Chapter V

Disorientation of Identity: No New Land

Diaspora and quest are central to Vassanji's fiction where the subject of his fiction is normally the struggle of diaspora in a new land. The novel No New Land (1991) uses the concept of diaspora to present variations on the recurring theme in the context of immigrants' suffering prevalent in many postcolonial works.

Vassanji's second novel No New Land describes the identity crisis of characters, who decide to settle in Canada after they are ill-treated in Tanzania. In this novel Vassanji refers to Canada as an ideal place for migration, 'a place to lay down your head' (34), a place which gives you the chance of reinventing yourself or carving a new niche for yourself. This is what happens in the case of Nurdin Lalani, the protagonist of the novel whose whole sense of being is changed in Canada. While the narrative focuses on his story, his experience is related to other similar stories of migrant people highlighting the difficulties faced by them. The novel shows how these people negotiate their individual and collective responses to dislocation and change.

Diasporic writings are invariably concerned with the individual's or community's lingering attachment to the original homeland. But this attachment has its converse in a yearning for a sense of belongingness in the new homeland. Caught psychically between two worlds, diasporas are, as Victor Turner mentions, 'transitional beings' or 'liminal personas' (95), that is, they are in the process of moving from one cultural state of existence to
another. In this state of transition, some respond ambivalently to their double cultures or societies, which happens very markedly in the case of Nurdin Lalani, the protagonist of *No New Land*, while some make a determined attempt to assimilate and integrate as is seen in the case of Fatima Lalani, the daughter of the protagonist. For some the liminal state is very complex in which they cannot adjust and they withdraw or go back to their ancestral homeland as happens in the case of Esmail who returns to Dar after being a victim of brutal racism in Canada.

Vassanji focuses on characters who are in a characteristic diasporic liminal state, where they are caught between attachment to their homeland which they have left due to security reasons and their adopted home where they remain marginalized. *No New Land* is a postcolonial novel which presents individual’s perception of identity and nation. According to Vera Alexander, Vassanji’s novel is one of “the few diaspora texts to actively position diasporic existence within a multicultural paradigm, exposing the ruptures between theory and practice” (qtd in Fludernik 220).

M.G. Vassanji’s background is similar to the cultural history of the fictional Lalani family of *No New Land*. Vassanji considers himself to be an Afro-Asian and says:

> [A]lthough we were Africans, we were also Indians... We were brought up as Indians. We grew up speaking two Indian languages – Cutchi and Gujarati – and we also understood Hindi from the movies we watched. And then we were also brought up speaking Swahili and
English. We had all of this within us. (Vassanji qtd in Kamboureli 355)

Vassanji's own background serves as inspiration for the Lalanis, an Indian family who migrates from Dar-es-Salaam to Canada. Vassanji comments that his own background consists of "this Indianness... transformed by Africanness" (Kamboureli 354). This cultural transformation is what Vassanji portrays in his novels. The Lalanis' identity is first changed from Indianness to Africanness and then into an uncertain label of the so called 'Canadianness'.

Vassanji mentions in an interview:

I am not an immigrant who believes that you leave everything behind... [T]hat notion of immigration is simply weird. Yet it seems to be promoted by certain sections of the host culture, especially in Canada, in their national, insecurity and search for a real Canadian essence... I see myself as everything that's gone into me Africa, India, Britain, Canada, Hinduism, Islam. (Val Ross 130)

Vassanji's novel outlines the ambivalent processes of cultural negotiation undergone by characters who aim to make their home in a new country without giving up their own traditions. Simon Lewis says that the characters of Vassanji's fiction are people doomed to live either as alienated natives in East Africa or marginalised aliens in the First World cities, and that
they are peculiarly vested with a non-identity which renders their various flights ever away but never towards (or even between) homes.(222)

According to Martin Genetsch:

Vassanji implies that in Canada both the culture brought over (and cherished inside) and the culture encountered (and neglected outside) are, in theory, at the immigrant’s disposal. However, opting for one, while at the same time discarding the other is revealed to be at worst fatal and at best erroneous. The question as to which side to privilege becomes a pressing one for Nurdin and other members of the South Asian communities of Toronto.[...] No New Land is the interrogation of how much retention is necessary and unproblematic and how much adaptation is called for and essential in a multicultural context. (26-27)

The community to which Nurdin, the protagonist of the novel, belongs acts as an impediment as it prevents its members from entering into a dialogue with Canadian culture and society and affects the process of negotiation. Torn between contraries Nurdin takes a lot of time in accepting Canada as his new home.

Nurdin Lalani and his family migrate to Canada in 1970s when they are ill-treated in Tanzania. Canada offers the comfort of a secure place with its clearly defined multicultural policies. However, after coming here Nurdin and his family discover that they are in a new country but their status is just the same. Toronto
is just like Dar-es-Salaam, where their minority group struggled among Africans and Germans.

The first of the two epigraphs of the novel is a quotation from 'The City' by C.P. Cavafy:

You tell yourself I'll be gone
To some other land, some other sea,
To a city lovelier far than this...
There's no new land, my friend, no
New Sea, for the city will follow you,
In the same streets you'll wander endlessly.

The epigraph suggests that escape from one's past is impossible. Memories from the past keep intruding in the new land. It suggests the plight of immigrants who leave their native place and migrate to another country in search of better living conditions but the host country ill-treats them and considers them outsiders, making them turn back in their mind to their experiences in the land they had left, where somewhat similar alienation had prompted them to seek a new home in Canada.

