



SEARCH FOR HOME IN M. G. VASSANJI'S *THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL*

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ABSTRACT

*The present paper sheds some light on how M.G. Vassanji, a literary member of Indian Diaspora, writes from Canada by taking into consideration the Indian people living overseas. Like his other novels, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* can be read as a diasporic novel and the element of quest for home is the heart of it. The paper talks about how, through the character of Vikram, Vassanji tells the story of the in-between life of a man. Along with the feeling of in-betweenness there is woven the elements of exile, memory, diasporic consciousness, longing for return, nostalgia, search for identity and sense of belonging. Vikram is a third generation Kenyan Asian. Set in East Africa, the novel reflects the ambiguous situation and the strange position of Indians of Kenya who are neither indigenous Africans nor European colonizers. They are alienated from their homelands. Vikram's grandfather Anand Lall along with many indentured labourers was shipped from British India to Kenya to build Mombassa –Kampala railway. Thus the paper tries to show how Vikram, a Kenyan born Indian boy, is neither Indian nor African but in-between.*

Key Words: *Diaspora, Home, In-betweenness, Exile, Nostalgia.*

INTRODUCTION

M.G. Vassanji is a literary member of Indian Diaspora. The paper is centred on his fifth novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. Published in 2003, this novel met with immense international success. This novel has almost all the characteristics of diaspora. The novel is deep and careful scrutiny of an immigrant's quest for his place in the world. It also deals with the themes such as the nature of community in a volatile society, the relations between colony and colonizer, and the inescapable presence of the past. Moreover, the novel talks about the people who are in-between and the predominant feeling is that of belonging and not

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belonging. The novel is about exile, memory, alienation, longing for home, in-between position of immigrants and quest for identity.

Diaspora:-

- According to Safran, diaspora is the segment of people living outside homeland.
- Docker defines diaspora as “a sense of belonging to more than one history, to more than one time and place, to more than one past and future”.¹

Etymology:-

The term ‘diaspora’ is derived from the Greek word ‘dia’ and ‘speiro’.

- ‘Dia’ means ‘through’ and ‘speiro’ means to ‘scatter’.

The literal meaning of diaspora is ‘scattering’ or ‘dispersion’. It has often been used to describe the original dispersion of the Jews in the 6th century B.C. or to refer particularly to the Jews living outside Palestine among the people of non-Jewish faith. “For Jews, Africans, Palestinians and Armenians, diaspora signifies a collective trauma where one dreams of home while living in exile”.²

The In-Between World of Vikram Lall is narrated by Vikram Lall from his new home on the shores of Canada’s Lake Ontario. In about five decades, three generations of Lalls, have migrated across three continents in westward movement followed by a growing number of African born Asians. Vikram’s grandfather, Anand Lall, in his youth, is shipped from British India to Africa as an indentured labourer to work on the grand Mombassa-Kampala railway. Here in Nakuru Ashok Lall, Vikram’s father, earns his livelihood by running a grocery store. From this country Vikram is compelled to run away by Kenya’s anticorruption hounds. To avoid being caught he is constantly running away and there is none where he comes from. Now he is lonely and lost in the snowy Ontario, hanging between multiple worlds, neither Asian, nor African, nor Canadian, neither innocent nor guilty, a captive observer. Vikram, the narrator, a Kenyan born Indian, now living in Canada, in hideout from those that would hound him in Kenya, narrates the story of his life when he is in his sixties.

The novel reflects the life of the Asian people in Africa. The story opens in colonial Kenya in the 1950s, when the protagonist, Vikram, recalls his early life in Nakuru; his friend Njoroge, the grandson of the Lall’s faithful Kikuyu gardener, who loved his sister Deepa; his love Annie and her brother Bill. Nakuru is a backwater town on the railway line built by Vikram’s



grandfather and other Indian coolies brought in by the British. Here Vikram's father runs a grocery. Deepa and Njoroge soon develop a strong affection for each other and Vic, the anglicised name of Vikram used throughout the novel, falls for Annie.

The white colonizers had seized the land of Kikuyu, the dominant Kenyan tribe. Being impoverished and suffering, they are taking secret oaths to drive out the white colonizers. They have started rebellions which they call the Mau-Mau uprising. Attack and counter attack are going on.

The happy childhood life around Vikram soon begins to end when the Mau-Mau uprising enters his life. Vic takes a secret blood oath with Njoroge to support Jomo Kenyatta, the leader of the Mau-Mau movement. In an attack, the Mau-Mau rebels kill the entire Bruce family including Vic's beloved Annie. It is impossible for Vikram to recover from this horrific and tragic event.

The dreadful killings and raising unrest result in a sudden displacement for everybody. Vikram's family moves to Nairobi with a hope to have safer home, away from the Mau-Mau killings. After moving to Nairobi, Vic's father, Ashok, gives up business as a shopkeeper and begins to work as an estate agent.

In 1965 Kenya achieved independence. Jomo Kenyatta who was a political prisoner becomes president. Vikram completes his education at Dar es Salaam. Then Njoroge meets the Lall family in Nairobi and becomes an intimate friend of the family. Here Njoroge and Deepa try to rekindle their love. But it is rejected by both the communities and so Deepa is married with a young and wealthy Indian boy named Dilip. After marriage they go to London. Eventually Njoroge marries in his community and Vic also gets married with an Indian woman. With Njoroge's support, Vic gets a job in the Ministry of Transport.

