writing is partly a search for home.

What is home to me? If I think about it, it seems to me that my writing is in fact a search for home. The home that I lost and the home that I am seeking. I don't believe in the simple process of learning and arrival. I have not arrived. I may have unpacked, but I don't think I have arrived. Home for me is a constant process. It is the search the homelessness. It is like being in a train, where there's the thrill of motion, the rhythm. Arrival would be disappointing; it would be an anticlimax. And in fact, a betrayal. You see, home is a tremendous guilt. So, at best, writing is a home. (Vassanji 8)

Vassanji, thus explicates his purpose in writing about homelessness. Like Naipaul he takes comfort in his writing. The characters in the two novels arrive in an unknown place and are caught in the anxiety of an impending departure. As Chelva Kanaganayakam observes

The reconstruction of the past now gives way, in Vassanji's second novel *No New Land*, to a preoccupation with the present, with the tenants of Sixty-nine Rosecliffe Park Drive in Don Mills, whose lives illustrate the ironies, the pathos of the hardships of having to live between two worlds, neither of which provides the harmony of a life that the mind imagines and craves for. (56)

The protagonists of these two novels, *No New Land* and *Amriika* happen to land in Canada and USA to find a resting place. Both the protagonists are the members of the Shamsi community origin, and these two novels are traditionally structured. They explore the tensions confronted by the immigrants who move to Canada and America. The epigraph of the novel *No New Land*

"There's no new land, my friend no
New sea; for the city will follow you,
In the same streets you'll wander endlessly"(46).

The epigraph reflects V.S.Naipaul's statement in his *The Bend in the River: Nowhere is safe*. Naipaul finds homelessness as a universal predicament in the postcolonial world. He goes on to say that people change prison while shifting from one place to another. Vassanji like V.S.Naipaul is doubly displaced. The protagonist in *No New Land* and *Amriika* are doubly displaced: India to Africa, Africa to Canada or USA. These two novels mainly focus on the immigrant's predicament, and they present a sequence of incidents to show how they feel alienated in the adopted countries. History can be found in their personal lives; unlike in *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. The protagonists reflect Vassanji's stay at America and his negotiation in Canada. As Harish Narang observes

It is this double alienation – their failure to acquire the new value system of their new land of adoption and at the same time their inability to fight the onslaught of more radical types from their own community. (48)

The plot of the novel revolves around the Lalani's family- Haji Lalani and his son Nurdin Lalani. Haji Lalani belongs to the first wave of migration and Nurdin to the second wave. Nurdin who is now transported to Canada is a prototype of all immigrants who think Canada is a wonderful land. In postcolonial times, the position of Indian communities in East Africa is untenable. By narrating the story of Shamsi community in the novel *No New Land* Vassanji tries to give voice to the Canadian immigrant experience. *No New Land* portrays the community's fate in Toronto where one of the protagonists, Nurdin Lalani, emigrates with his family. Nurdin Lalani, an average man, is regarded by his father as an underachiever, useless and "good – for – nothing" (NNL 19). "One brother making millions in the diamond business, the other making his – so Nurdin had heard – in the black market. Always he, Nurdin, the middle one, neither here nor there". (NNL 169)

The novel *No New Land* begins with two depressing events in the life of Lalani family: the youngest daughter Fatima receiving news of her getting admission to Arts and Science instead of the coveted and prestigious pharmacy, and the father Nurdin being accused of assaulting a white woman. Nurdin actually helps the white woman. The touching by Nurdin is viewed by the white woman with seriousness. Moreover Nurdin Lalani has been brought up with strict religious codes. Nurdin is caught immediately with a racial conflict. Nurdin confuses it with moral morality. His past which has guided his moral self has been affected much. This dilemma is well explained by Vassanji who analyses

For Nurdin Lalani, who was brought up under a very strict religious code, even to think of touching a girl lustfully was already a sin. He himself was not sure whether he sinned. She accuses him of touching her with an intent to rape and he did touch her, not exactly with the intent to rape but still with the thought of it in his head. So there was that element of ambiguity operating in the novel. (Rhodes 115)

Nurdin feels defeated and dejected. The whole family feels this shock. The whole novel describes the conflict between two different cultural ports. It is difficult to understand the meaning of one person touching with lust or touching with care. Nurdin happens to think about his father and how he taught him the morality of mankind. And this past disturbs him very much. This is his mental state. He has to get a process of assimilation. The

weather is another monster. It is another extreme level of change that he and his family have to undergo. His arrival in Canada shocks him with outer and inner space of Canada. He finds the weather is totally uncongenial. Snow had fallen, a blistering wind blew squalls on the road and, as they stepped outside the airport building, it made sails of their ill-fitting second-hand clothes, which had seen better days on the backs of colonial bwanas and memsahib on chilly African evenings. "So this is snow", Zera remarked. It had been cleared into unimpressive mounts and at their feet was a fine powder blown about by reckless gusts. Toes freezing, faces partly paralyzed, eyes tearing, they stood outside, shoulders hunched. The two children were moaning and shivering, weeping, hiding behind adults coats, crating fresh pockets and exposing fresher areas of anatomy for the wind to snatch at. (NNL 35)

Nuridin gets baffled and does not know what to do and where to go in that moment of crisis. The legal associate Jamal and Nanji, the part time professor advised him to reconcile himself with the Canadian life. He's torn between his memory of his own morality given to him by his community and the predicament which he feels at the present moment. Nuridin recollects how he has been brought up by a puritan father Haji Lalani. His memory takes him to his child hood days, "to begin from the beginning".

Haji Lalani becomes a strict disposition. Though Haji Lalani had an opportunity to have a slave woman to create half-breed though the members of the community have done, he restrains himself from such immoral activity. Gradually Haji Lalani becomes one of the prominent citizens among the Indian community. He is made a mukhi, the presider of the mosque and he has been very popular as a mukhi among his community. Nuridin recalls his father "they would not hesitate to send away a loved or rude boy with a cuff or to scold a girl who had a compromised her modesty by even a glance at a woman. So, of his sons he made examples" (NNL 16-17). With his father's request, Nuridin is able to get a job with the help of a missionary. As Nuridin has to travel through various modes of transportation he drops himself from that assignment. When Haji Lalani passes away, Nuridin feels the vacuum: "a way of life disappeared" (NNL 21). Africa gets independence, the Africans start to feel that the future is theirs and they are the masters particularly in Uganda, when General Idi Amin had overthrown an elected government the Asians, exploiters who did not want to integrate with the Africans, had to leave the land.

The Asians do not know where to go. They feel the agony of alienation and homelessness. They are overwhelmed by the thought of their history which has been mostly in oral form. To live such a past suddenly makes them adrift. Vasanji admits

We wanted to know about "Lancashire" and "Cheshire"; we desired it because that is where we believed our future lay. We were not sophisticated or educated enough; our histories had not been written; records had not been kept; we had oral forms of history that were mythological in nature related to miraculous communal and religious origins. (Sayed 301).

Thus, Vasanji's novels is not just to tell a story, but to reclaim a past that was forgotten. He proves that for a diasporic community caught between Africa, India, and the West, memory becomes the only true homeland. In the end, memory humanizes history, and history validates memory. Ultimately, the study of memory and history in Vasanji's novels reveals that understanding the past is essential for defining the present identity and for surviving in a multicultural world.

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