The second epigraph is an extract from an old Gujarati hymn:

What are houses like in Amarapur?
Walls of gold, pillars of silver and floors that smell of musk.

The ideas expressed in the two epigraphs are constantly in dialogue with each other throughout the novel, where Canada is presented as
an ideal place, a place with all the modern luxuries and a place which ill-treats its minorities just like any other nation.

In the opening pages of *No New Land* the narrator views the city from the height of his apartment building and states:

Roseliffe Park Drive runs its entire short length in a curve, along the edge of a rather scenic portion of the Don valley. It looks over dense woods which give the valley its many moods and colours; in the distance, from among the trees, rises a lone enigmatic smokestack, its activity sporadic and always surprising; a solitary road drops partway down the valley, turns sharply, abruptly ends. [...] On the side facing the valley the drive itself is lined by apartment buildings identified only by their numbers – the famed 'Sixty-five', 'Sixty-seven', 'Sixty-nine', and 'Seventy-one' of Rosecliffe Park – whose renown, because of their inhabitants' connections, reaches well beyond this suburban community, fuelling dreams of emigration in friends and relative abroad. These buildings, when new and modern the pride of Rosecliffe Park – itself once a symbol of burgeoning Toronto – now look faded and grey, turning away sullenly from the picturesque scenery behind them to the drab reality in front. (1-2)

Vassanji describes that in this place immigrants live adding to this place a new fervour. Here they are identified with their numbers: they are stripped of their identity, that is their names. Those
buildings once appeared like a symbol of growth but now their grey colour symbolizes the ground reality of this place.

In Toronto, Nurdin finds an accommodation in a block of flats which bears puzzling similarities to their former home in Dar in which several ethnic groups lived beside each other. Nurdin says:

But then you step out in the common corridor with its all too real down-to-earth sights, sounds, and smells, and you wonder: This, Sixty-nine Rosecliffe? And you realize that you’ve not yet left Dar far behind. (60)

Life in Toronto for Nurdin reproduces many of the demoralizing conditions known to him in Tanzania. He and his family still belong to a minority group floating in a multicultural melting pot.

The novel opens with two revelations. The first is the news Fatima Lalani, the daughter of the protagonist, receives of her getting admission to Arts and Science instead of pharmacy. She belongs to the second generation diaspora; she is not nostalgic about the previous homeland like her father. Her only concern is to ‘Become-rich’ (4). Vassanji right at the outset makes a comparison between the first generation immigrants and their children who unlike their parents readily and easily adapt themselves to the new environment.

The second revelation is that Nurdin Lalani is being accused of assaulting a white woman. When he comes home and tells his family about the incident the family looks at him with doubt. No
one trusts him. His wife fails to provide emotional support which Nurin at this point of time longs for:

This time was different. He was beyond her and she felt left out. They sat for a long time in silence, side by side, immersed in their own thoughts. (9)

The novel unfolds Nurin’s story and moves back in time to the events leading to this incident. The first chapter of the novel makes a statement that one should be at peace with one’s own self by putting the past to rest. However, as Vassanji observes:

We are but 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 easily shaken off. An account of Nurin Lalani’s predicaments must therefore go back in time and begin at a different place. (9)

The narrative begins with the first migration which Haji Lalani, father of the protagonist had undertaken. Like Dhanji Govindji of The Gunny Sack, Vassanji’s first novel, Haji Lalani also migrated from India to Africa in search of better living conditions. Like Dhanji Govindji, Haji Lalani also started a business and soon became the mukhi of the community. Unlike Dhanji Govindji he was a man of strict disposition who followed the German justice as symbolised by the whip which they used against the natives. He used the whip against his sons as he believed that his idealism will be revealed through their character.
Haji Lalani had three sons: Akber, Nurdin and Shamshu. Nurdin is referred to as a ‘middle man’:

Nurdin Lalani was a middling kind of boy. Neither short nor tall, somewhat skinny, he was not one to take risks but was always game for mischief or a laugh, always with spare change or comic books to lend. He was prone to be the butt of jokes of the rowdier boys, the gang leaders, but these, as he grew older, he learned to manipulate, simply by sharing prudently his generous allowance. (19-20)

He is regarded by his father as a useless “good-for-nothing” (19): “An under-achiever: One brother making millions in the diamond business, the other making his – so Nurdin had heard – in the black market. Always he, Nurdin, the middle one, neither here nor there” (169).

For Nurdin growing up in a household whose head emphasises strict moral guidelines and high achievements, only sets him up for later frustration, owing to his failure to attain remarkable levels of satisfaction in his life. One of Nurdin’s childhood memories is when Haji Lalani beat up Nurdin’s brother for passing a comment to a neighbouring girl. The beating which is about instilling high moral values in the young boy, is actually used to camouflage the high expectations that Haji has of his sons. This incident paralyses Nurdin’s emotional growth. Haji is upset because Akber passes a comment to a girl who is lower in status. Haji’s extraordinarily violent reaction to his elder son’s act instills terror in the younger Nurdin’s heart, so much so that he becomes almost powerless in
dealing with women. He follows his father unconditionally; even in matters of marriage he does not disclose his choice. Haji selects Zera for him with whom Haji could discuss religious matters. Deep in his heart Nurdin wanted to marry a girl who followed western ways of life.

