Chapter Five

Conclusion: Asserting a Syncretic Identity

Post-Colonialism seems to come full circle in those writers who inhabit the third space, live the third culture and shape the third history.


A close analysis of M. G. Vassanji’s canon of five novels and two collections of short stories reveals a perceptible pattern, especially when we analyze it from the point of view of the double displacement of characters and the question of their assertion of a syncretic identity. Double displacement is both a phenomenon and the general theme underlying his work as a whole. All the five novels, some of the stories in Uhuru Street and the stories in Elvis, Raja: Stories handle the theme of double displacement and the theme gets worked out through the lives of several generations of immigrant characters—from the first to the fourth. And quite incredibly the first four novels with the sole exception of the fifth, The In-Between World of Vikram Lall and several of the short stories portray one specific community—the Shamsis.

Thus collectively Vassanji’s works seem to record the lives of the Asians and the Shamsis in particular, the trauma of displacement they experience after each uprooting and the way they try to retain their
syncretic identity which does not preclude the need to adjust to the ways of the land of adoption. The trajectory of migration of the first generation, in all the five novels is invariably from India to East Africa from where their descendants migrate to Canada. The only exception is the fourth novel, AMRiiKA where Vassanji situates his protagonist in the US. When the second and the later generations migrate to the Euro-American world, they are presented as migrating, metaphorically, for a second time and hence stand doubly displaced from their ancestral roots in India. And almost as if to give a comprehensive sketch of this phenomenon, Vassanji explores the displacement trauma of his protagonists at various levels—physical, geographical, cultural, emotional and psychological—as a result of the transplantation and victimization on ethnic grounds that they face in the new land.

Even while appearing to focus on the dilemmas of the protagonists, Vassanji does not limit his works to a narrow canon. The problems of the individuals seem to typify the trauma of double displacement of the entire transplanted community because Vassanji does not see the individual divorced from the family and community. In fact, the individual does not mean anything when isolated from the family and community, as reiterated in the words of the protagonist-narrator of AMRiiKA. His query: “Can I talk about myself without reference to a group?” (AMR 194) makes the connection explicit. Through the lens of the individual, the family and the community, Vassanji projects the history of migration and
the trauma of displacement of an ethnic community, which lie embedded in the larger history of Kenya and Tanzania.

The syncretism of the Shamsis, as depicted in *The Gunny Sack*, is the outcome of the initial conversion form Hinduism to Islam which took place three centuries ago when Shamas *Pir* converted the village of Junapur in India to an esoteric sect which combined the tenets of Hinduism and Islam. It is this Hindu-Muslim syncretism which makes the Shamsis unique and which later enables them to adapt easily to new ways of thinking and living without compromising their core values.

The syncretism of the ethnic community, as depicted in *The Gunny Sack*, *No New Land*, *The Book of Secrets* and *AMRiiKA* are worked out at different levels—at the level of religion, at the level of cross-cultural interactions and at the level of inter-racial marriage. The Shamsi religious practices, which combine the tenets of Hinduism and Islam, throw light on syncretism at the religious level. The cultural influence of Africa on the Indians is reflected in the use of Swahili along with Cutchi / Gujarati and English by the fictional characters. Their art forms also reflect the mutual influence of the two continents. The Shamsis are both Hindu and Muslim, Indian and African as their identity is shaped by an African component too. By bestowing mixed parentage and thereby, a hybrid identity to some of his central characters, Vassanji retains syncretism at the inter-racial level. Thus Salim is one-eighth African—a hybrid combination which represents the social relation between immigrant
Indians and native Africans in a typical colonial sandwich situation. Akber Ali, in *The Book of Secrets*, represents a similar union, though this time between the colonizer represented by Alfred Corbin and the colonized Indians represented by Mariamu. These are only a few examples.

*The Gunny Sack* vividly portrays the way in which the first generation retains their Gujarati-Indian identity, initially in East Africa and later, in Canada through the second and later generations who re-enact their Cutchi-Gujarati-Indian-Zanzibari-Kenyan-Tanzanian identity as a positive mark of empowerment. They try to retain their former selves as they do not wish to lead a faceless existence in the new land. The Indianness of the first generation immigrants in East Africa is reflected in Dhanji’s attempt to reclaim his half-caste son for India—a “struggle to maintain an Indian identity in a continent that threatens to swallow them . . .” (Barratt 447). It is also reflected in Ji Bai’s attempt to preserve her Indian values and tradition. The gunny sack of her colourful memories preserves for posterity a record of what she and her descendants go through in Africa after she leaves her paternal home in Gujarat as a young bride, to follow the footsteps of her husband, to Dar. The advice, which her father gives her at the time of leaving for Dar, is typically Indian. She is asked not to do anything that would bring shame upon herself and her family, never to walk out alone or to speak of her home outside the four walls. “Always cover your family’s shame. Don’t come back without
your husband’s permission . . .” (GS 19). Like a dutiful daughter-in-law, Ji Bai preserves the khandanity of her husband’s home. Even after living in East Africa for decades, she retains ties with her homeland—a fact which is reflected in her last visit to her native village in Gujarat where she breaks down before the ruins of her house. She asserts her Indian identity and takes pride in it, but at the same time, imbibes, consciously or unconsciously, some of the values and practices of the adopted land. This justifies her claim that she is assimilated enough to be an African, Indian, Arab and European (GS 228). It is this component of Indianness which Ji Bai passes on to Salim and tries to perpetuate through him.

