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(Re) Visiting The Imagined Homeland: A Study of M. G. Vassanji's Changed Perspective on
India through His Works

Abstract

India has always been at the centre stage of Indian diaspora writings. The second generation Indian diaspora writers have been engaged with the Indian landscape and India of their imagination. The pull of a distant homeland has kept Indian diaspora writers drawn toward India in one way or the other, as is widely acknowledged in their writings. Moyez Ghulam Vassanji, an Indo Afro Canadian writer is one of the most representative contemporary diaspora writer, whose works have Indian background, since the publication of his first novel *The Gunny Sack* in 1989, when he had not visited India to the works like *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* which was published 2009, by the time he had visited India several times. In this paper, the difference in imagined Indian land and the real Indian land through the lens of Indian Diaspora writer will be brought forth. The Indian landscape as determinant of identity in next generation Indian Diaspora, twice removed from India, has been questioned and probed in this paper. Through the writings of M. G. Vassanji, the importance of real landscape and imaginary landscape on “psyche”, “identity”, and “identification of the self with respect to a place” are gauged.

Keywords: Homeland, Frozen Memory, Imagined Indian Landscape, Real Indian Landscape.

Homeland exists in as many variegated hues on the canvas of human mind as it exists geographically on the canvas of the Earth. It provides a textual site and space where a riot of imagination and reality leads to rediscovery of one layer of identity after the other. Landscapes magically transform into mindscapes, when physical reality takes the shape of imagination. Homelands become imaginary homelands and are lived-in and on for centuries altogether in the alien lands by the diaspora. This imagined homeland becomes new space which exists nowhere but in frozen memories. And thus Diasporas are,

Caught between two worlds, the expatriate negotiates a new space, caught between two cultures and often languages; the expatriate writer negotiates a new literary space. Therefore, an anxious sense of dislocation is characteristic of expatriate writings. The shifting designation of 'home' (Where's it?) and the attendant anxieties about homelessness and the impossibility of going back are perennial themes in these stories. (Abraham 51)

The complexity arises when we place 'home' as an important part and parcel of one's identity. As the sense of place shapes the way one thinks, one visualizes the things, one connects to the Nature, one places the society around in perspective and the way one stays united with the seasons and the neighbourhood of the place. The background and more importantly, the place where we come from, becomes the central question when one migrates to other place, or chooses it as a new homeland. The diaspora have always been caught up in this bewildering question. The place where we come from is the sum-total of so many things, like culture, rituals, beliefs, myths, histories and the landscape.

M. G. Vassanji is the contemporary writer of Indian Diaspora today, it may not be wrong to say that he is the face of today's Indian Diaspora. He wrote about 'Indian homeland' passionately before visiting India and he is still writing about 'India as a Home' and a place to identify with, with more zeal after visiting India. And when his journey of

knowing himself and his roots is traced through his novels and his travelogues, it is evident that he saw India as a place through real and the mythical stories which his mother used to narrate to him when he was a little small child living in Tanzania. But when he went to America to do his PhD in Nuclear Physics, he faced a challenge. Having lived all through his life by then in Africa and having spoken Swahili, he was surprised to note that he was recognised in America by Indian Student Unions not African. On his very first arrival his brown colour and Indian facial features placed him immediately with Indians and India, the place which he had never seen. This further aroused in him more curiosity to see the real Indian Land. Vassanji started knowing and writing more about India, though nevertheless Africa being the land of his childhood, is equally dominating in his initial writings before visiting India.

Vassanji though, later settled in Canada with his wife Nur Jehan Aziz and two sons. However by then, India as an important part of his being had taken its deep roots. In America, while studying, he got more drifted towards his Indian-ness. In his search of Indian-ness, he started recalling the stories he had listened to in his childhood more often, reading more on mythology and Indian history and watching many Satyajit Ray movies. This heightened curiosity, led Vassanji to board his first ever flight to India in 1993, with naturally many conflicts and questions. In his travelogue *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*, Vassanji has descriptively admitted that India which he had imagined was his own creation. It was some remote land. The poor, backward and dusty land, India of his imagination was somewhat mysterious, dark, and bushy. The stories and narratives had painted and planted the picture of India in his mind that his ancestors had carried in their memories along with them to Dar es Salaam. Vassanji assert, "I always carried a picture of two Indian girls sitting under a tree in an open land, waiting to be rescued . . . we chose to imagine India as poor, backward and laughable – the past. There were always stories about India." (*The Place Within* viii).