His father operated like fate. To oppose him even for the sake of a gesture would have been to unleash a fury and a storm he had no desire to face. If he probed his innermost desires, then the girl of his dreams was smart and fair, with boy-cut hair, who was comfortable in high heels, spoke English nicely, and perhaps even had been abroad.(20)

In the novel Asians are shown to be fascinated by the English way of life as the narrator of No New Land says:

The Asians had spawned at least two knights of the empire in their slums, they had had Princess Elizabeth in their midst, greeted Princess Margaret with a tumultuous welcome. They spoke proudly of Churchill and Mountbatten, fondly of Victoria. What schoolboy or girl had not heard over the radio the reassuring chimes of Big Ben before falling asleep, or the terrified voice of Dicken’s Pip, the triumphant voice of Portia, the Queen’s birthday message. (6)

As in The Gunny Sack, in No New Land Vassanji once again describes how revolutions took place in Africa and how Asians
were marginalised. They are however happy when independence is declared:

Finally, a new dawn was proclaimed, the beginning of a new era of cultural integrity and economic self-reliance: banks were nationalised, English was replaced as the medium of instruction in primary schools, students underwent army training and political indoctrination, and tilled farms. (24)

The Asians are then ill-treated and are expected to follow the African way of life and allow inter-marriages which the Asians objected to. However, they consider themselves superior they dislike the notion of inter-marriages with native Africans. This is shown when Jamal’s father publishes an article in his magazine which asserts: “If the previous generation of pioneers could have intermarried or cohabited [...] what stopped the new generation from ‘mixing with our African brethren?’” (72). The community is enraged at this comment and he is asked to stop writing such articles in his magazine. Most of the Asians felt a sense of insecurity in the absence of strong supportive rulers, which they had found in the colonizers. They did not know when they would be asked to hand over their properties and would be asked to leave. Consequently, many among the Asians were ready to move to Canada, a country which had openly invited them to come and settle there. In order to seek a comfortable place, the Asian-Africans felt no hesitation in leaving their old home in Africa which they had inherited from their ancestors. Before death Haji
Lalani thought that he had found an ideal place in Africa for his future generations:

[He] in his last days would sit at the ocean looking towards the land of his birth with only a twinge of nostalgia (After all we've brought India with us), died believing he had found a new country for his descendants. Two years later, his middle son, with his own family, set off for yet another continent. (30)

The narrator tells us how these people felt on hearing the word Canada:

Suddenly everyone was talking of Canada: visas, medicals, interviews, 'landeds'. In Canada they needed plumbers, so those who did not know one end of a spanner from another, schoolteachers, salesmen, bank clerks, all joined plumbing classes and began talking of wrenches and discussing fixtures they had never seen in their lives. Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal. You got the most recent news outside mosques after prayers, when men await their women, and during morning and afternoon tea times at the A-T and other tea shops: who had left, the price of the dollar, the most recent black market-related arrests. They talked of Don Mills as if it were in Upanga. The buildings of Rosecliffe Park were known, it seemed, in intimate detail. (29)

This migration of second-generation Indian Africans was not that easy as they identified with Africa as their native place.
They felt happy with the changes in Africa. They were ready to accept Africans as their leaders. As the narrator says:

Their children, third - and fourth - generation Africans, were taking readily to the new identity. What the government said made sense to the youth. Independence did open up new vistas, intellectually. Swatches of history became available, which had so far been hidden from them. They were not enamoured of the British as their elders were. Not after they had heard or read about Nehru and Tito and Nasser, not to mention Ben Bella and Nkrumah. The future was theirs, they were its masters, and the street fruit vendor, the shopkeeper, the elderly sheikh all looked upon the schoolchild, black or brown, with pride. Youths would march proudly in support of African socialism in Youth League uniform, under a scorching sun. (24)

It is only when the changes desired by the new rulers were felt to be exploitative that the younger generation of Indians felt nervous and “the idyll of a new Africa began to appear as shaky” to them “as it had always appeared to the older” (24-26). It was unlike the state of mind of the first generation migrants who had thought that in Africa they had found a secure and comfortable home for their future descendants.

Nurdin fails to make a place in Africa. He fails his Junior Cambridge examination. He tries to do various jobs and at last becomes sale representative for the Bata Shoe Company. He finally frees himself from the strict hold of his father by remaining on
tours. Nurdin is the victim of racism in Africa too. He is denied promotion which he feels he deserves. He feels dejected when his friend and colleague Charles is promoted and even peons are promoted. He believes in the fact that the reason of this partiality is that he is not a native of Africa. He quits his job and starts working independently but is not able to earn much in this state of affairs. Two years after Haji Lalani’s death, his family decides to shift to another country after their ill-treatment in Africa. “It was as if with Haji Lalani a whole era died, a way of life disappeared. [...] the changes that took place only two years later would have been beyond his wildest dreams” (21). Nurdin finally decides to migrate to another country. “Good night Dar, good morning London” (31) was the catch phrase of the time. On their way to Canada first they go to London, from where they would take another flight to Canada, and they are all being excited at the opportunity to see London, but their idyllic dreams are soon shattered Nurdin and his family’s first encounter with racism is in the plane: “The Asians for some reason, had been seated together and for their meal were all fed vegetarian” (32). In the plane they are told about various things about which they feel embarrassed and deep in their heart they think: “was Canada going to be like this: every step a mystery and trap, fraught with belittling embarrassments, and people waiting to show you up” (32). At London airport the immigration officers see in them “a pack of skilled and rehearsed actors from the former colonies out to steal jobs from hard-working English men and women”(33). They are refused entry in London. Upset at this hostility, Nurdin does not
even glance outside as they take off to Canada. He however “felt a
certain foreboding [...] there would be no return” (33).