The Indianness of the Shamsis is reflected in the game of antakshri that women play in their rare hours of leisure; it reverberates in the Muslim prayers and the Hindu bhajans of mad Mitha, the maternal grandfather of Salim; it is also reflected in the ritual observed by Salim’s mother soon after the birth of Begum—a ritual which harmonizes the Hindu-Muslim tradition. Salim grows up imbibing the richness and values of this Indian tradition which forms a major feature of his syncretic identity. Vassanji projects the Indianness of some of the central characters through their reflections, observations and reminiscences. Salim remembers the incident of his visit to the local mukhi’s house while serving as a conscript in Tanzania’s National Service. As soon as he enters the house, he sees two giggling young girls. His comment is: “One takes the sweetness of Indian girls for granted—the playful even
mocking, innocence that evokes tender feelings inside you and you forget how possessive you feel towards them” (GS 208). Although Salim belongs to the fourth generation and falls in the slave woman’s line of ancestry, he retains cultural and linguistic ties with his Gujarati-Indian heritage. With every succeeding generation, there is the added possibility of a dilution of the Indian component and the creeping in of an African component. However, Vassanji’s protagonists do not subvert their Indian identity completely and do not seem to embrace total assimilation at least immediately.

Salim realizes that there is a very close relationship between naming and identity. Thus, in one of his reminiscences, Salim says: “How much in a name? Salim Juma, the name chose me, and it chose my future and this basement in which I hide myself with my gunny . . .” (108). Salim remembers his father’s dark complexion that he has inherited—“. . . the dark of the Indian, that persistent dark-brown of sedimented coffee that refuses to whiten with any amount of milk” (62). Begum and Sona are also one-eighth African like Salim as they are all Juma’s children. Genetically as well as in the adoption of the name, Salim Juma Huseni, Salim truly retains his Afro-Asian syncretic identity. He is interested in knowing about the past of his father Juma, grandfather Huseni, great grandfather Dhanji and his paternal great grandmother, Taratibu. Salim sees Taratibu in every slave woman.
Vassanji’s preoccupation with the theme of double displacement is reflected right from his first novel. In post-independence Tanzania, we see many aspiring young boys and girls of the Shamsi community migrating to London and North America. Thus, the protagonist’s scholarly brother Sona migrates to the US to pursue higher studies; his sister, Begum marries an Englishman and migrates to London; and Salim himself escapes to Canada in times of political turmoil in Tanzania. Other members of the family—Salim’s Hassan uncle and aunt also migrate to Canada. Thus they are all doubly displaced from their ancestral roots in India. Nevertheless, they try to retain their former “selves” to a great extent. Sona’s vocation involves the study and love of antiquity, old alphabets and scripts, crumbling manuscripts: the “history and mystery of sects, in medieval Europe and India and—Sona’s later interest—Coastal East Africa” (GS 234). Kulsum’s parting advice to Sona that he should not marry a white girl, that he should not smoke, drink or eat pork and her reminder: “Don’t turn your back on your faith and your community” (235), are actually indirect attempts to preserve and uphold the syncretic identity of the Shamsis. While they are in East Africa, the Shamsis try their best to preserve their unique Indian identity. The need to assert their Africanness arises only when they are transplanted to the Euro-American world, where they see their Tanzanasian identity as a distinguishing factor. Thus Sona carries with him to Boston the values of the old world—of India and Africa. Begum’s children are named Peter Juma
Harris and Sara Kulsum Harris—yet another attempt to assert a syncretic identity. Ji Bai dies in Canada on her way to visit Salim.

Even while asserting their syncretic Shamsi identity, Vassanji’s fictional characters belonging to different generations realize the need to adjust to the ways of the adopted land. Sometimes this happens even without the characters’ active knowledge of it. One of the best examples of this paradoxical phenomenon is provided by Ji Bai’s Westernized funeral in Canada which takes place in a “converted supermarket” (GS 3).

Thus *The Gunny Sack* ends with the writer’s serious contemplation on the theme of double displacement. Shamas *Pir* had promised the Shamsis a saviour from the west, and after hundreds of years of long wait, they feel that he had come—“not a pir, but a Pierre Trudeau of Canada, promising a cold Eldorado in the north” (GS 248-49). As depicted in *The Gunny Sack*, the reversal of roles in post-independence Kenya and Tanzania, invariably turns out to be the impetus for migration of the fictional characters, especially the protagonists, in all the five novels.

The theme of double displacement becomes most pronounced in *No New Land* which depicts Nurdin Lalani’s trauma of displacement that is seen to stem from his father’s emigration from India to Tanzania. Nurdin and his family are faced with the task of carving out a respectable place of their own in the adopted land, grappling against all odds. Vassanji focuses on the trauma of displacement—physical, cultural, emotional and psychological—of the protagonist and the way in which he
realizes that although he can never belong to the adopted land, it is a land of promise both for himself and his children. The religious mentor from Dar teaches Nurdin that he has to draw on strengths that he has brought with him from the past. And this past is, inevitably, the meeting of the cultures and values of two continents—India and Africa. It is a past which gives him the confidence to face the future with equanimity.

