

**THE ASIANS OF AFRICA, ‘THE LAND OF NOT-YET’: AN ENIGMA
OF M.G. VASSANJI’S *THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL*.**

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... We Asians were special: we were brown, we were few and frightened and caricatured, and we could be threatened with deportation as aliens even if we had been in the country since the time of Vasco da Gama and before some of the African people had even arrived in the land. (303) - Vassanji

‘A state of perpetual wandering is Diaspora’. The first Diaspora is associated with the perpetual wandering of Jews and the mere adaptability and adoptability of themselves in their host countries. The scientific term of this process is termed as ‘transplantation’— a transplanted tree among the native shrubs. Now diasporic cross over is possible without being able to break down away from the old identity and inventing a new culture. There are three different categories in diasporic cross over. In the first category, the migrants are never a part of that culture and are always at odds with it. The second category is the divided self, who is neither here nor there — a sort of ‘Trishangu’. The third is the immigrant. Of course, the perfect immigrant is actually an imperfect immigrant. All these enthusiastic immigrants show various discontents within the immigrant experiences.

At the forefront of the mentioned categories stands Bhabha who in *The Location of Culture* foregrounds interstitial people in the post colonies, by privileging their specific racial and national identity. His neologistic critical vocabulary such as “diasporic identities,” “unhomeliness,” “cultural ambivalence,” “re-membling” and “interstitiality,” insistently remind other postcolonial theorists, of the ambivalence that pervades colonial and postcolonial societies.

The idea of a homeland is the quintessence of Diaspora writing. It involves a displacement from the original homeland, nostalgic for it, a curious attachment to its tradition, religion and language, an inability to return, making of a new home and a crisis of double identification with the original homeland and the new home. This is especially evident in the writings of Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji (1950-), an African-Asian novelist living in Canada. He has so far authored six novels: *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), *Amrika* (1999), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and *The Assassin’s Song* (2007).

Vassanji, in all his works, portrays the South Asian expatriates living in East Africa. He primarily deals with the “double diasporization” (Alexander 215). He is concerned with how this “double diasporization” affects the lives and the identities of his characters. This is an issue so personal to him. He was born in Kenya and grew up in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. His parents were part of a community of Indian Muslims who had once immigrated to East

Africa. He studied at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA on a scholarship and earned a Ph.D in Nuclear Physics from the University of Pennsylvania. From there he migrated to Canada where he presently lives. Hence he is of mixed identity - Indian, African and Canadian – and his works can be included either under Indian diaspora, or African Literature or Canadian Literature.

It is not epistemologically accurate to say that Vassanji is an Indian from East Africa, at least in the descriptive sense of that label. He is not an Indian in terms of his culture identity for the obvious reason that Indians are from India. Using his land of birth, Vassanji could more accurately be labeled as an African of Indian ancestry, or an Asian- African. Such a labeling will go a long way to point to his interstitial sense of being and the interstitial nature of his community in East Africa. It will also go a long way to explain, in his own words why many people, outside East Africa, find it difficult to come to terms with his African origins. In an interview with this researcher Vassanji says:

I do not like academic conference; and I find that most of these are organized by Europeans and Americans; to them (this is my feeling) an Asian just doesn't belong to the Africa they have conjured up; they have their money and positions and their coteries of Africans. On the other hand, I go to my Dar or Nairobi, identify with the landscape, be it dry grass or a hut, enjoy speaking Kiswahili or simply drinking chai in a banda and listening to banter; and no one there, especially in Dar, even asks me where I come from. And when I speak Kiswahili, the manner of my speech identifies me immediately as someone of the land. What need do I have of a conference? (Rajan 2)

Vassanji seems to imply that the labeling of a writer does affect how such a writer is perceived and read. It is by approaching him as an African of Asian ancestry that we can access the most accurate interpretations of what he is really out to do and say in his novels.

Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) offers an account of history – personal, cultural and historical perspective. It is about the three races whose intersection in time and place has shaped Kenya's history. The novel looks at the issue of vision – forward and backward using the motif of intergenerational gap. The first and second generation immigrants – the grandfather Anand Lall and the parents Ashok and Sheila Lal tend to live in their individual, collective and historical past; while their children, Vikram often called to be as Vic, and Deepa have already accepted the adopted culture and are ready for assimilation. In 1950s Vikram Lall and his sister Deepa in Kenya growing up in Nakuru, the children of Indian merchants, have two British children Bill Bruce and his sister Annie as their friends, along with Njoroge, a Kikuyu who lives with his grandfather, the gardener for the Lalls and other local families. While Vic 'not white enough' is secretly in love with Annie and 'not black enough' like his another friend Njoroge, who is secretly in love with Deepa, both childhood relationships ignoring the cultural and colour barriers of that era. This in itself shows the 'in between world' of Vic. This is a time in which the Mau Mau, a Kikuyu group dedicated to the violence they believe in will rid the country of the British. As Mary Whipple averts about Mau Mau as, "...they are on the march, striking fear into the hearts of all, attacking at night and killing British men, women, and children. To Vic and his friends, who

live in an area where the violence has not yet struck, however, the Mau Mau are almost mythic creatures”.