When they reach Canada they see snowfall for the first time. As they step off the plane in snowy Toronto, they are hit with an intense cold and additionally with the realization that their chosen dress is no longer appropriate in this new country: The wind “made sails of their ill-fitting second hand clothes, which had seen better days on the backs of colonial bwanas and memsahibs on chilly African evenings” (35). This simple introductory scene captures the sense of unease experienced by the various characters in their new home.

Nurdin’s family starts living with Zera’s sister Roshan, but after some time, they are asked to shift to a new house. They shift to Don Valley where immigrants live. Some of their optimistic expectations of a prosperous future are fulfilled on arrival, manifested by things of which they had dreamt in Dar. The very name of this place evoked in them a feeling of comfortable and rich life style. As Nurdin asserts:

Sixty-nine Rosecliffe Park. The name still sounds romantic, exotic, out of a storybook or a film. Sometimes it’s hard to believe you are here, at this address, sitting inside, thinking these thoughts, surrounded by luxury: the carpeting, the sofas, the telephone, the fridge, the television – yes, luxuries by Dar standards – things you could not have owned in a lifetime. The CN Tower blinks unfailingly in the distance; the parkway is incredibly beautiful at night
dotted lines of glowing lights curving in the darkness of the valley. And when it’s snowing there in the night, softly, silently, whitely, you wonder if it’s not a childish Christmas card you are dreaming. (59-60)

From their apartment they could see “the top of the CN tower blinking its mysterious signal. In rain or shine, a permanent presence in their lives, a seal on their new existence [...]” (43). For Nurdin the CN tower becomes a God-like figure from which he seeks some kind of communication or guidance and the lights which it emits a kind of message which he fails to decode. The CN tower, one of the tallest “free-standing structures and symbol of communication and complexities epitomizes Canada’s unreachable possibilities” (Kanaganayakam ‘Broadening the Substrata’ 33). Which the immigrants would experience in the course of the narrative. There is another structure which is present at the bottom of their building is that of a lady: “She is for all those who pass under her stony gaze, a real, if a little mysterious, presence” (70). The place near the statue later becomes a meeting point for the males who:

would gather in the mornings to discuss ‘life and politics’, while their wives or mothers would be out at work or rolling chappatis upstairs in the apartments or, to be fair, out on their own breaks. This was the Don Mills A-T, men sitting in a circle on the goddess’s platform, and standing around, sipping tea, sharing snacks, chatting. (71)
Nurdin and his family continue to live in the same way culturally as they had in Africa, the land they have left behind, and socially they overlook the fact that their social networks are not confined to that building where almost all the residents are immigrants. As Neil Bissondath observes:

Vassanji's description of this community of exiles - so tight, so self-contained, so alienated from the mainstream - is that of an almost classic ghetto. It is not an extreme of multiculturalism but it's ideal: a way of life transported whole, a little outpost of exoticism preserved and protected. (qtd in Genetsch 52)

Their cultural practices and lifestyle are simply transplanted in a new place. In order to preserve their culture, the Shamsis of Dar recreate their community life in Toronto. Sixty-Nine Rosecliffe Park, their main abode in Toronto, has all the luxuries which they dreamt of, but they have also maintained the chief characteristics of Dar, their previous home. Their native dishes are readily available there:

The cookers at Sixty-nine are on, full blast. Saucepans are bubbling, chappatis nest warmly under cloth covers, rice lies dormant and waiting. Whatever one thinks of the smells, it must be conceded that the inhabitants of Sixty-nine eat well. Chappatis and rice, vegetable, potato, and meat curries cooked the Goan, Madrasi, Hyderabadi, Gujarati and Punjabi ways, channa the Caribbean way, fou-fou the West African way. (65)
The Shamsis make their own Mosque which is temporary and is held at a school gym on Eglinton Avenue. For them the Mosque is not merely a place of prayer but also a sort of club where people come for relaxing. After prayers the newcomers from Dar announce themselves and people inquire from them, about Dar. They feel relieved when the newcomers say that there is problem for them that is the Asians, in Dar. Though their new home is also not an ideal place for them, yet they feel happy for having left Dar.

The uncomfortable feeling of the migrants in Canada is highlighted in Chapter Four of the novel which begins: “What would immigrants in Toronto do without Honest Ed’s...” (40). The Lalani family enjoys shopping:

The first few times they would stand in wonder before the racks, piles, and overflowing boxes and crates, fingering perfectly good clothes for sale for peanuts, as it were: Shirts for $1.99, dresses for $4.99, men’s suits for $14.99! (42)

They make comparisons between their earlier home and the new. They feel happy when with their budget they can dress elegantly like the white Canadians. They recall:

The headaches you could buy in Dar with such difficulty: size sixteen shirts with size fourteen sleeves, pockets sewn shut, flies too short, shoes not matching, zips not closing. (42)