The Dar Indians in Toronto assert their syncretic identity by creating their community life. The community gatherings turn out to be occasions for indulging in reminiscences of their past lives and the land they have abandoned. They recreate their mosques, their neighbourhoods and the associations in Toronto. “They had the Girl Guides with the same troop leaders as in Dar . . . some things were different. That was the whole crux of the matter now. Their Dar, however close they tried to make it to the original, was not quite the same” (NNL 170). The sparkle of Dar, its very essence was missing, suggesting that the search for an ideal home, away from the original home, remains the eternal quest of all immigrants. Recreating small replicas of their homeland, the Dar Indians try to carve out a space of their own to which they can relate themselves emotionally and retain their syncretic identity.

The fact that they bring the religious mentor to Toronto in order to reinforce their faith is ample evidence as much of their unwillingness to subvert their former selves and as their urgent need to assert and strengthen it. While Nurdin and Zera embrace their religious faith and old
world values, they watch with trepidation the way their daughter becomes Canadianized. Fatima has no qualms about breaking bonds with her birthplace in Tanzania. She is ambitious about carving out for herself a rewarding commercial career in Canada; her aim is to become rich in the quickest possible way. But her parents would rather prefer to save her from the corrupt influences of Western culture. They feel that they have almost already lost their daughter and the mother decides never to lose her son—“No, not him” (NNL 6). Even while trying to assert their uniqueness, there is the threat of a Canadian component creeping into their already syncretic identity, just as an African component has consciously or unconsciously crept in. The chances of cultural assimilation are indeed very real and seem to increase with every succeeding generation as depicted by Fatima.

When they are marginalized as South Asians in Toronto, the Dar Indians, in order to set themselves apart from the other Asians, re-enact their Tanzanian identity by wearing Kaunda suits, a typically East African outfit which they had all bought in a frenzy of African patriotism in Dar (NNL 95). When a Paki rally is organized to protest against the racist attacks launched on Esmail, some of the Dar immigrants at Rosecliffe Park Drive express their displeasure. “A Paki rally was not really their cup of tea—weren’t they from Africa?” (109). The Tanzanian Asians believed that they were more truly Africans as they have been on the coast for centuries. Even the Cutchi-Gujarati they spoke had a
Swahiliness about it. The Masai wood carving and the wax Taj Mahal that adorn the living room of Nurdin’s apartment in Toronto almost symbolize the harmonious co-existence of two cultures. Thus even in Canada Vassanji’s fictional characters try their best to assert their Afro-Asian syncretic identity.

Also living in the highrise of Rosecliffe Park is a cast of wonderfully drawn characters whose lives interweave with the Lalanis. They are also people who have experienced the trauma of double displacement. There is the slick and up-coming lawyer, Jamal, his friend and philosopher Nanji, Esmail, a baker and the lovely self possessed widow, Sushila who was the old Tanzanian flame of Nurdin’s elder brother. There is also the Guyanan, Ramesh who helps Nurdin find a job in the Ontario Addiction Centre, and who introduces him to the forbidden pleasures of pork, beer and even peep shows. Missionary is the only first generation Dar Indian to migrate to Toronto. Thus the experience of double displacement and the assertion of a syncretic identity go hand in hand among the Shamsis, although the fictional characters show varying degrees of adaptation to the host culture.

In *The Book of Secrets*, though the theme of displacement is at work, it focuses more on the history of the Shamsis that lies embedded in the colonial history of East Africa during the final years of colonial rule and the first decades of independence. Here Vassanji explores the human predicament with colonialism as its setting. The first generation of the
central Shamsi family is Jamali’s mother who migrates from Jam Nagar in India, first to Zanzibar and gets married in the Swahili town of Lamu from where her son sets out to the mainland in the company of a British explorer and becomes the founder of the village of Kikono in British East Africa. It is here that he gives his sister in marriage and where her daughter, Mariamu is born and given in marriage to Pipa. Mariamu’s son, Akber Ali is also born in Kikono. The doubly displaced immigrant from this Shamsi family includes Akber Ali who elopes to London with Gulnar Rejani, now Rita. Their scandalous affair rouses the curiosity of the Shamsis in London and they become the topic of discussion until Ali gets a divorce from his first wife. Three months after their arrival, they get married in a small Shamsi mosque in London.

Vassanji then focuses on the racial discrimination that the Third World immigrants in the First World have to face, by describing the predicament of Rita and girls like her who have left their homes to seek jobs in the colonizer’s land. In Rita’s words: “We worked late, were asked to clean up, had our bottoms pinched; a girl was raped, another became pregnant. And then we learned to speak up” (BS 283-84). They are still from the colonies, and hence the sharp colonizer / colonized divide. Ali’s plight is no better. The proud, handsome Ali, who has the bearing of a prince, has to work even as a waiter. The hardships endured in the colonizer’s land are such that, in Rita’s view, no one would grab the chance of rushing to London, had they known the truth. With an
unexpected turn of events, Ali scales heights of success, learns to live and
talk like an Englishman and leads a glamorous existence. While Ali
moves towards Westernization, has “flings with women” (*BS* 291), and
grows derisive of Indian ways, Rita remains her old self, still religious,
still visiting the Shamsi mosque and never letting down her Dar Indian
Shamsi identity. Even after she is divorced from Ali, Rita mediates
between him and the Shamsi community in London and remains
religious, resisting Westernization even in her way of dressing.

