



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

TREATMENT OF DIASPORIC ELEMENTS IN M.G. VASSANJI'S WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

M.G. Vassanji is among those front ranking South Asian immigrant writers from Canada who see themselves as unfixed selves or who comprehend their identity in terms of their being twice displaced as first he migrated from Gujarat to Africa and then to settle as a diasporic in Canada. Vassanji in his novels represent the problems that the Asian diasporas face in Western countries. They can neither give up their old cultures and traditions nor they can adapt themselves to new. So they feel themselves in-between and they long to visit their homeland again. He also focuses on the interaction between the Indian community and the native Africans and the generational differences among first, second and third generations of Diaspora, gender related conflicts/crisis, the transformation of subjectivities, and the emergence of new patterns of life with cross-culture interaction etc.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Vassanji.

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The diasporic writers in Canada are primarily preoccupied with the human experience of dislocation, relocation and assimilation, Canada being a 'cultural mosaic'. Most of them coming from different ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds and respective pasts, look back at the 'routes' of their characters' migration and the consequent effect on their lives with the central trope of dislocation. However, the past in their case (and for their protagonists) is intertwined with confronting the other histories of their adopted lands and their political / cultural / social complexities, as well as the problem of adjustment in another milieu. History and memory thus oscillate in their works to create an alternate sense of their double or triple identities. M.G. Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, Neil Bissondath, Bapsi Sihwa and Michael Ondaatje come from different places and their works echo the respective

pasts merging into present in the restaging of such dislocated and acculturated lives of people. Vassanji's *Gunny Sack* is set in Africa, whereas his second novel *No New Land* has a Canadian background. Mistry's works highlight the Parsi predicament of preserving cultural and religious identity in sectarian and communal upheavels in India. In *A Casual Brutality*, Bissondath presents the varied experiences of his protagonist who leaves his Caribbean island to settle in Toronto. Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, a hybrid text combining travelogue and fiction, captures in vivid terms the turmoil of colonial time in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). This substantiates the point that diasporic journeys locate between one's older ethnic identity and the putative assimilation into yet another 'narrative' of belonging, punctuated by phases of suppression, pragmatism and opportunism to strategically survive and shape one's personal

autonomy while being a minority. Writing on the new diaspora aesthetic, a critic has stated:

I may use it as a sign of the now prevalent attempts to re-define experience as cosmopolitan and cross-cultural and to which the appropriation and interrogation of history manifests as a major requisite, not only to locate the individual or his place in a mapless geography of motions, but the questioning of the whole impact of modernity, especially on the non-western, colonized and post-liberation cultures, so that the post-colony now extends beyond the history and conflicts therein, travelling and placing itself everywhere, anywhere. I call diaspora an extremely malleable expression, creating alternate, bricoleural definitions, given the languages, ethnicities, communities, subalternities and aporias that preside over its unrepressible compulsions and at times, unrepresented character. (Singh 14)

Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji is among those front ranking South Asian immigrant writers from Canada who see themselves as unfixed selves or who comprehend their identity in terms of their being twice displaced. Born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 and raised in Tanzania, Vassanji's family was part of the Shamsi community of Indians who had immigrated to Africa. When he was 19, Vassanji left the University of Nairobi on a scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He studied Nuclear Physics in which he later earned a Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania. From there he migrated to Canada, working at the Chalk River atomic power station. In 1980 Vassanji moved to Toronto and began writing his first novel, *The Gunny Sack* which was published in 1989. That year he, with his wife Nurjehan founded and edited the first issue of the *The Toronto South Asian Review* (TSAR). After the publication of *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji began writing full time and ended his career in Physics. In February 2005, Vassanji was named a member of the order of Canada for his contribution to arts/writing.

Most of Vassanji's works deal with Indians living in East Africa. Some members of this immigrant community later undergo a second migration to

Europe, Canada or the United States. His works are concerned with how these migrations affect the lives and identities of his characters, an issue that is personal to him also.

Vassanji has written six novels, two short stories and non-fiction collections. In most of his works, he focuses on the interaction between the Shamsi (Indian) community and the native Africans, as well as the former British colonial administrators. Even though none of his characters ever return to India, the country's presence looms throughout his works. Vassanji acknowledges his Indian origin, yet he sees himself "as an Afro-Asian". Another major concern of Vassanji's is how History affects the present and how personal and public histories can and do overlap. The colonial history of Kenya and Tanzania serves as the backdrop for many of his novels. His novels also represent the generational differences among first, second and third generations of diaspora, the gender related conflicts, identity conflicts/crisis, etc. Thus his novels deal with various theoretical aspects and tropes of diasporic experiences. In the diasporic context, Vassanji creates fictions which are grounded in personal and communal histories of many of his characters. His fiction engages in retelling alternate accounts of these histories, little known officially and given almost negligible significance. These are histories or stories of the complex process of migration and its cultural/political manifestations, experienced and undergone not only by Indian, but African characters as well.