The third section of the novel "The Years of Betrayal" talks about Vic's career. He advances from working in the Ministry of Transport to indulging into embezzlement scheme in high places and that too almost without realising it. Vic becomes a personal assistant to a corrupt minister named Paul Nderi. Vikram is gradually drawn into a web of official and political larceny.

Nderi uses Vikram to conduct a massive money-laundering scheme involving American aid money. It earned him the notoriety of one of the most hated men of his time and place. In the end he is framed by his party, led down by the very people that employed. He becomes a perfect scapegoat. He ran away to Canada from where he tells his life story.



The last section with the title “Homecoming” shows Vikram living in rural Ontario where Njoroge’s son Joseph visits him. Deepa, now settled in Canada, has asked Lall to look after Joseph who is to begin college in Toronto very shortly. Joseph despises Vikram for plundering his county. And this sets Vic reflecting on the past. The nostalgic element is clearly visible.

Throughout the novel Vic agonizes over whether to go back to Kenya and deal with the consequences of his past actions. He decides to return to Kenya and wants to settle anew in the place he calls home. But again he is in an in-between position and is expected to take the blame for the actions of senior ministers whose skin colour exempts them from guilt and responsibility. Vikram finds that for the Africans he would always be the Asian; he would not be able to escape that suspicion, that stigma.

A sense of identity, a feeling of discrimination and demarcation have always been important issues in the writings of literary members of Indian diaspora. The feeling of belonging and not belonging is very personal to Vikram.

The novel shows Vikram’s struggle to search his place in the world. In independent Kenya he wants to secure his identity as a civil servant but the officers and politicians cut him out. He is involved in a corruption scandal and so his identity suffers from danger. He is declared as one of Africa’s most corrupt men.

Vikram has found himself in such a position that he has to do what he has been told to do, even if he knows that it is wrong. His life is more dependent on the political needs of the day. His community has become political victims.

Vikram’s father cannot be Indian enough for his wife’s relatives, and after his wife’s death, when takes up with an African woman, it is even impossible for him to be African. This portrait of Vikram’s father is really pathetic. Rootlessness, racism, displacement and in-betweenness prove to be barriers for Vic in search of his identity and home, and the status of his family remains enigmatic unsettlers. Indians in Africa are viewed as the Other by both whites and blacks. Thus Vassanji’s world is the world of in-between.

Vikram, throughout the novel feels that he is neither a native of the land like his friend Njoroge nor is he anything like Bill and Annie, the children of British colonials; in a sense Vikram Lall is an in-between from very early in his life.

He is a part of Indian community of Kenya, which is socially and politically sandwiched between the White and the Black. Before Kenyan independence the British used the Kenyan

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Indians to suppress the Africans. But even after independence, the Indians are in the middle. The Africans started seizing the properties and business of not only the British but also of Kenyan Indians who have lived, as Vic has, all his life in Kenya.

In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* Vikram Lall represents the Indians in Kenya. Though Vic is a third generation Asian African, he realizes that Njoroge is somehow more Kenyan than he or his family ever is. Vikram knows his nebulous status between the oppressors and oppressed, an existential state of in-betweenness that will dog him for the rest of his life. He felt that both Bill and Njoroge were genuine, in their very different ways; only he, who stood in the middle, Vikram Lall, cherished son of an Indian grocer, sounded false to himself, rang hollow like a bad penny.

After *Amriika* when Vassanji's publisher asked him what he was doing next, he replied her that he was going home. And by writing this novel, Vassanji tells us about his return journey home. This is nothing but longing for home.

After having Ph.D. in nuclear physics from the University of Pennsylvania, Vassanji wanted to return to Africa to teach, but independence had led to an exodus of Indians. He found he could not go back. So through his books he tries to go home. *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is such an attempt. The notion of home becomes complex for Vassanji. The nostalgic desire for home and community is visible in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. The Lalls are Hindus from Peshawar in what is now Muslim Pakistan. Thus they no longer have 'a home', even if they wanted to return.

The idea of home for Vassanji is, in fact, always something of a creative act. Throughout the novel Vic dwells upon whether to go back to Kenya and deal with consequences of his past action but caught between many worlds, Vic along with numerous Indians, is in effect, homeless. Throughout the novel, the author brings us back to Vikram's present location, Canada, from where he is recalling his past life and decline- which mirrors that of his beloved country. In short, as an immigrant Vikram "retains a collective memory, vision or myth about his original homeland- its physical location, history and achievement".³

The novel talks about displacement of Indians who came to East Africa and from there to Canada. Vassanji tries to show how these migrations influence the lives and identities of his characters. This vital issue is personal to him. Vassanji says:

[The Indian diaspora] is very important... Once I went to the US, suddenly the Indian connection became very important: the sense of origin, trying to understand the roots of India that we had inside us.⁴



Vic's grandfather had arrived in Kenya as a labourer because of poverty and repression of the British. Vic's father has to leave Nairobi due to racist ideologies of Kenya. This acute and bittersweet story of the novel is told by Vic who eventually leaves Kenya and takes shelter in Canada where he lives in exile. His exile is not intentional but he is compelled to run away by anti corruption investigations and death threats.

Vikram is a man who has no place in history and politics. Caught between several worlds Vic and other Indians are in effect homeless, many of them doubly so because of exile that the division of India forced upon many Indians. And Vassanji has superbly handled in this novel the pathos of this condition of a perpetual exile.

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