The low price and fair quality of the clothing in Canada seems to reflect a better lifestyle and validates their decision to leave Dar.
They later attend a party which some of the Canadians gave in order to welcome them. This party is actually a sort of trap for the immigrants where in the end they are supposed to pay for eatables. “A party where new Canadians can meet the old and learn from their experiences. A party to welcome the newcomers” (50). Nurdin and his family attend this party. Their awkwardness begins when they watch “Tall ladies in fur, men in tweeds and leather” (52). The glamorous outfits in the lobby contrast with that of a self-conscious Nurdin who thinks “nervously of his suit. A bargain, though the checkered design was not to his complete liking. And the sleeves were just noticeably long” (52). This place makes him aware of his status. The Honest Ed bargains, which makes the migrants happy, become an embarrassment when compared with the trendy outfits in the posh lobby. As a result, a sort of fashion hierarchy is created; the evening’s highlight, a fashion show titled “The Complete Canadian Male or Female”, reiterates this hierarchy. The clothing, ranging from the pricey to the practical, is deliberately showcased from most to least expensive. The accompanying commentary reflects the image created by the higher or lower cost. The fashion show seems to imply that becoming a “Complete Canadian” simply involves dressing up in a certain way. In a country without a unified national identity, many Canadians attempt to define themselves by their clothing, speech or appearance instead of a national identity. In the party Bibles are presented to the newcomers. Christianity stands as the emblem of colonial authority used by the colonizers or the majority to curb the minority.
This is what Nurdin discovers when he goes in search of a job. Nurdin’s experience forms a common pattern of experience of the unemployed Asian Africans. To get a job different accents are tried, shoes with heels are bought to increase one’s height. Nurdin fails to find a job as in Canada he is considered the ‘other’. He is rejected because he does not have the Canadian accent. The employers’ recurring demand for ‘Canadian experience’ is what irritates Nurdin. This question of Canadian experience becomes a ‘trump they always call, against which you have no ‘answer’ (44).

They face the ground reality of this place:

After their initial excitement, the days of wonder when every brick was exotic and every morning as fresh as the day of creation, came the reckoning with a future that they’d held at bay but was now creeping closer. [...] First the man of the house had to get work befitting his status. But try as he might. Nurdin Lalani could not find a job. (43)

Vassanji’s characters witness racism—be it in any part of the world—which cripples them.

Nurdin’s wife finds a job and he feels his identity as the bread-earner is challenged. This happens to almost all the male members of the community. Nurdin starts doing menial jobs in order to earn money and remove the tag of sitting idle:

Out of this world Nurdin would wander in search of a job and return dejected, plunged into deeper despair. Sometimes he took daily jobs, invariably menial,
loading and unloading with fellow Dar immigrants and would come home and lie and say 'filing' until that became a joke. Everyone knew what 'filing' meant. Sometimes he simply refused to go out to these humiliations, watching game shows and talk shows at home, and joining the 'A-T' crowd of the idle men who met for chitchat and tea downstairs in the lobby in the emulation of Dar's famous A-T shop. On his ideal days, in the afternoons he would clean up at home, sweeping away evidence of any degeneracy giving the television enough time to cool. (65-66)

For a man who had lost his job in Africa and fails to secure a job in Canada the issue of identity is crucial. Nurdin's failures in the new land frequently draw him towards the familiar where he finds a kind of connectivity. He remembers Dar where they had servants. He remembers how he used to travel with Charles, his friend, in order to sell shoes:

At times like these, all to himself, he would on occasion think of the old days... of his stern old father who had terrified him much... of his brothers and sisters and the family... of his schooldays... of his buddy, Charles, and the days and nights they spent in the forest together on their way to sell Bata shoes. [...] Those times in the forest, on the road, were what he treasured most out of his memories. They were moments he could truly call all his own. (169)
Nurdin is racially, culturally and politically excluded from the host society, he is living on the fringes of the host society and dreaming of a home, replete with intimate memories and feelings of emotional affiliations. As Neil Bissondath observes:

Bitter-sweet descriptions of Dar-es-Salaam offer a nostalgic vision of the past and make the present even darker than it really is, emphasizing the central point there are, as the title states, no new lands, only new circumstances. (qtd in Genetsch 58)

It means that the whole responsibility of adapting to a new environment solely depends on the individual, his preparedness to accept the host country as his home, a place where he is comfortable both economically and emotionally.

The identity crisis in Nurdin’s life manifests itself in his becoming a different person. He starts thinking differently and then feels guilty. Nurdin discovers "tremors of change inside him and new yearnings" (84). He starts thinking obscene thoughts and often discusses this with Nanji, a part-time professor: "Do you have lewd thoughts?" (84) Nurdin starts believing that he is rotting from inside:

Perhaps he would rot physically first. He felt tired these days, old. His hair had greyed and thinned, there were lines on his face, and his skin somehow looked more opaque in the mirror. How old was he? Forty-six, about the average life expectancy where he was born,
but here in Canada you got an extended lease on life.

(85)

Nurdin falls a prey to the temptation of eating pork. Caught in a dilemma whether eating pork has changed him, he asks Nanji “But can it change you, from inside, you know, your character?” (128). He has similar feeling or uneasiness, when for the first time he drinks beer with his friend. He does not know why he accepts the offer:

He did not know why he was doing what he was doing, did not think about it, though a vague consciousness of his deed lay somewhat heavily on his heart. (144)

Nurdin puts all the blame on Canadian air. “There must be something in the Canadian air that changes us” (136-137). Nurdin goes to watch peep shows. He starts visiting Sushila, who had been their neighbour at Dar and whom he happens to meet again in a restaurant in Canada. He wants to form a relationship with her but deep in his heart he feels guilty and confesses his sin in front of his father’s photograph:

To punish himself, he looked full square at Haji Lalani’s photograph, eye to eye. Do to me what you will: twenty-five, fifty, a hundred strokes of hippohide whip, dipped in salt. When he died, his father would be waiting for him with the whip, God’s personal executioner... (146)

Haji’s portrait in Nurdin’s house becomes a constant reminder of the latter’s failure to provide for his family and
therefore to live up to his father's expectations. Nurdin is locked in a battle to do things which his father never approved of that is eating pork, drinking beer, forming relationship with the very same girl for which his father had beaten his elder brother.