When it comes to the fifth generation, their daughter Rehana
marries an Englishman, but her children are given Indian names. Thus,
with every succeeding generation, there comes about a dilution in the
Indian component of their syncretic identity. Jamali can be cited as the
best example of cultural syncretism. He marries a Swahili woman, begets
three half-caste sons and leads a contended married life. “His Swahili
wife spoke Cutchi . . . and had borne him three children” (*BS* 28).
Khanoum embraces the Shamsi community wholeheartedly as her
husband is the *mukhi*. In the Jamali-Khanoum relationship, Vassanji
seems to envisage an ideal condition of syncretism. Yet another example
of syncretism is Pius Fernandes who is an integral part of Dar. For Pius:
“This city where I first landed forty years ago has so grown on me, it is
like an extension of my self. I will never shed it” (*BS* 316).

The theme of double displacement is integral to the fourth novel,
*AMRiiKA*. But what makes it different from the first three novels is that
its major focus is on the personal and political awakening that comes about in the protagonist, Ramji, over three highly charged decades in the political history of the US, from the nineteen sixties to the nineties. Yet another difference is that it is the only novel in which Vassanji situates his protagonist in the US. It is more concerned with the politics of dissent and anti-American student movements in which the naïve Ramji gets entangled and even becomes an easy prey to moral corruption, including free sex. Nevertheless, he cannot divorce himself from Third Word issues. The novel is written in the form of a memoir of its protagonist who is a third generation Shamsi Muslim. Having lost his parents in childhood, he is raised by his grandmother (Ma). Ramji sets out from Dar to Boston in the company of his friend, Sona in order to pursue higher studies at the Tech (a fictitious institution as stated in the “Author’s Note”). AMRiiKA is a novel that illustrates the complex nature of the diasporic narrative. “It must speak both to the adopted home and to the homeland, and in Vassanji’s case, the medium or the bridge between the two is the older diasporic home, East Africa” (Paranjape 39). Paranjape’s remark indicates the presence of more than one homeland which, in turn, reinforces the theme of double displacement.

The American society that Ramji and Sona find, when they land in the States, witnesses presidential assassinations, economic scandals, murder of social leaders, a demanding war in South East Asia and the proliferation of dissenting lobbies that ask for the suppression of gender
and social barriers. In 1995, twenty-seven years after Ramji first set foot in America, he looks back to his life from the vantage point of a lonely, middle-aged man. We move along the changing political scenario in the US and the rest of the world. Back in Tanzania, times are hard. The expulsion of Asians from Uganda by the mad dictator Idi Amin has its repercussions in both Kenya and Tanzania.

Ramji remembers the scene in which his Ma bids him farewell "with a vow of constancy against temptation, a promise to uphold his identity and faith" (AMR 21), which has parallels with the parting advice that Kulsum gives Sona on a similar occasion. This is the way in which the earlier generations try to perpetuate their faith in religion and a sense of community and identity through the later generations who migrate to the second adopted home in the Euro-American world. The idea of retaining one's moral, cultural and emotional ties with the homeland is symbolized in AMRiiKA by an icon—a khanga which his Ma and the African women in the neighbourhood give him as a parting gift, with the message inscribed on it: "Wayfarer, keep looking back" (AMR 36). In fact Ramji keeps looking back and even feels like returning home to contribute his share in the nation building process. But he never returns, not even when his Ma dies. His predicament is reflected in the remark: "And so I followed the routes of many visitors to this country. I allowed convenience, the temptation of good life, and the assurance of safety and
freedom to detain me, even as I held on to the image of the errant patriot, needed, missed in his native land" (AMR 126).

The first section of the novel traces Ramji’s growth and change in the background of the anti-war movement across American campuses; he gets involved in a politics of dissent, tastes the wine of liberty and happiness, and has sex with Ginnie, the matriarch of the host family, although it is she who initiates him into the act. Ramji and Sona are seen moving in two opposite directions—the former towards Americanization and the latter, towards his Shamsi Muslim roots. Sona becomes the mukhi of the student community at Boston, creates a make-shift mosque, performs the religious rites in the prayer meetings every Friday, and tries to keep his fold together. While he pours the holy water into the hands of the congregation, one of them remarks: “We have brought the holy Ganges with us” (24). These rituals help them to retain their syncretic identity wherever they are. Sona is rather annoyed with Ramji’s habit of visiting the satguru ashram and remarks: “Look. We are a community with a history, language, identity. Would you like it all evaporate into nothingness?” (107). Sona believes that all the mysticism that the guru teaches is there in their Hindu Islamic tradition and that Ramji does not have to “run off to find it anew” (106).