Vassanji vividly describes that the Lall family is doubly alienated as when Rama’s exile was the subject of the stories, it was never far from our consciousness that Sheila and her brother Mahesh shared a deep sense of exile from their birth place, Peshawar, a city they would never be able to see again because it had been lost to Pakistan and again from the majority population of Kenya. In Africa, when the Kenyans eventually gain their independence, the Indian community finds itself caught in between, as the Africans need to usurp, not just the property and functions of the British, but also the property of other non-Africans, even those people who have lived, as Vic has, all his life in Kenya.

For Anand Lal, life is a recollection of Indian mythology and Kenyan history. He tells his grandchildren, “Indian tales of Lakshman and Rama and Sita speaking with monkeys and devils in the enchanted forests of a distant land” (18), but for the children, “the lion stories (of Kenya) were always favourite, because they were scarier and so much more immediate and realistic” (18). This proves that the children had already accepted Kenyan history as their own than the history/mythology of a distant land. On hearing such sorts of myth, Vikram, the protagonist comments, “India was always fantasyland to me” (19). Even though he feels the pleasure of being in Africa, the Asian was there in his blood. He inherited the traditional way of life from his former generations without even knowing the real connotation of it. He utters, “Even now, even here in this Canadian wilderness, I cannot help but say my namaskars, or salaams, to the icons to carry faithfully with me, not quite understanding what they mean to me” (20).

Even though Vikram oscillates between the Asian and the African, he uncoils his taut feeling and claims Africa as: “This was my country—how could it not be? Yes, there was that yearning for England, the land of Annie and Bill and the Queen, and for all the exciting, wonderful possibilities of the larger world out there. But this, all around me, was mine, where I belonged with my heart and soul” (112).

The ‘in betweenness’ is perspicuously and vividly portrayed when Lal’s family start hunting for a bridegroom for Deepa and through these customs we can interpret the generation gap between the parents and the children. Deepa who is in love with Njoroge wants to marry him but Sheila strictly opposes such a relationship with a Nigger. On the one hand Vic accepts and enounces to Njoroge as, “It’s up to you and her, Njo, I said. You are my friend and she is my sister. You don’t have to worry about me” (180). Deepa on the other hand strengthens Njo as, “This is a new Africa, Njo, they’d [parents] better not. We are the next generation. They will, of course—but I don’t think for long. I’m stubborn as a mule, Njo, I hope you are strong too” (187).

But parents slant Mr. Ashok on one hand broke loose as, “What do you mean you will marry anyone whom you want? We are not Europeans, remember that, 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, girl!” (184-185) Sheila’s fear of miscegenation is so

much on the other hand that she declares, "...did not marry blacks or whites, or low castes or Muslims [...] Hindu Punjabis were the strong preferences always" (185). Thus, Vikram's traditional mother has meddled disastrously in her daughter's life. Sheila did not want to live her life for her sake. She always has the feeling that, "the world watches us..." (233). Indeed as Said observed "the relationship between Selves and Other is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (5). After marrying Dilip, Deepa's love for Njo does not fade away, provoking Dilip to sadistically murder Njo, and leading him to meet with an accident later. Deepa looks petite but older in sari, which she has taken to wear after Dilip's death, to present an appropriately somber appearance to a keenly watchful Asian public. For the Asians, she changes her outfits.

Deepa's issue is on one side and Vikram's on the other. Vikram is caught between two worlds. Scenes from the childhood come rushing to his head. They are more real to him because they are more intensely felt than the life he now lives. He utters, "How fragile, life; ..." (259). Vic moves up the political ladder, working for ministries and powerful individuals, but he finds himself powerless to resist the orders of his superiors, even though he knows that his primary responsibility is to launder the cash which comes into his office as bribes. Vic sounds out of Paul Nderi, his superior as:

I had always been of two minds about him. I liked his wit and his energy. He was smarter than most other politicians. But he was also shamelessly unscrupulous. Mephistopheles like. He introduced me to the path of power and corruption and he dropped me when he needed a scapegoat and I was no longer of use. (358)