The looseness in the moral conduct of many Dar immigrants also irritates Nurdin. The new country with its own cultural values has made these persons break off with their own cultural past. They have become more practical and rational. He observes:

The old people who are shunted between sons and daughters and old peoples' home – who would have thought that possible only a few years ago. It's all in the air: the divorces, crimes you could never have imagined before, children despising their parents. An image of his own arrogant Fatima came to his mind and he pushed it back. (137)

Nurdin's life becomes stagnant between the statue of the goddess in the hall of their building and the CN Tower. He wonders at his own behaviour:

"When does a man begin to rot?" Gazing at the CN Tower blinking its signals into the hazy darkness, Nurdin asked himself the question. He sat in his armchair, turned around to look out into the night. Through the open balcony the zoom of the traffic below in the valley was faintly audible, as was the rustle of trees. Pleased with the sound of his silent question, he repeated it in his mind again, this time addressing the
tower. The lofty structure he had grown familiar with over the months, from this vantage point, and he had taken to addressing it. “When does a man begin to rot?” he asked. Faithful always, it blinked its answer, a coded message he could not understand. (82-83)

For Nurdin the CN Tower replaces God. He seeks its support and guidance. The CN Tower remains mute and the light which it emits becomes a mystery for Nurdin.

There are some characters in the novel who easily adopt themselves to the new set-up. This is what Nurdin’s friend Jamal does. He marries a Canadian girl in order to take admission in the Bar Council. His marriage is a social commitment which leads him to success and social rise:

If there was anything Jamal learned from the Don Mills demo, it was that the world was a bigger place, and he had to grab it, make a prominent place for himself in it. The two dimensional world of Sixty-Nine and its neighbours was a dead one, a world to escape from. Accordingly, he took his chance when it eventually came. (114)

His wife however changes her name from Nancy to Nasim. He grabs the multiple possibilities that are available to him in Canada. Similar is the case of Sushila who was Nurdin’s neighbour in Dar. She is now a widow who lives in Canada with her daughter. To her Canada symbolizes growth and freedom where she is not anyone
else's servant and can pursue her dream of higher education even at an advanced age.

Nurdin's own daughter Fatima accepts the Canadian way of life. She wants to be an independent girl and wants to earn her livelihood. She likes everything English and imitates that very lifestyle. She is seventeen years old, she changes her choice of clothing as the novel progresses. The first introduction to Fatima describes her as an attractive young girl dressed in "designer blue jeans and a stylishly oversized khaki shirt" (4). Fatima imitates the English style of clothing so that she looks a member of their community. She follows Nanji in terms of clothing. She develops an uncomfortable hatred of her origins. She calls her house 'little Paki-Shitty-stan':

She was ashamed of this little Paki-shitty-stan of Don Mills, as she called it. She didn’t belong here, she would pull herself out of this condition, everything about her attitude suggested that. She would rise to where they had neither courage nor the ability to reach. Where had she picked up this abrasiveness, this shrillness, this hated of her origins? (167)

Fatima stubbornly rejects her upbringing and family. Fatima's sense of fashion is typical of other teenagers who try to form a new identity. For these children identity is not static but is ever-evolving.

In the novel the impulse towards cultural conservation is best exemplified through Zera Lalani wife of the protagonist who
follows same lifestyle in Canada. She hangs on the wall the photograph of her father-in-law who symbolized a standard against which the family members should measure themselves.

The migrants often find themselves in circumstances where they feel awkward. Nurdin, for example, decides at the new Canadian party that "This was not for him, an atmosphere that made him so conscious of himself, as if he was onstage and those people were the spectators" (52). The uncomfortable sensation of the gaze, however, can originate from more familiar sources; when Nanji exits his own building in a new outfit he feels the unsettling stares of his own neighbours. Nanji becomes self-conscious as he leaves his own familiar dwelling: "In the pathway he'd looked up to see - just in case - and his fears were confirmed: there were spectators on the balconies" (131). In Nanji's case it is not only the external gaze which he feels is judging him, but also viewers from within his own community. This clearly shows that the community acts as a barrier for the migrants who try to adapt themselves to the ways of their new land.

By describing the clothes of characters from different classes Vassanji makes a comparison in their status which the reader understands. As Nurdin struggles to find employment in Canada, he takes up a job at a doughnut shop. The shame Nurdin feels is made clear:

As he came to the counter wearing the yellow jacket, feeling a little low and degraded in this uniform that was stiff and odorous with the sweat of previous wearers. (86)
The yellow jacket is an upsetting reminder to Nurdin, who has the experience of wiping tables, a sacrifice which he has to make to live in Canada. The uniform is an obvious marker of success and employment. A discounted outfit holds a stigma and acts as a marker of comparison against other families which are successful. Nurdin becomes aware of the difference between his own and his niece's financial status during a visit to Montreal. Their dresses show the disparities of status which exist between the families:

[Nurdin] felt so out of place, he had felt like a bum, with his night watchman's blue jacket, unpressed trousers, cheap boots straight out of Honest Ed's. (148)