The Indian mindscape which Vassanji had mirrored in his mind is carved only through his mother's and grandmother's stories and it is presented similarly through his imagination in his initial writings. He had formed a certain picture of India, as a land in both geographical and cultural terms. When this India of his mind meets the real Indian landscape for the first time, his orientation takes a complete shift. The 'Land' which was frozen in memories and in the stories does not remain stagnant in reality. The following words reflect his bewilderment when the real landscape meets the mindscape. He rightly questions, "A country you've seen in films; you're linked to by tradition, culture and language. "Where is it ? I asked myself, and kept asking throughout that visit." (The Place Within xii). This geographical and psychological hemispheric leap is very interesting to note and it is very clearly and markedly traced in Vassanji's works, pre-visit and post-visit.

In his early novel, *No New Land*, M G Vassanji has mentioned that how so ever far away we go from the lands of our origins they cling to us forever, the protagonist Nurdin Lalani asserts, "We are but the creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our past stand not far behind and are not shaken off. (9)

When Vassanji writes about Gujarat in his short story named, 'The Expected One' from his short story collection, *When She was a Queen*, he presents a picture of India, which is very grim and that of the land of snake charmers, scorching sun, dust and unpaved roads, the following descriptions bring out the microcosmic India of his mindscape:

The man looked sinister, exotic, as if materialized from some nightmare, some dark reach of the mind. Shirtless and grimy, he was sitting cross legged on the ground . . . and in front of him in a basket lay a thick snake. . . (65)

It was hot and dusty that day May; buses were everywhere, docked in the station, or clogging streets outside, in various stages of departure or arrival from Gujarat and beyond. 66)

. . . my ancestors from India must have been snake worshippers . . . I remember that in Africa my mother always spoke respectfully of snakes; once when a Cobra was reported in the vicinity where we lived, for a few days she would put a bowl of milk under the lemon tree just outside of our house (69)

Thus the distant homeland India in mindscape lives throughout the lives of Diaspora and is remembered by fondness by the first generation immigrants, but it is not completely real for the second generation of these Diasporic communities. The place, the smell, the fragrance, the walls of the house, are all very important, and are part of one's soul who has immigrated to a distant land. Hence, they forever live the memorised India. The emotions of a woman removed from her house are poignantly captured below:

Tell me, you who would know all . . . What was she like, the gentle one, this bibi, Tarantibu given to my ancestor for comfort on lonely, breezy African nights when mango and coconut tress rustled and crickets chirped and the roaring ocean echoed with reminders of a distant homeland? From a ravaged tribe, gutted village, was she brought to the coast, and did she not also think of her home . . . (Vassanji *The Gunny Sack* 27)

The rustling of mango trees and coconut trees, the sounds of the crickets and the roaring sounds of the ocean, make longing for her Indian scenery, Indian greenery quite unbearable. Not only have Indians in Africa, as we read through the works of Vassanji, have remembered and lived Indian landscape through stories, memories and films. But they had interestingly tried to mimic and recreate the microcosmic India in Africa. Rightly has been remarked that,

Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants, who (as Leonard [1992] shows vividly) use memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world. "Homeland" in this way remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced peoples, though

the relation to homeland may be very differently constructed in different settings. (Ferguson 11)

The Indian areas, the Indian shops Indian Dukawallahs (Shopkeepers) and the Indian style houses are prominent feature of Indian neighbourhoods aboard. Even after re-living India through mindscape, memory and culture, the longing for the lost landscape aggravates day by day in the Diasporas. The no place to return makes this trauma more unbearable. The distinctive physical, cultural and geographical features of the literary landscape in *The Gunny Sack* supply an extended metaphor. The Indian culture imbibed by the streets, houses, neighbourhood, shops, food and clothes in Africa where Vassanji spent his childhood, serves as a memory of India. An image of India evolves even in Africa. Through modified landscape, India is relived, it is similar to reliving India through food, habits, rites, stories and rituals. The neighbourhood that is created by Indians living in Africa is landscaped according to the mindscape that they carried along while migrating to the Africa. But it is not complete recreation of the landscape, it can never be. The smell, the sun and the sky of beloved country cannot be replicated. This landscape is just like the landscape drawn by an artist, like the real one but not the real, like a painted home on the painted landscape. The fragrance of the air cannot reach the dweller; hence the nostalgia ever lingers upon. The concept of the home with respect to the geographical positioning is difficult to define for the Diaspora, as Lew asserts,

