Indianness in the Works of M.G. Vassanji

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Abstract: The present chapter aims at an evaluation of Indianness in the works of M.G. Vassanji. Vassanji has emerged as a formidable writer on the world literary scene. He is a prestigious literary member of Indian diaspora. He is Canada's latest literary golden boy. His family was a part of community of Indians who had immigrated to Africa. Under ‘free’ or ‘passage’ pattern of migration Vassanji’s ancestors came to Kenya from the Gujarat region in north-western India. His deep attachment to India is evident in his novels. All his works brilliantly capture India and its environment. During the course of narration he imagines India in its multifaceted complexities and realities. Vassanji deliberately uses the names of Indian cuisines. In fact, the cultural identity that comes up through food is very powerful because it exhibits the everyday modes of life. This is the reason why Vassanji mentions the names of food in all his works. His presentation of Indian traditions and customs proves that he has deep attachment with India.

Key Words: Indianness, cuisines, nostalgia, memory, customs and traditions.
Vassanji’s first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, deals with the story of four generations of Asians in Tanzania. Here the author provides an insightful look into the culture of one particular group of Indians who were born and grew up in East Africa during the mid 20th century. The main story of this novel is narrated by Salim Juma. It is he who is bequeathed a gunnysack by his mystical grandaunt named Ji Bai. This sack is an ancient sack that is full of mementos. It appears as a metaphor for the collective memory. It becomes a device to recall the author’s family history in India. Here Salim Juma’s remarkable remembering includes finding the significance of ancestral genesis and genealogy. Vassanji says: ‘But where is our past? Where are our roots?’¹ In an interview M.G. Vassanji says to Kanaganayakam:

> Once I went to the United States, suddenly the Indian connection became very important: the sense of origins, trying to understand the roots that we had in us.²

*No New Land* is Vassanji’s second novel. It deals with the story of Shamsi community. Nurdin, the protagonist, has his roots in India. His father went to Africa many years ago with certain innate Indian characteristics. Nurdin inherited these characteristics and came to Canada with them. The Indian characteristics can be seen through its customs, tradition, typicalities and cuisines that Vassanji portrays in *No New Land*. It can be observed in the very beginning of the novel. When Fatima receives envelop from some University, which may decide her career, she becomes excitedly anxious. Becoming nervous may be a human trait, but whispering prayers superstitiously due to nervousness, anxiety and excitement is a typical Indian characteristic:

> It did not occur to her that the decision she awaited had already been made a few days before, and she whispered a prayer in much the same her mother sometimes did…³

Nurdin’s wife Zera also shows the typical Indian traits in her. When the Lalanis immigrated to Canada, Zera had got with her lots of souvenirs and memories from Africa. But when they settled down in Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park, most of the things went to the dustbin, except the photograph of Hazi Lalani. It was the first objecte to go up on the walls. One may draw a conclusion that this sort of respect for father-in-law may be a traditional human trait but lighting incense sticks and holding them in front of the photograph is an
Indian trait of respect and devotion for the father-in-law. Hanif, Nurdin’s son, has also some innate Indian characteristics. Hanif calls Nanji “Eeyore.” Eeyore is an accented form of the Indian word for friends. This is a typical way of summoning friends in India. Friends are sometimes called as ‘yaar’. Yasmin Ladha, one of the Indo Canadian authors, also uses this word ‘yaar’ in her collection of short stories, *Lion’s Granddaughter and Other Stories*. She addresses her readers as “yaar-readerji.” Not only the Lalanis but other people of Indian roots in the Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park also have such inborn Indian Characteristics. Jamal uses the term “chacha” to summon an aged person. ‘Chacha’ is an Indian word to show respect for the elderly people. It is an Indian word for uncle.

Through the various characters of *No New Land*, Vassanji beautifully portrays some Indian traditions and customs. Touching the feet of the elderly guests always concludes the welcoming ceremony in Indian tradition. When the Missionary, the religious man, comes to Nurdin’s apartment, there was a traditional welcoming ceremony. As he entered the room the females of the congregation, dressed in white, attempted an elaborate welcoming ceremony, “with touching of feet and cracking of Knuckles and garlanding….” When one visit someone’s house for the first time, it is an Indian tradition to take sweets or fruits along. Nurdin does not forget his tradition. When he and Romesh visit Sushila’s house at Kensington Market, they take some fruits with them.

