

Diasporic Consciousness in Vassanji's Novel the in-between World of Vikram Lall

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Abstract

Moyez Vassanji is a diasporic writer who in his fifth novel, 'The In-Between World of Vikram Lall' focuses on the situations of Indians in Africa and the Western countries. Like Vassanji, the narrator-protagonist Vikram Lall, oscillates between the African and the Asian throughout the novel. His 'in-between' position reflects his continuously negated sense of belonging. After independence, Paul Nderi, a corrupt politician of Kenya, uses him as a scapegoat to legitimize his fraudulent money transactions. In order to avoid prosecution, Vikram escapes to a small town by Lake Ontario in Canada, and moulds himself to live a new life. Both Vassanji and Vikram turn to the west for stability and belongingness.

Keywords: Diaspora, In-between position, Kenya's independence, Western countries, and Belongingness. .

Introduction

Moyez Vassanji, a Canada-based novelist of Indian origin, was born in Nairobi, 1950 and raised up in Dares Salaam, Tanzania. Members of his community later passed through a second migration to Europe, Canada, or the United States. He immigrated to Canada in 1978, after having received his PhD in Nuclear Physics from the University of Pennsylvania. The study, however, of Sanskrit and Indian Philology changed his career. He started writing while he was teaching Physics at the University of Toronto. He then left university teaching and from 1990, became a full-time writer.

In the early 1990s, Vassanji wrote three novels – 'The Gunny Sack' (1989), 'No New Land' (1990), and 'The Book of Secrets' (1994) – and a short story collection, 'Uhuru Street'

(1990). In 1989, he won his first international award, the Regional Commonwealth Prize for his inaugural novel, 'The Gunny Sack' (1989), set in Kenya and Tanzania. With the publication of this novel, Vassanji established himself as an important voice in the field of immigrant writers. During the second phase of his writing, he produced some remarkable novels – 'Amriika' (2000), 'The In-Between World of Vikram Lall' (2003), 'The Assassin's Song' (2007), 'The Magic of Saida' (2012) – and a short story collection, 'When She was Queen' (2005). He has also written a biography of the late novelist, Mordechai Richler in 2009, and a travelogue, 'A Place Within: Rediscovering India' (2008).

Moreover, Vassanji was the founder of the journal 'The Toronto South Asian Review' (later 'The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad'), through which he has done much to promote the works by authors of South Asian origin, in Canada and elsewhere. Arun Mukherjee (1998) describes Vassanji as the author who has played, "his triple role as editor, theorist, and writer" in the development of South Asian Canadian literature. It is interesting to note that Vassanji, in all his works, reflects the position of South Asian expatriates living in East Africa. According to Meena Alexander (1993), Vassanji's novels give a full description of "double diasporization". He focuses on the situation of Indians in Africa and the Western countries and how the lives and the identities of his characters are affected by migration.

Vassanji's fifth novel 'The In-Between World of Vikram Lall' was published in Canada in 2003. This novel, a magnificent complex piece of fiction set in Kenya, was selected as the winner of Canada's prestigious Giller Prize. The title immediately suggests that it is about Indian diaspora. Like his other novels, it too deals with – the migration of the Indian communities from Punjab to East Africa to Canada, their contribution to the development of the African nations, and later their establishment in Canada. The issues of European Imperialism, the complex situations of interracial and intercultural relationships, and the non-involvement of African-Asian in the Mau Mau fight for independence – are delineated in the novel.

Vikram (often called as Vic), a descendant of Indian labourers in Kenya, functions as the first-person narrator of the novel. He recalls his idyllic childhood days and growing up in this former British colony: "It was a world of innocence and play, under a guileless constant sun; as well, of barbarous cruelty and terror lurking in darkest night; a colonial world of repressive, undignified subject-hood, as also of seductive order and security...." The novelist relates the history of Kenya from the days of displacement of hundreds of Asians from Indian sub-continent to East coast Africa to work as labourers for the construction of railway line. The railway line of Nakuru, which is a backwater town with diasporic population, was built

by Vikram's grandfather Anand Lall and other Indian coolies brought in by the colonial masters.

The novel captures the basic problems of the diasporic psyche – of not belonging anywhere, of feeling displaced, and being without any roots. This condition is associated further with the feeling of alienation, a desire to bring back the past yet revolt against it, and the desire of being affiliated with the homeland but unwillingness to challenge relations with the host country. Vijayasree, (2001) considers this condition as “dual affiliation”. Like Vassanji, the narrator-protagonist of his novel, is presented both as belonging and not belonging. His ‘in-between’ position, indeed, reflects his continuously negated sense of belonging. Vassanji himself affirms that a diasporan belongs nowhere: “home is never a single place, entirely, unequivocally. But there is a reverse side to this in-between-ness: it is to belong precisely nowhere. One is pulled between places... in a surface existence. ‘Nowhere’ is truly home” (A Letter).

The novel “In-Between World of Vikram Lall” throws light on the ambiguous situation of Asian diaspora in Kenya, who are neither ‘native’ Africans nor European settlers. They are torn between allegiance to more than one nation and national culture. In Vassanji's words, all their affiliations are “neti, neti” (not this, not that). Vikram's grandfather Anand Lall, who worked on the grand Mombasa-Kampala railway, marked his new sense of belonging by inscribing his name and birthplace on one of the rails in an alien country. Ashok Lall, Vikram's father, operates a grocery store in Nakuru before his shifting to Nairobi. But it is his mother Sheila Lall, who keeps cultural traditions and heritage alive in the adopted land, feels native to a country: “This is where I have married and made my home.... And this is my husband's and children's country”. Likewise, the protagonist, too feels in a train journey through Kenya that he is a native of the country: “This was my country – how could it not be? ... this, all around me, was mine, where I belonged with my heart and soul” (112).

