



A SENSE OF IN-BETWEENNESS IN 'THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL'

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ABSTRACT

Moyez G. Vassanji is a writer of six novels, two collections of short stories and a memoir of his travels in India. Vassanji in his novels focusses on subjects like wars, post- colonisation and its effects on the people, especially the immigrants from India to Africa, Canada and the United States. In his novel The In- between World of Vikram Lall, Vassanji brings out the sufferings caused to the people who fall victim of the wars between the protestants and the colonizers. Throughout the novel we see the changing Africa from 1950s to the fear of seventies and eighties and as a consequence the changes occurring in the lives of the characters. The combat between the Mau-Mau rebels in Kenya and the Britishers place the innocent people nowhere. The present paper throws light on one such character named Vikram Lall, the protagonist in the novel. Vikram is the grandchild of an Indian railroad worker and now a third generation immigrant in Kenya. The paper deals with the sense of 'in-betweenness' that Vikram Lall comes across in every important phase of his life. Right from childhood to his later life, Vikram Lall finds himself in an in-between situation. Further we see instances where Vikram Lall is always clutched at the centre of two warring worlds, one of childhood innocence and the other of a colonial world of repressive, undignified subjecthood.

Keywords: *in-between, immigrant, war, victim and victimizer.*

INTRODUCTION

Moyez Vassanji having an Indian origin was born in Nairobi in 1950 and was raised in Dares Salaam, Tanzania. Vassanji is a Canada based Indian writer. Despite of achieving Ph.D in Nuclear Physics from the University of Pennsylvania, Vassanji shifted his career to writing. Popular as Canada's most acclaimed writer, M.G. Vassanji has published six novels, two collections of short stories, a memoir of his travels in India and a biography of *Mordecai*. Vassanji has twice won the 'Giller Prize'. He is the winner of the 'Commonwealth Regional



Prize (Africa)' and the 'Governor-General's Prize' for non-fiction. Vassanji was also nominated for the 'Crossword Prize' in India.

Vassanji's life spans through three continents, North America, Africa and South Asia. His writings too focus on the conditions of the East African Indians who migrated from India to Africa and later undergo a second migration to the European countries or the U.S. due to difficult circumstances. In this regard Meena Alexander views, "Vassanji's novels give a full description of 'double diasporization' "(1993). Most of Vassanji's works emphasize on the interracial and intercultural relationships between the Indians, the native Africans and the colonizers. In his novels like *The Gunny Sack*, *Amriika*, *No New Land* and others, Vassanji brings out the state of South Asian expatriates situated in East Africa.

'The In-Between World of Vikram Lall' is the fifth novel written by M.G. Vassanji published in Canada in 2003. Like in his other novels, Vassanji deals with issues of migration of Indian communities from India to East Africa and their further displacement to Canada. The novel also delineates issues like the European Imperialism, the interracial tension and the Mau-Mau protests in Kenya for independence. The novel is kind of autobiographical in its expression. Through this novel Vassanji shares with us his life in Kenya. He explores a significant part of his life; the writer draws upon the 'memory of his childhood'. "I was born in Nairobi and when I was about eight the Mau-Mau were active and it was the time of pain and darkness, from what I remember". (p.4)

'The In-Between World of Vikram Lall' is a portrayal of corruption, regret, turbulence of the Kenyan society in the last five decades. It gives an account of Kenya's colonial past and its post-colonial era. In the novel, Vassanji expresses conflict from the perspective of the immigrants caught in the perilous 'in-between'. This expression of 'in-between' forms the major stand of the novel. The feeling of belonging or not belonging is very central in the novel. The life of the characters in the novel oscillates between being an African or an Asian throughout.

The novel is a narrative, a record in the voice of the central character described as "a cheat of monstrous and reptilian cunning". He is the protagonist in the novel. As he narrates and introduces himself to the readers, "My name is Vikram Lall, I have the distinction of having been numbered one of Africa's most corrupt men, a cheat of monstrous reptilian cunning... I head my country's List of Shame" (p.1). The story is centered around Vikram Lall, grandson of Anand Lall who was brought from India to Kenya as a railroad worker. Though Vic's grandfather contributed significantly in the development of Kenya, the status of the family remains enigmatic.