While portraying Indian traditions, customs and typical characteristics, Vassanji talks about the Indian cuisines. As we all know, the food one takes, affirms the traits of a particular place. The food that the Indian dwelling in Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park eats shows that they belong to India. For instance, chappatis is the staple food of people of Northern part of India. Indians prefer to take it with pickles. They even tend to put ghee or clarified butter over the chappatis. Sheru Mama and her husband, Ramju, tend to serve chappatis that way:

Sheru Mama makes hundreds of chappatis everyday and baby-sits to toddlers at the same time, while husband Ramju helps with the dishes and puts the required dollop of margarine over every chappati. Her customers tend to be single men who will eat a chappati with a pickle, or butter and jam, or curry canned in the United States.

“Samosas” are one of the favourite snacks of the people of Northern part of India. They like to take them with tea, especially; “Tea would fetched and samosas.” Vassanji mentions about having Samosas with tea even in one of the short stories in *Uhuru Street*. In
‘In the Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon’, Zarina sells samosas to the Indian people living in Uhuru Street. We can get a sentence like this, “I have tea and wait for the woman to bring samosas.” Indians are well known throughout the world for a variety of fried and spicy food. Even in breakfast, they prefer to have fried food. When Mohan and Lakshmi, the Indians from Guyana stayed back for a night in Nurdin’s apartment, Zera made some “puris.”

M.G. Vassanji’s third novel, The Book of Secrets, was published in 1994. It’s a fine piece of work that foregrounds the themes and ideas that recur throughout M. G. Vassanji’s fiction. It is an engrossing account of Asians in East Africa. The world of The Book of Secrets is part fiction - part memory, a history of the people who left Indian shores in search of a dream for Eastern Africa. Here the author focuses on the interaction between the Shamsi [Indian] community and native Africans, as well as the colonial administration. Even though none of the characters ever return to India, the presence of the country looms throughout the novel. Here M.G. Vassanji’s engagement with the history is very significant. With it he has attempted to explore his own past and the past of Indian community in East Africa. He has brilliantly and skillfully woven the past with the present. He discusses “how history affects the present and how personal and public history can overlap.”

The Book of Secrets is an eloquent story of the diary of Albert Corbin, a junior British colonial administrator, who has served many years in various East African colonies. Corbin is posted to Kikono, a tiny fictitious Kenyan town near the border of Tanganyika. Immigrants from India, who had come to East Africa in the second half of the 19th century, had founded this town. Thus M.G. Vassanji gives us the history of Indian settlements practically from their beginning to their almost destruction. Nurmohamed Pipa, a metonym of Asian African community, is not only a restless character but also a homeless one. It is a deep sense of unhomeliness that makes the forefathers of Asian Africans such as Dhanji Govindjhi in The Gunny Sack to migrate from the borderlands of Cutch, Kathiawar and Punjab. Memory is also an important characteristic of diaspora. This characteristic has a significant place in The Book of secrets. The world of memories has always been the germ of Vassanji’s fiction. The author’s engagement with the past and heritage through memory is very significant.

M.G. Vassanji’s fourth novel is Amriika. Once again it deals with the themes and ideas that recur throughout his novel. It is an excellent tale of immigrant experience. It explores the state of living in exile. In ‘More Personal Notes on the Book’ the author himself has expressed his views about this book. He says:
How far can political commitment and radical dissent go? How far west can you go? In Canada this novel, beginning in Boston-Cambridge in the Vietnam War era, was seen as documenting the travails of an immigrant; in India it was seen pre-cursing 9/11. The reader can draw his or her conclusion. “Amriika” is how Indians pronounce America.14