The first phase comes to an end when Ramji is implicated in a bombing incident and the person (Lucy-Anne) responsible for it is sheltered in his room. She curses him when she is arrested as she feels
that he has betrayed her and accuses him of being a betrayer of his “own world” (126). He contemplates: “... In my country Indians like me are sometimes called foreigners even though we’ve been there more than a century . . . . I am Indian and African and all screwed up with Western education and all she sees is ‘Third World’” (115). Identity is a sum total of all the experiences in a person’s life—a clear indication of the syncretic identity of the protagonist. AMRiiKA has a repetitive, dual movement and combines two plot lines—the political and the personal. If the bombing incident marks the political in the first section, Ramji’s meeting with Rumina, an enigmatic, good-looking half-caste from Dar, in the second section, marks a catastrophe in his personal life as it leads to the breakdown of his marriage. However, there occurs a temporary rift between the two when he realizes that Rumina is the daughter of Sheik Abdala, one of the leaders of Zanzibar’s Revolutionary Council who had forcefully married a young Asian girl in the name of the integration of the races.

The second section subtitled “A Grand Reunion”, presents Ramji in the company of his friends and families who are comfortably settled in the affluent American suburbs. However, Ramji and Sona are obsessed with thoughts about home and Third World issues. These community gatherings turn out to be occasions for cherishing fond memories of bygone days in Dar, their school days and other memorable events in the lives of Ramji, Sona and many others of their generation. Even the food
that is served seems to be an attempt to assert their syncretic culture. "There were dosas, idlis and sambar, samosas, potato-chops, chicken tikka, kebabs and salads . . ." (135).

Ramji’s meeting with Rumina marks a turning point in his life and career. If Ramji has encountered America in Ginnie, he encounters Africa in Rumina. What attracts them to each other is their common interest in Swahili, "the language that sounds like music to his ears, and taraab music that he hasn’t heard all these years" (Mukherjee 90). Ramji moves west, to California to work for the left-wing magazine titled *Inqualab* which aims mainly at highlighting Third World issues. The mission of the journal is "to make inroads into mainstream culture, subverting the homogenizing melting pot, even as it goes out and chews up world culture in its maw" (208). The journal publishes letters by a phantom writer and this leads to the hostility between the conservative and the radical Muslims, culminating in the bombing of a bookstore, causing three deaths. In the Shamsi community that Vassanji portrays in his novels, there exist rifts in the form of radical Hinduism and radical Islamism which co-existed even in Tanzania and has historically led to continual tensions that plague them and become more intense in the Euro-American world. Ramji once again ends up sheltering a young man called Michel, an escapee from the Third World and a suspect in the bombing incident. Once in Ramji’s absence, the police break in and arrest the young man, who by now is holding Rumina hostage. The trauma ends
with Michel killing himself. Rumina leaves home and Ramji loses her a second time, though the novel ends on a note of optimism.

Ultimately the message that Vassanji tries to convey through his passive protagonist seems to be that political adventurism and extremism of all kinds must be condemned for they can culminate in nothing but violence and death. The syncretism that Vassanji advocates through his novels is rooted in the harmonious co-existence of differences and abhors extremism and violence. A letter from a former student revolutionary also convinces Ramji that the anti-War Student Movements of the sixties and the Islamic fundamentalism of the nineties were the excesses of the age—a realization that comes too late when there is no going back. In Ramji’s words, “there is no going back to one’s previous state of being . . .” (AMR 68). Ramji is torn between his affiliation for the erstwhile homeland and his adopted home; he is haunted by the ghosts of two far away places—Africa and India. Focusing on the central characters, we see Sona emerging as an influential professor. Though he is married (later, divorced) to a white American, Sona’s first obsession is his religion and he considers it his mission in life to study “the distinctiveness of just one community” (194)—the Shamsis. Ramji is more involved in the political issues of the day and feels that in matters of the world, the religious arguments of a “small people” do not matter much. Sona’s cause has to do with the history and belief of his people who have maintained for centuries and kept intact their syncretic culture that combines the
tenets of Hinduism and Islam. He is much concerned about the recent attempts of the community to purify itself of Hindu idolatry, which, he believes, is the outcome of Arabic Islamic imperialism. Sona's conviction is: "For their faith to take root in the new country, the Shamsis must adopt the values and icons of America . . ." (155), without subverting their former identity.

Apart from Ramji and Sona, another doubly displaced Dar Indian immigrant in the US, is Mr. Darcy of the first generation who is also a political activist and founder-editor of Inqualab. Ramji's life intersects with that of Darcy who lives with his son and family at Los Angeles, in the midst of a community which he has always shunned in the past for its narrow-mindedness and backwardness. Darcy is derisive of his daughter-in-law's interest in Third World issues which, he feels, is a mere public relations gimmick. He remembers how, back in Dar, he had always indulged in intelligent discussions with some educated Indians, the topic of discussion invariably being Indian independence and the role of National leaders like Nehru, Gandhi and Jinnah. Thus Darcy becomes a rich source of history.

It is interesting to note how Vassanji entrusts people of the first generation with the task of carrying over the past to the present. Thus Ji Bai, in The Gunny Sack, Missionary in No New Land, Pius Fernandes in The Book of Secrets and Mahesh in The In-Between World of Vikram Lall serve as a link between the past and the present. The identity of their
forebears is, undoubtedly, the basic component of the syncretic identity of the protagonists. For Ramji, "Darcy was their past, a rich source of history, and there was a wholesomeness in sitting before him and listening to his stories" (*AMR* 234). It is from Darcy that Ramji learns about his long-lost parents and also about Rumina’s parents—Sheik Abdala and Elena (a Russian)—whom Darcy had met at a press conference in Dar.