Apart from these humiliations which the migrants feel due to their dress; there are two instances of clear-cut racism in the novel. The first concerns Esmail who had also migrated from Dar. Esmail, a neighbour of the Lalani family, is a quiet man who is viciously attacked by a group of white youths in Toronto subway station for no reason. This incident draws attention of the media and all the immigrants come forward in support of Esmail. They are dismayed to think of their oppression in Africa, which they find recurring in Canada; and this heighten their fears about their future in Canada. They assert: "The blacks kicked us out, now the whites will do the same... Where do we go from here?" (103). They start thinking whether in coming to Canada they have done the right thing or not:

What now? Was this a sign of things to come... danger to self and property, to wife and kids. Have we come to the right place after all. In all these years in Africa not
to have seen anything so wanton, so arbitrary, so public. (102)

They try to raise their voice that they are not from Pakistan but are East Africans. The immigrant community holds rallies and meetings where they question Canada's multiculturalism which they say is 'multivulturalism' where the whites behave like animals. The whole episode puts the East Africans in an identity crisis as they are clubbed with the Pakistani community. As the narrator describes:

Rosecliffe Park Drive had become a promenade with unfamiliar faces, posters flew about - and they took note of it, but warily. A Paki rally was not really their cup of tea - weren't they from Africa? A few of them went to the meeting, to see what it was all about. It seemed that they were being forced into an identity they didn't care for, by the media and public, and now by these Paki Asians who meant well but couldn't keep their distance. None of them seemed to realize, or care that Esmail belonged to them, their particular East African Asian Shamsi community. (109)

After this incident Esmail is made a celebrity. His entire recovery process is telecast on television. People bring him gifts, pray for his recovery. Amidst all this Esmail starts painting indigenous masks. The Canadian artists do not acknowledge or appreciate his art. He decides to go back to Dar where he starts teaching painting to American students. As Martin Genetsch comments:
His return to his origins is not only an aesthetic endeavor, it also has an additional dimension in that it brings about a valorization of (his) community as well as valorization by his community, the Shamsis. Not only has his art benefited from his return home, Esmail's apocalyptic better understood by the members of the community he belongs to than by a Canada that rejects his works as aesthetically inferior. When connected to their socio-cultural contexts, the masks he paints acquire additional layers of meaning insofar as they have a particular cultural/ritual function within Tanzanian society. The fact that Esmail's art has not been understood by Canada reflects not only how his art has seemed to a first world audience but also how rootless he himself is in North America. (28)

Nanji, Nurdin's neighbour and a part-time professor, also faces racial discrimination on many occasions. While travelling in a bus, he remains seated all alone. No one from the white community sits with him even when all the seats are occupied and some passengers are standing. The word racism keeps intruding in his mind: "It could be my face, dark, brooding, scowling, cratered. Perhaps I look like a bum" (93). Nanji's parents died in an air crash. He had buried this tragedy deep in his mind, which he rarely invoked. When he joined University the Vietnam War had begun, and he was interested in Indian nationalism. Later he lost faith in all these ideologies and there began constant search in his life for
some meaningful purpose. Nanji’s girlfriend also leaves him, which further troubles him:

Nanji told Jamal, in all earnestness, the first week they met, “the only, choice, real choice, man has in the world is whether to go on living...or to commit suicide, end this absurd existence. Have you thought of that? Compared to this, all other questions are trivial, frivolous, irrelevant”. (75-76)

Nanji’s search for meaning finally comes to an end when he meets Khadija. With Khadija he forms a link with East African community from which he was estranged. His desire for a purpose in life is fulfilled by Khadija, the Missionary’s daughter.

Nurdin also becomes a victim of racism but in a different way when he is accused of assaulting a white girl when he actually offers her help. Nurdin’s colour becomes the target of racism where the accusations of the girl are purely racist. Nurdin has to face a lot of humiliation where his family does not trust him. Nurdin is tried for other crimes. His colleagues misbehave with him. One of his colleagues says: “I’m not going to serve this rapist!” (180). The tag of being a rapist is attached to him before he is actually tried in the court. The basic line of trust is missing. The family fails in providing the emotional support which Nurdin at this point of time longs for. Apart from this false accusation Nurdin had a sense of internalized guilt at visiting another woman, Sushila. Due to this guilt he could not face his family:
Not meet her eyes because there was that other guilt of all his misdemeanors, and the guilt of visiting another woman, planning a tryst... (183)

All these things have an adverse effect on Nurdin's personality. He is unable to live his normal life:

The following days he was’nt himself, was’nt there, at all. It was, every time he became conscious of his situation, as if he had taken a tremendous fall, then getting up, not knowing how much of him was still there intact. Most of the time there was this heaviness in the heart, pulling him inside, into himself, making him inattentive, vague, numb, as if what he suffered from was something terribly physical, the aftermath of a deafening explosion, whose echoes drove everything else from his mind, made discussion meaningless. (184)

A similar incident had taken place in Haji Lalani’s life in the past:

One day a young fraulein stopping over at the mission came into the shop to look for gifts for her servants in the European settlement of Wilhelmstal up north, whence she came. She carried a parasol and had the most delicate features. As she stepped in from the glare of sunlight outside, it took a while for her presence to materialize in the relative darkness inside the shop, where Haji Lalani sat with his servant. The girl was accompanied by one of the fathers, who stopped at the
doorway to chat and a servant girl who carried her shopping. As the fraulein raised her arm to point to a string of beads handing from a nail, Haji found himself staring at her – she was flushed with the heat, her face lightly perspiring, and her armpit a delicate wet patch – and he felt the faint stirrings of a desire inside him. They did not go very far, in fact he would have quashed those forbidden thoughts there and then had not his face been brought alive by a stinging slap from the girl’s hand. (14)