Vikram Lall oscillates between the African and the Asian throughout the novel. In Nakuru, eight-years-old Vic plays with his little sister Deepa, Bill, Annie, and Njoroge. Bill and Annie are the son and daughter of one of the British colonists, whereas Njoroge is the black grandson of a poor African. When the narrator compares himself with his European and African childhood friends, he finds himself different from them: “I couldn't help feeling that both Bill and Njoroge were genuine, in their very different ways; only I, who stood in the middle... son of an Indian grocer, sounded false to myself....”

The in-between position of Indians in the novel is vividly portrayed when the parents of Deepa start looking for a bridegroom for their daughter. Deepa wants to marry her childhood

sweetheart Njoroge, but her mother Sheila puts up much resistance to such a relationship with a Nigger. The opposition comes in this way: “What do you mean you will marry anyone whom you want? We are not Europeans... we are desis, Indians. Proud Indians, we have our customs, and we marry with the permission and blessings of our parents! You will do as you are told...”(184-185).

It is important to note that Vikram’s growing up parallels Kenya’s struggle for freedom from the Britishers. It is a time when the Kikuyu Mau Mau fighters started killing the Whites as they believe it will rid the country of the colonizers. The British on the other hand, used the majority of the Kenyan Indians in hunting down the Mau Mau guerrillas because they could not distinguish the good natives from the bad ones at times of war. It is for this reason that Kenyan Indians become suspect in the eyes of the black African communities. The interracial tension is described by Njoroge in the following terms: “You were in with the whites, so you had power over us. And you were so alien, more so than the whites... You are so inscrutable, you Indians”. Thus, the Africans consider the Kenyan Indians as the collaborators with the British colonizers. Vikram substantiates: “To the Africans I would always be the Asian, the Shylock; I would never escape that suspicion, that stigma...” (286).

The racial intolerance towards the Indians in Kenya results in the sudden displacement for everybody. Vikram’s family moves to Nairobi in order to find the safer home. Right after independence, Jomo Kenyatta becomes the country’s president, and Vikram becomes an influential figure in the new government, due to his position as a personal assistant to Paul Nderi, Minister of Transport. It seems that he has finally constructed his Kenyan identity. Paul Nderi, a corrupt politician, uses him as a scapegoat to legitimize his fraudulent money transactions. Later on, Vic is framed in the Gemstone scandal and is dropped. For his Asian link-up, Paul Nderi comments: “...you people have your feet planted in both countries, and when one place gets too hot for you, you flee to the other” (314). Vikram replies angrily: “It’s rather that ‘we people,’...don’t have a place anywhere, not even where we call home”.

In this way, the novel reflects the dilemma forced on to the diasporic Indian community of East Africa. It stresses the point that most of them can’t find a refuge in the Indian sub-continent nor in the host country. For Lalls, it is disturbing because they have lost their homeland during partition as is evident from this statement: “By some perverse twist of fate, Peshawar, our ancestral home, had become an alien, hostile place; it was in Pakistan”. In the end Vic has a question: “...how desperately I loved this country that somehow could not quite accept me. Was there really something... negative in me, are in those like me” (325). In order to avoid prosecution, Vikram escapes to a small town by Lake Ontario in Canada, and

moulds himself to live a new life. The diaspora's typical problem of identity is depicted in the novel by the in-between position of the Asian community in Africa, as they were sandwiched between the whites and the blacks. Both Vassanji and his protagonist Vikram are diasporic and both turn to the west for stability and belongingness. In all Vassanji's writings, history and biography, political and personal are mingled. His strength lies in his economical characterization. Vassanji explores the importance of traditions in the modern world. Writing for him is, in fact 'a search for home.'

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M. G. Vassanji's *The In-between World of Vikram Lall* describes how the life of the eponymous protagonist, a third-generation Indian African, is affected by Kenya's independence struggle and its post-colonial aftermath. This essay analyses how this novel uses the motif of travel in order to explore the possibilities and difficulties for Asian Africans to make East Africa their true home. It is often through travel that the protagonist re-examines some facets of his "Kenyan" identity. This essay first explains how the novel reflects the historical particularities of Asian Afr Acclaim for M.g. vassanji's the in-between world of vikram lall. Copyright. For my father. I call forth for you here my beginning, the world of my childhood, in that fateful year of our friendships. It was a world of innocence and play, under a guileless constant sun; as well, of barbarous cruelty and terror lurking in darkest night; a colonial world of repressive, undignified subjecthood, as also of seductive order and security—so that long afterwards we would be tempted to wonder if we did not hurry forth too fast straight into the morass that is now. our malformed freedom. Imagine an outdoor mall, the type we still call a shopping centre there, a plain stubby strip of shops on op He again won the Giller Prize in 2003 for *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, the first writer to win this prize twice.[7] In 2005, he was made a Member of the Order of Canada. In 2006, *When She Was Queen* was shortlisted for the City of Toronto Book Award. *The Assassin's Song*, released in 2007, was short-listed for the 2007 Giller Prize, the Rogers Prize, and the Governor General's Prize in Canada, as well as the Crossword Prize in India. ^ Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan, "M. G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack: A Reflection on History and the Novel*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 37, no. 3 (1991): 511–518.