“Home” is a relative concept. For many people, the physical places that they call “home” will change over the course of their lives. The reasons for changing one’s home are diverse, though geographers have traditionally viewed them as “push” factors and “pull” factors. Following a change in home, old and new places often vie for “homeness”, and as each new place becomes more of a home, each old home comes to hold a sense of “past homeness”. For many people, these past homes form important parts of their life experiences and

personal identities. For some, these past homes can hold a greater sense of belonging and “at home” feelings than their current physical home. (Existential Tourism 1)

Vassanji like other Diaspora people had seen India only through the eyes of their ancestors, a miniature microcosmic India. India as a country and as a land has big expanse, it is not mere a land of snake charmers now. It is not a country with always the hot scorching sun shining on the people walking bare feet on the dusty shrub hills. It is the land of seasons, land of historical places, a land of so many colourful shades from Kashmir to Kenya Kumari. Hence when Vassanji writes previous to visiting India he wrote about superstitions, land of dust and unbearable heat. The vastness of country like India can be disturbing for anyone whose miniature and incomplete image of vast Indian landscape is shattered in real meeting of the India. Vassanji himself in his travelogue admits that vastness of country is overwhelming at first place, he writes, “I have seen so much in the last four weeks I feel numbed. I visit the Gandhi memorial and the tombs of the great Sufi Nizamuddin Auliya and his disciple, the poet and musician Amir Khusrau. I walk through the Old Delhi and realize that here is another world I have not seen.(36). In his comparison of his India of mindscape and the real India, there is not a complete disillusionment though. There are certain elements of familiarity too. Many scenes and sceneries of real landscape give him sense of having lived this India in Africa too, which is comforting and adopting for him. He writes in his travelogue, *The Place Within*, “But here in Delhi, excepting the monuments and the size of the city, so much actually reminds me of another home, in East Africa, across the Indian Ocean. The residential streets in many areas look like those in the Indian areas of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam of my childhood: the flower bushes in bungalow garden, the mango trees giving wide shade; the two storey apartment blocks of brick and cement, painted simple white or light colour; the people outside, vegetable sellers and their customers, the school kids . . . All this, so familiar to take the breath away. (43) Hence the journey of writer from

landscape to mindscape, through his ancestors and from mindscape to landscape, through his visits of India, completes a hemispheric shift. Vassanji takes away some similarities and some differences, some satisfaction and some disturbance, yet India as a land invites him again and again. India as his country welcomes him and adopts him. Vassanji too never fails to recognise that India is a land that is dynamic and ever changing, he notes, “Gurgaon and Noida, beneficiaries of India’s new globalized, with their spanking-new air-conditioned industrial parks, shopping malls and housing developments, where the nouveau riche professionals can live in (Western) style. (48)

There are mixed emotions, but it is rightly said by him it is not essential to define and situate the identities. Identities are rooted, yet fluid, fixed yet floating. Though the preserving of identity and connection leads to becoming of a new identity, as in the case of M. G. Vassanji, brought forth by his works the “The Gunny Sack’ and “A Place Within: Rediscovering India”. The meeting of the imagined landscape and the real landscape leads to the forming a new identity. He is not a Canadian writer now, he is not an African writer too, but Vassanji becomes an Indo- Afro- Canadian writer. As Saha notes, Whatever may be the geographical location of the exiled writer, in the mental landscape the writer is forever enmeshed among the strings attached to poles that pull in opposite directions. The only way the writer can rescue oneself from the tautness of the enmeshing strings is by writing or by other forms of artistic expression. The relief is only a temporary condition for no writer’s work is so sharp a wedge that can snap the strings that history-makers have woven. Even if a writer consciously tries to justify one end, simultaneously, but unconsciously, there arises a longing for the other. Therein lies the fascination of exile literature. (Exile literature 3)

Nevertheless the Landscape and Literature have always mirrored and complimented each other. The stories weaved on the background of homeland shape the identity, the stories

written on the background of mindscape probe identity and stories do take to the real places sometime. Any literature, folk or literary, oral or written, ancient or contemporary is incomplete without hues of native land. Words definitely imbibe the colours of variegated culture. The sight that writer's eyes catches, irrigates the imagination and realities. The meeting of imagination and reality shatters some illusions but gives few consolations too as we observe in Vassanji. The identities thus are always dynamic like homelands. Ever evolving and ever changing.

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