There are many instances in the novel which reflect the cultural syncretism of the Shamsis, especially of the protagonist and also their interest in Third World issues. The Makonde carving which Ramji brings as a gift to the host family is an excellent example of Tanzanian carving in wood—a reflection of the influence of the African art forms on the Shamsis. Later, Michel also gives Rumina and Ramji a Makonde carving as a token of love and friendship. The Shamsi Friendship Walk, which is organized to connect the Shamsis scattered across America, is a momentous event in their lives. It is aimed at raising funds for matters pertaining to the Third World. A jubilant, motley crowd participates in the "walkathon" (*AMR* 301). The assertion of a syncretic identity can be seen as a mild form of resistance against the effacing of the "self" and the marginalization that the ethnic minorities experience in the Euro-American world.

*The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is an epic tale of modern Kenyan history mapped out against the major transplantations of the Lall
family. In the course of five decades, three generations of the Lall family migrate across three continents in a westward movement followed by a growing number of African born Asians. The reversal of roles in post-independence Kenya serves as the major exiling factor in the protagonist’s life. A self-imposed exile in Ontario, Vikram Lall goes back to the land of his birth to make a fresh start. His plans misfire and he is forced to flee from Kenya and relocate in Canada. In this sense, he becomes a victim of double displacement.

Despite Vic’s upbringing as a Punjabi Hindu Indian, he has a passion for the land of his birth, as it is the only home he has known. “While Vikram Lall has sought refuge in ‘clement’ Canada, his new country seems to barely impinge on his consciousness, intent as he is on recording his past in a distant, dangerous land” (Jacinto 3). India is a “fantasyland” (VL 19) for Vic. Nevertheless, he comes to know of the land of his forebears from his paternal grandfather and also from his mother and Mahesh uncle. Vic grows up paying homage to the Hindu gods and goddesses—a practice that he has imbibed from his mother. Even in the Canadian wilderness, Vic never forgets to say his namaskars to the icons he has carried faithfully with him, although he doesn’t know what they really mean to him. The first generation Indian immigrants of the Lall family include Vic’s paternal grandfather, his mother and Mahesh uncle. They take pride in their Indian identity. By strictly adhering to the Punjabi Hindu religious practices, celebration of festivals, dress and
cuisine, Vic’s mother upholds her identity to the very end of her life. In fact, it is her pride in her specific Punjabi Indian identity and her intense desire to preserve it that make her thwart her daughter’s love for the African boy, although she has motherly affection for him. She asserts the difference between the two races and strongly voices the view that the two can never merge.

However, when it comes to the third generation—Vic and Deepa—there is a dilution in the Indian component of their syncretic identity. They have consciously or unconsciously internalized Africanness which is reflected in Deepa’s love for Njoroge and her deep desire to marry him; it is also reflected in Vic’s contemplation on his dada marrying a masai woman so that he would inherit an African identity genetically and legitimately. Vic’s Punjabi Hindu Indian heritage, coupled with his passion for Africa and African values and his love for the English Anne reflects the different strands of his syncretic self. The Lalls have a permanent outsider status in the adopted land as their ancestral home in Peshawar had become part of Pakistan, at the time of Partition. The theme of displacement and a sense of exile, alienation and dispossession mark the general mood of the novel.

The Indianness of the protagonist’s family and its true Indian spirit are reflected in the discussions on India’s freedom struggle and reminiscences of the National leaders like Gandhiji, Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. Vic’s uncle has even participated in India’s freedom
struggle. However, Vic’s father finds these Indian allusions quite alien and he has not heard of Subhas Chandra Bose. Nevertheless, he takes pride in having a beautiful Punjabi Hindu Indian woman as his wife. In the Sunday family gatherings, the Lalls take pride in listening to “the lilting melodies and sad lyrics from Saigal, Hemant Kumar and Talat...” (VL 25) which emanate from KBC’s Hindustani music from the shortwave. Though displaced from their homeland they retain emotional and cultural ties with their land of birth.

While Vic is in Canada, he becomes aware of his deep passion for the land of his birth. Even as he opens up to Seema, he also realizes that he must return to Nairobi to clear his name. The pull of the homeland and the urge to preserve the family honour are too strong for him to resist. If Salim, in The Gunny Sack, decides to go back to Dar, here we have in Vic a protagonist who really returns home and becomes convinced of his permanent outsider status. Vic’s predicament almost confirms the idea that a person once displaced from home suffers a permanent sense of exile, alienation and dispossession—a frame of mind that often serves as inspiration for immigrant writers to produce narratives of dislocation. Apart from Vic, his sister, after her husband’s demise, settles in the US along with her children. Her in-laws, the Sharmas, also migrate to London. The issue of double displacement and the need to assert a syncretic identity thus go hand in hand in all the five novels.
In his works, Vassanji presents not only the problem of double displacement but also seems to give the implied solution that the displaced immigrants, whom he portrays, can face the present reality only by carrying over the past to the present and attempting to make a clear understanding of it. The past becomes a source for drawing on strengths that will help them in resolving the dilemmas of the present and also for facing the future confidently. Reclaiming the past is also an attempt to reclaim their former “selves”. In his essay, “Thinking Diaspora: Home Thoughts from Abroad,” Stuart Hall remarks that “a detour through the past enables us through culture to produce ourselves anew as new kinds of subject” (556). Thus the protagonists in all the novels acknowledge the past and understand the role played by the past in shaping the present. Acknowledging the past, along with its value system, is, in turn, manifested in the assertion of their Afro-Asian syncretic identity. Reclamation of the past makes life at the margins more a celebration than a relapse to nostalgia.