The novel is divided in four stages. They are years of love and friendship, years of her passion, years of betrayal and the final part i.e. homecoming. In the first part of the novel we see childhood friendship of Vikram and his sister Deepa with Njoroge, grandson of the gardener, a Kikuyu and also with the two siblings, Annie and Bill, children of the British colonizers. As Vic looks back this 'in-betweenness' is implanted right from their childhood. It is evident when Vic compares himself and his sister with the playmates, two of them English and the other an African. He could discover that they are different, different in a way that he and his sister are neither black nor white but they are *brown*, the in-between. "I couldn't help feeling that both Bill and Njoroge were genuine, in their different ways, only I who stood in the middle... son of an Indian grocer, sounded false to myself..." (p.156).

As the story graduates, Vikram's growth parallels to Kenya's struggle for freedom from the British. This is the time when the Kikuyu Mau-Mau guerrillas raised their protest against the whites. On the other hand the British colonizers used the Kenyan against the Mau-Mau rebels. And this space to the African natives to suspect the Kenyan Indians. The Africans assumed Indians as the collaborators of the British colonizers. Now this again brings in the feeling of belonging or not belonging i.e. being 'in-between' the two nations. The Kenyan Indians are not trusted by the African natives nor are they accepted by the English. On the other side Njoroge, grown up as an idealist, expresses his tension as, "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." To this Vikram substantiates, "To the Africans I would always be the Asian, the Shylock, I would never escape that suspicion, that stigma..."(p.286)

The third part of the novel entitled, 'the years of betrayal' forms the substance of the novel. It seeks to cover varied circumstances in which we witness betrayal in personal relationships and also disloyalty towards their nation. We see Deepa being unfaithful to her husband Dilip, Vic deceives his wife Shobha. The scene is similar at the political level too. Politicians like Jomo Kenyatta and Paul Nderi betray their own countrymen. The section pictures Kenya's long and painful period of political independence and national maturity. Not only there is transformation in Kenya's politics and people but the section also brings out the drastic growth in Vikram Lall's progress as a rogue; from an employer of the Ministry of Transport to a personal assistant to Paul Nderi, a corrupt minister. Vikram is drawn into an unknown danger, a web of official and political larceny. Paul Nderi utilises Vikram as a perfect scapegoat for a massive money laundering scheme. Vic gets involved in scams that skim millions of dollars of aid money from public coffers. This makes him famous as the most hated men of his time and place. And when after his dismayal Vikram decides to move to Canada, Paul Nderi expresses his anger, "You people have your feet planted in both countries and when one place gets too hot for you, you flee to the other"(p.314). Vikram's reply to this is "It's rather that we people don't have a place anywhere, not even where we call home..."



The last segment of the novel, entitled ' is pictured as the present day where we see adult Vikram Lall living in a snowy town in Ontario. This section is named so as Vikram Lall here reveals his truth to the Anti Corruption Commission and is ready to bear the consequences. "All the wealth the money I made over the past years, I am going to give the up-most of it, part to the commission and part to a foundation. I will start new. I will come clear on the Gemstone Scandal. That should satisfy them and the donors of the World Bank."(p.418). Vic here expresses that he wants to get rid of all the scandals and come back home. " Ultimately I will have my say and make my peace with my world." (p.403)

After he Vikram Lall admits his past to the Anti Corruption Commission, they agree to offer an amnesty, the Kenyan Government, afraid of Vikram' s revelations, declared the commission and displeased it. Vikram Lall's fate remains unresolved, hovering between life and death, wandering in the 'in-between'. His last words "Go run, I will follow you..."

In this way, Vassanji presents before us the critical condition of Kenya during the last five decades. The worst condition of the mass under colonizers during the 1950s and how the circumstances subjugate after independence. The central theme of the novel is the situation of 'in-betweenness' among the Indian settlers in Africa for whom Kenya is their homeland. The catastrophic state is where even though these expatriates from India (Asia) accept Kenya as their land but are not accepted by African natives. Supporting the themes like alienation, migration, exile, diaspora and majorly 'in-betweenness', Vassanji explains this with reference to the central character, Vikram Lall. Lall, right from his childhood to his adult age grows with that feeling of 'in-betweenness'. Through the course of the novel we see Vikram's life drives him from the childhood innocence to a colonial world of repressive and undignified subjecthood. He and his family along with rest of the Indian communities hold an ambiguous position between the oppressed and the oppressors, the victims and the victimizers.

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