He is simply dropped because he is a convenient scapegoat, the disposable outsider, and his utility has run out. Vic substantiates, "To the Africans I would always be the Asian, the Shylock; I would never escape that suspicion, that stigma. We lived in a compartmentalized society, every evening from the melting pot of city life each person went his long way home to his family, his church, his folk" (286). For his Asian quagmire Paul Nderi affirms, "... you people have your feet planted in both countries, and when one place gets too hot for you, you flee to the other" (314). Vic in rage replies, "It's rather that "we people," as you call us, don't have a place anywhere, not even where we call home" (314). However self-avowed "notoriously corrupt" (13), Vikram has his redeeming traits. It is clearly observed from the onset of the fiction through Vic's voice as,

My name is Vikram Lall. I have the distinction of having been numbered one of Africa's most corrupt men, a cheat of monstrous and reptilian cunning. To me it has been attributed the emptying of a large part of my troubled country's treasury in recent years. I head my country's List of Shame. These and other descriptions actually flatter my intelligence, if not my moral sensibility. But I do not intend here to defend myself or even to tell my story . . . it is with an increasing conviction of its truth, that if more of us told our stories to each other, where I come from, we would be a far happier and less nervous people. (82)

Vassanji ensures that our sympathy remains with the hero by giving him the predominant voice in the novel. Vikram is hiding out and in whom Vikram begins to confide. Silman remarks, "After a short, tantalizing prologue that introduces Vikram in exile near Toronto, we learn that our narrator is "numbered one of Africa's most corrupt men". (13)

Vic goes on and on with a question in his mind as, "I told myself how desperately I loved this country that somehow could not quite accept me. Was there really something prohibitively negative in me, and in those like me, with our alien forbidding skins off which the soul of Africa simply slipped away?" (325) incredibly signalizes the "the Land of Not-Yet" (193). Eventually, Vic moulds himself to live a new life as he depicts, "Life beginning of truth and reconciliation" (397).

The prevalent theme of exile in the novel creates the concern of place and displacement in the minds of the characters. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin refer to the effect of displacement as follows:

The major feature of postcolonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special postcolonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development of recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place (8).

Thus, Vassanji in his euphoric novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* traces the chiaroscuro of the Asians of Africa in the diasporic angst. This novel highlights the dilemma forced on to the transplanted citizens all over the world. The globalized society and its mode of living cause numerous psychological pangs. But the novel is also a tale of resilience, hope in the midst of despair and self-regeneration as is evident from Vikram's declaration, "... I should start my life anew, a life as simple and pure as a mountain stream..." (389). One among the writers, Adiga too points out the clan through one of his characters Balram as, "I am in the Light now" (313). Vassanji in this novel has successfully and effectively exploited all the avenues of globalized human conditions to focus on the diasporic Asians of Africa in all its dimensions.

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In *In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, M. G. Vassanji presents Deepa as a woman abstracted in national discourses, though, with her education and knowledge of the world she attempts to transcend the boundaries of race by breaking down the barriers of nationalism constructed by male-dominated society. Moyez G. Vassanji, an Ismaili Muslim of Gujarati heritage, was born in Nairobi, brought up in Tanzania and went to the United States for higher studies. He has published seven novels in all. results into the division of society into groups which not only interlock but also remain separate. The (2004). As Patrick Savidon (2003) writes in the modern version of the world Born and raised in East Africa, Indian Vassanji describes in spare but resonant prose the depressing realities of post-colonial Africa in telling the story of a man whose life is blighted by the times. In 1953, Vikram is an eight-year-old living contentedly with his family in a Kenyan village where his father runs a general store. Vikram, like his younger sister Deepa, is a third-generation African-Indian "their grandfather came from India to build the railroad in the late 1800s" and Kenya indeed is home. The siblings are close friends of the white Bruce children, as well as of Kikuyu Njoroge, whom Vikram's mother calls her son. But the times are not propitious for interracial harmony: the famous "winds of change" are blowing through Africa, promising an end to British rule. The border between fiction and nonfiction in both their work is not always clear. In this chapter, I could discuss the same matter in Vassanji, but I would rather concentrate on his lesser-known work. His fiction tends, like Eco's, to be best known to readers, but, unlike Eco, Vassanji has not made a career in the study of language, literature and philosophy. Vassanji, "The Postcolonial Writer," A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature, ed. M. G. Vassanji (Toronto: TSAR, 1985), 63. Google Scholar. 27. M. G. Vassanji, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2003), 291. Google Scholar. in Roy Cullen, *The Poverty of Corrupt Nations* (Toronto: Blue Butterfly Books, 2008), ch. 2. Google Scholar. 46.