A close reading of the stories in the anthologies, *Uhuru Street* and *Elvis, Raja: Stories*, reveals that Vassanji’s preoccupation with the theme of double displacement extends into this genre too. The short story cycle traces the lives of the members of the tightly knit community in the context of momentous changes in the history of Tanzania when this street, formerly Kitchwele Street changes to Uhuru Street, the term *uhuru* meaning independence. The central focus of *Uhuru Street* is the historical
fact of migration of the Shamsis to East Africa, the establishment of
diaspora and the interaction of the Asians with the colonizer and the
native Africans in a tripartite society where the social hierarchies are
strictly maintained. It also depicts the change in the socio-political
scenario and the immense psychological pressure under which they are
uprooted and are forced to migrate to the Euro-American world. In short,
*Uhuru Street* has thematic parallels with *The Gunny Sack*. The readers
find themselves inhabiting a familiar world as characters reappear, events
recur and encompass almost the same time span—features integral to the
short story cycle which is a literary form that is used by some of the
diasporic writers to preserve a world that is slowly slipping away with
time. Thus, in the story, “Leaving,” the parting advice which the
narrator’s mother gives his brother when he goes to the US to pursue
higher studies is akin to Kulsum’s advice to Sona, in *The Gunny Sack*,
when he leaves for Boston for the same purpose. A character named Mrs
Daya, the gossip monger reappears in the story “Alzira.”

“The London–returned” and “All Worlds are Possible Now” are
haunted by the inevitability of the departure of Indians from Tanzania,
paving the way for the double displacement of the second and later
generations, especially of the narrator. The narrator of “The London-
returned,” who is now settled in Toronto with his daughter Zahra,
indulges in reminiscences of his past life in Dar. He remembers the
weekends in Uhuru Street, a rendezvous for boys and girls like him who
come to spend their holidays in Dar. They “would strut up and down its
dusty pavements parading overseas fashions, our newly acquired ways”
(US 104). But for the narrator, the street has always meant something
more. It is the place where he had first met Amina and fallen in love with
her. “Kismet our elders called it. You could walk to the end of the world
and not find the right partner, they told you” (106).

Vassanji thus keeps alive the Indianness of his fictional Shamsis “.
. . by front-bench afternoon gossips and the preservation of traditions and
world views” (Davis 15)—a feature that is reflected in many of the stories
dealing with intra-community relationships. Subsequent to the political
changes in Tanzania, a large number of boys and girls from Dar migrate
to London to pursue higher studies. Amina follows suit, a year after the
narrator’s return to London, after his vacation. They marry and move to
Toronto where their daughter is born. Amina’s friends and families follow
and she becomes the centre of everything as she had been in Dar.
“Slowly, Toronto, their Toronto became like Dar, and I was out of it” (US
112), says the narrator. Theirs is an intimacy that turns insipid, dried up
and the same kismet that unites them quite ironically separates them. The
story depicts the physical, emotional and psychological displacement
which the narrator experiences in Toronto, especially after his separation
from Amina. It is also a reflection on the way in which migrations and
transplantations can affect the lives of people.
The narrator of "The London-returned," who is seen mulling over the last days of his marriage to Amina, is also the narrator of "All Worlds Are Possible Now." He has returned to Dar and says: "I returned, I suppose, because I always returned, ever since those student days I spent abroad. But a broken home also pushed me out as did concern for a palsied father spending his last years alone" (US 130). In Dar, he visits the familiar haunts of his school days. At the Shamsi mosque, he happens to meet Farida. She is the librarian of a small library attached to the mosque, and also a widow with a son. There develops a growing intimacy between the two. But he loses her as a more affluent man supersedes him in proposing to Farida. The narrator has come back to reclaim "home" and "permanence" but he is left with nothing to reclaim but the empty street. The street itself has changed; it looks narrow and small; all the lustre and liveliness has ebbed out and "the ships that pass here no longer carry portents of faraway impossible worlds" (130). All worlds are possible now—a situation that arises out of the mass migrations from post-independence Tanzania to London and North America, as a result of which they have been "caught between lives as contrary as the ends of a cross" (130)—a clear indication of the phenomenon of double displacement.