The novel Amriika deals with Ramji, the protagonist of the novel. His name has Indian essence. It is he who narrates the whole story. Indian origin boy, a second generation African, Ramji is a native Gujarati Muslim. He belongs to a small community of Cutchi Ismaili Muslims who have settled in Dar es Salaam. He seems to be modelled so closely on M.G. Vassanji himself. Here Vassanji wishes to write back not just to the empire, but also to his homeland. Praised for its combination of history and fiction, The Gunny Sack was a movingly told story of a small community of Asian Africans, whom M.G. Vassanji called the Shamsis. This community corresponds to the Ismailis, who regarded Aga Khan as the 10th avatar of Vishnu. In Uhuru Street, M.G. Vassanji went back to the lives of Cutchi settlers in Dar es Salaam. In Amriika M.G. Vassanji uses the same material, but with a new twist.

Memory plays a very significant role in the novels of M.G. Vassanji. In Amriika the story springs from the same memory. With the help of the history Vassanji has tried to explore his own past and at the same time the past of Asian African community in East Africa and America. He has beautifully woven the past with the present. He tries to discuss “how history affects the present and how personal and public history overlap.”15

In short, Amriika beautifully tackles “the predicament of in-between societies.”16 It is a fantastic diasporic reminiscence with a great, great deal of authentic detail. It also reads like autobiography, slipping from third to first person at various places in the text. Vassanji, of course, makes a point of insisting that everything in the novel is fictitious, but I cannot agree. The incident may be fictional, but the note of personal experience is unmistakable. Here the typical Third World characters, and their cries, inhabit the hyphenated identities and spaces that Vassanji, a literary member of Indian diaspora, explores.

A fascinating mix of contents flows in M.G. Vassanji, the first writer to win the prestigious Giller Prize twice. He is looming high on the arc of Indian diaspora writers. His fifth novel The In-Between world of Vikram Lall is an interesting and relevant account of the Indian diaspora. It deals with a compelling story of Vikram Lall, a third generation Kenyan Asian. Here Vassanji returns to the theme that preoccupied him in earlier works. It deals with
the strange position of Asian Africans in East Africa. In the figure of Vikram Lall, Vassanji has created a character whose life reflects the myriad experiences of thousands of Asian Africans in latter half of 20th century, but also, more generally, a figure through whom he explores broader issues of the Indian diaspora.

M.G. Vassanji is quite a wordsmith. His descriptions of Indian food, family life and community are both rich and delicious. Vikram remembers:

On Saturday mornings, with the schools closed, my sister and I went down to the shop with our parents. Sun-drenched Saturdays is how I think of those days, what memories trapped for me days of play. Though it could get cold at times, and in the morning the ground might be covered in frost. At the other end of the mall from us, Lakshmi Sweets was always bustling at midmorning, Indian families having stopped over in their cars for bhajias, samosas, dhokras, bhel-puri and tea, which they consumed noisily and with gusto.17

In The In-Between World of Vikram Lall we find great fascination of Indians for samosa and tea. Remembering his idyllic childhood Vikram says:

…Indians families having stopped over in their cars for bhajias, samosas, dhokras, bhel-puri and tea….my father and mother always ordered tea and snacks from Lakshmi…18

It is not only description of about food, but also of enumerating the traditions, customs and typical Indian characteristics that prove the fact that maintenance of culture is an innate trait of immigrants. Vikram and his family, and all the other inhabitants of Nakuru try to maintain their culture. We see that Vikram’s father Ashok, an Indian diaspora, finds references to Indian politicians, such as the pro-axis figure Subhash Chandra Bose and even Gandhi himself, to be “quite alien.”

One of the most impressive thing about this fine novel is that it gives voice to a people, some of whose forebears were in Africa before Portuguese, who have tended to keep their heads down and their mouths shut – and were not infrequently booted out – Vikram Lall says proudly that he is the third generation African; a boast from the time when people said such things, and believed them. He is the son of a grocer, who was himself the son of a Punjabi labourer, an indentured ‘cooler’, brought to East Africa to build the railway line from Mombassa to Kampala, through 600 miles of the loveliest terrain in Africa.
References


04. Ibid., p. 6.


07. Ibid., p. 185.

08. Ibid., p. 61.

09. Ibid., p. 78.

10. Ibid., p. 78.