Nurdin also falls victim to a white girl when he actually tried to help her but in his mind is tempted by her colour: “He was almost squatting beside her now, his hand was on her shoulder. He realized he had never been so close to a white woman, before. And he realized he had become aware of her femaleness” (178). The disappointments and humiliations that Nurdin experiences bring about an unwillingness to adapt culturally. As Genetsch also mentions Nurdin “must remain an alien because he is profoundly alienated by a new land that does not embrace the other because it feels braced by the other”(30). Nurdin is regarded as the other and that is the reason that this girl accused him.

Not only does Nurdin fail to accommodate Canada, Canada also fails to accommodate Nurdin. For Canada, Nurdin is merely a threat and thus a burden at this
point. Thus Canada, despite its multicultural policy, fails to realize that Nurdin’s difference is also a cultural resource. For a land that prides itself on its multicultural ethos this is a remarkable failure. (Genetsch 31)

It is with the help of a Missionary who comes from Dar that Nurdin exorcises his part:

Missionary’s arrival, a week after the incident, turned out to be a blessing, although Nurdin had not really looked forward to it. (184)

The Missionary helps Nurdin. He looks at Canada as a perfect ‘Amarapur’. This Missionary was Nurdin’s father’s friend but unlike Haji he is very liberal. He is a spiritual leader, not in the conventional sense of the term. He accepts the winds of change. As Nanji notes:

What was amazing, observing him now after many years, was that the man was so human. He was no ascetic. He liked food, delighted in conveniences and gadgets, and was definitely not one to spurn a car ride in favour of walking out in the cold. (190)

This first thing the Missionary does is to reduce the CN Tower to a tangible location: “Ah the CN Tower. I have been to the top of it, many years ago. Excellent restaurant” (86).

The Missionary hopefully thinks of progress that had always kept his people intent on migrating to the West. The last three chapters of the novel focus on how the Missionary and Jamal try to
help Nurdin. The Missionary helps Nurdin to become confident and come out from the feeling of internalized guilt. He helps Nurdin in overcoming his fear of his father. The Missionary's act of wearing Nurdin father's fez leads to a demystification of the past:

Nurdin recoiled, flitting his eyes from his father's hat on the Master's head to his father's picture on the wall, back and forth, several times. The very same hat that his father had worn, day in and day out, before him now, more real than the photograph. He [the Missionary] removed the hat from his head, holding it irreverently like the dead object it was, and he laughed some more and they could'nt help laughing with him. That instant the red fez was exorcized. In one stroke that photograph on the wall had lost all potency, its once accusing eyes were now blank, its expression dumb suddenly they were here, in the modern world, laughing at the past. (196-97)

The exorcism of his father brings a positive change in Nurdin where he is ready to accept change:

It seemed to Nurdin that, with the dust settled, some kind of commitment had been wrought from him in the proceedings of the past few weeks. Missionary had exorcized the past, yet how firmly he had also entrenched it in their hearts. Before, the past tried to fix you from a distance, and you looked away; but Missionary had brought it across the chasm, vivid, devoid of mystery. Now it was all over you. And with

219
this past before you, all around you, you take on the
future more evenly matched. (207)

With the Missionary's help Nurdin realizes that now he must
think of his family and his job. After the Missionary paves the way
for a more adequate attitude towards the Canadian host culture,
Nurdin is free to accept Canada as a new land. As Victor Ramraj
asserts, "Vassanji sanctions efforts at assimilation and syncretism
on the part of the diasporic communities" (228). Nurdin undergoes
a change and sees the possibility and necessity of cultural
exchange. As Uma Parameswaran mentions:

Home is where the feet are, and we better place our
heart where the feet are. (52)

For Nurdin, "the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind
and are not easily shaken off" (9). Thus, for Nurdin adaptation is a
time-consuming process unlike the second generation diaspora who
readily and smoothly adapt to the winds of change. The narrator
refers to a girl who is a second generation diaspora:

Take this girl in hijab, standing in the elevator, head
covered, ankles covered, a beautiful angular face, long
body, who could have come straight from northern
Pakistan. But when she opens her mouth, out flows
impeccable Toronto English, indistinguishable from
that of any other kid's discussing what? - last night's
hockey game. In her arms, covered with a decorated
green cloth, is a heavy book also apparently in hijab.
She's on her way to Quran class, on the fourteenth
floor. What will she remember when she is twenty, thirty, what will she write. (63-64)

She is happy to adapt herself to her present, land unlike Nurdin. The children of the migrants adopt Canada as their home. Yasmin, Nanji's girlfriend, finds freedom in U.S.A., displaying what Bharati Mukherjee calls: 'a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation, to the exuberance of immigration' (qtd in Bissondath 111). In the end Vassanji wishes that the changes wrought by immigration and radically different circumstances must be recognized, assimilated and accepted. It is the only way to take full advantage of the new possibilities.

Vassanji depicts the postcolonial landscape of Toronto as a place of partial mergings that have the potential to replace old patterns and to create new possibilities. The novel ends on an optimistic note with Nurdin having been cleared of the legal charges against him and with his growing openness to Canada which helps him cope with crisis of identity and redefine himself.
References