The experiences of migrancy and living in a diaspora have animated much recent Post-colonial literature, criticism and theory. The literature produced by 'diaspora writers' such as Naipaul, Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, Amitav Ghosh, Hanif Kureishi, Bharati Mukherjee, Caryl Phillips and Ben Zephaniah has proved immensely popular in western literary criticism. Similarly, in the works of academics such as Avtar Brah, Homi K. Bhabha, Roy Chow, Carole Boyee Davies. Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, the new possibilities and problems engendered by the experience of migrancy and diaspora life have been readily explored. The possibilities include

creating new ways of thinking about individual and communal identities, critiquing established schools of critical thought and rethinking the relationships between literature, history and politics. One of the important offshoots of the above has been the way history and experience has been reshaped and relocated following cross-cultural encounters and diasporic dispersals across continents.

The creative writers all over the globe have portrayed these multiple issues pertaining to diaspora lives and experiences from different angles and perspectives but the space occupied by the diasporas is so diverse that all the diasporas can not be clubbed together. Moreover, their concerns and sensibilities vary to a great extent as per their generation, individual perceptions and community and race-specific identities and issues, but overall, their dominant concerns pertaining to diaspora experiences have been of similar nature as discussed so far.

Many Indian diaspora writers writing in English and other languages too have portrayed in their works certain community, region and culture specific- conflicts in the new lands of location revealing the diversity of Indian culture. But their major common concerns about diaspora issues have been dislocation, fragmentation, nostalgia for home, marginalization, racial hatred, cultural and gender conflicts, identity crisis, generational differences, transformation of subjectivities, emergence of new patterns of life with cross cultural inter-action and disintegration of family units of Indian diaspora. This lead to anguish, traumas and dilemmas, suffered by the members of such families in varying degrees and mainly by the children of these unhappy and broken homes, many of whom are shown going astray in the cultural lawlessness of the western countries and inclining towards drug addiction, homosexual and lesbian relationships.

While major concerns of most diasporic writers are the fractured and fluid aspects of individual identities, and new ways of thinking about communal identities, they also foreground generational differences in exploring how new and old diasporas relate to their land of origin and host culture. The element of nostalgia and the quest for roots mark diasporic fiction, for these remain

eternally in conflict, and in the process produce synergetic vision and imagination.

M.G. Vassanji is today arguably a great writer of contemporary diasporic literature. He, like many of his characters is a writer of double displacement; from Gujrat to Africa and then to settle as a diasporic in Canada. In most of his writings, the thematic and political issues related to post-coloniality find its prominent place. His novels represent the problems that the Asian diasporas face in western countries. The blurb on the cover of *In-Between World of Vikram Lal* (2003) reads:

“This novel is part of Vassanji's great talent to demonstrate that the minor changes- unexpected love, sex, accusation- in the life of a very modest man are, in fact, transformations of history.”

The circularity of events is an equally important motif of his work- history as tragic farce, destined to coil back on itself, no matter how much you try to stop it. Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it, goes the familiar aphorism, but one of the strengths of Vassanji's writing is how he demonstrates- not in a gratuitously cynical way- but through insightful stories about specific individuals that even sensitive, self-aware people can become trapped in a skein of historical wrongs. Vassanji opines, “In my work, the present is always interacting with the past”, “There is a feeling of entrapment by history- one little decision and a whole wave comes crashing down on you. This is especially true of Africa, but even in India one thinks of all those who are trapped by the violent memories of partition”. (Singh, Jai Arjun) History, historical interventions and dialectics are thus powerful tropes in Vassanji's works, which serve as a backdrop to the general drama of life. Writing about how personal histories often merge into national histories in Vassanji's works, Harish Narang states:

History fascinates Vassanji. If there is one common thread running through all his fiction- novels as well as short stories it is his concern for history- history of individuals, communities and nations. Vassanji believes that fictional mode is very valid mode for perceiving and writing the history of a society, including that of its individual

members. (Narang 7)

Africa exerts a powerful influence over M.G. Vassanji and is the subject of much of his writing, though he has not lived there since 1970. Vassanji says, "It is hard to explain what Africa means to me," he says. "Tanzania was a more or less tolerant society and there were so many people from Indian origin communities. We had our identity, but at the same time we grew up with their language". (Singh, Jai Arjun)

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