Commenting on Uhuru Street, Malak Amin remarks that the appeal of Vassanji’s work resides in its ironic ridicule of the claim of ethnic and religious purists. "Half cases, mixed ancestries, syncretic
ideologies and beliefs and cross-cultural relationship or marriages preoccupy his narrative with various degrees of prominence (Malak 281). Thus the narrator in the story “For a Shilling” describes the population of the street as “(t)he crazy world of our daily associations—of Arabs, Africans, Asians and assorted half-castes . . .” (US 35). Naming and identity also seem to have a close relationship. The Indian narrator of the first story, “In the Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon,” remarks: “we all have a name here. They think I don’t know they call me ‘Black’” (2) His mother was African and he knew that no better name would suit him. Although relationships of dependence may be established between the races, boundaries are kept clear, never to be trespassed.

This is the reason why Ali, in the story, “Ali,” is dismissed from the narrator’s home as he is caught spying on the narrator’s elder sister while she is having her bath. He leaves, saying that he will marry her. Interracial marriage was considered taboo then. However, in “Breaking Loose,” a more positive vision of interracial relationship emerges. An Indian mother finds fault with her daughter for falling in love with an African professor. Her query: “What do you know of him . . . ? With an Indian man, even if he is evil, you know what to expect. But with him?” (87)—indicates the way in which the mother upholds her Indian identity. But a dilution of the Indian component is reflected in her daughter Yasmin’s decision to marry the African. For Yasmin, people bound by histories and traditions are puppets tied to strings. She considers herself a
“new mutant” (88), and decides to “break away from tribalism” (90), and live with Daniel Akoto, thereby reinforcing the idea of syncretism.

The theme of double displacement is integral to all the stories in Elvis, Raja: Stories, as almost all the central characters are people transplanted to Canada from India via Dar. They are people who inhabit the in-between space on the margins of cultures. The in-between space that the immigrant community occupies is a place “where history is preserved only by virtue of memory, where culture is an evergrowing patchwork of transient lives” (Fox 3). More than mere spatial displacement, some of the stories depict the psychological and emotional turmoil and the strong sense of alienation experienced by people who strive to strike roots in an alien land. If No New Land—though with a fresh cast of characters—can be seen as a sequel to The Gunny Sack, as the former begins where the latter ends, Elvis, Raja: Stories can be seen as a sequel to Uhuru Street for almost the same reason. If only the last few stories in Uhuru Street contemplate the theme of double displacement, it becomes a common concern in the second collection of short stories. While most of the stories in Elvis, Raja: Stories are narrated by Shamshu, the mukhi of the Shamsi community in Toronto, the narrator of most of the stories in Uhuru Street is a fatherless child whose mother runs a store with the help of her five children—a situation similar to that of the protagonist-narrator of The Gunny Sack. Though the theme of double displacement is a unifying factor in Elvis, Raja: Stories, each story
in the collection has its own thematic concern that seems to depict a slice of the immigrant experience.

While stories like "The Girl on the Bicycle," "The Expected One," "Last Rites," "The Trouble with Tea," "She, with Bill and George" and "Farida" deal with the Shamsis, the other stories in the anthology concentrate on Indian immigrants negotiating the in-between space of east and west, past and present. The story "Her Two Husbands" is set in Pakistan as the central character Yasmin, after the demise of her first husband, leaves Toronto and goes to live in Pakistan with her second husband who is a Pakistani.

The first two stories—"When She Was Queen" and "The Girl on the Bicycle" present two incidents back in Dar, the hurt and humiliation of which are carried across continents and have their culmination in the present in Toronto. The narrator of "When She Was Queen" has heard from his married elder sisters that their father Rashid once bid their mother at the poker game. She goes to spend a night with John Karmally (John Chacha) and the birth of the narrator exactly nine-and-a-half months after that incident makes everybody suspicious of his paternity. The incident at the poker game turns out to be "the obsessive dark centre" (Elvis 9) of the narrator's existence. A year after the expulsion of the Asians from Uganda, the narrator's family migrates to Toronto. John Chacha and his wife follow suit. Rashid dies of a heart attack, five years after their arrival in Toronto. The humiliation at the poker table had cost
him his happiness and the enthusiasm for life. He bears his humiliation silently, leads a resigned life and eventually becomes a loner. Besides, the cold Canadian climate is too severe for him to adjust to. The narrator’s mother lives all alone in a small apartment in Toronto and though he tries to make her talk about her past, she seldom touches upon what the narrator craves to know. He visits John Chacha to find out who his father is. The shocking revelation is that his mother went unmolested from John Chacha’s house that night, with Dr. Singh. Dr. Singh thus turns out to be the narrator’s biological father. Betrayal, alienation of man and the complex nature of human relationships become the central focus of this story.

Through the description of the choice African motifs with which John Chacha adorns his Toronto apartment, Vassanji tries to drive home the fact that wherever they are, the African Asians uphold their syncretic culture. “Carvings on display table, a pair of spears crossed on a wall, a large drum of animal skin, an almost full-size statue of a Masai” *(Elvis 17)*—clearly throw light on the cultural impact of Africa on the lives of the Asians.

The narrator of “The Girl on the Bicycle” is Shamshu, in whom Anaar Dhalla confides the secret of her revenge. Even after leaving Dar and settling in Toronto, the hurt and humiliation she suffers in Dar, though abated, is not extinguished. The story opens with Anaar spitting on the face of a dead man when his body is laid for funeral at a mosque in
Toronto. Her hatred and anger are set ablaze when she happens to meet the object of her revenge, Salim Damani in Toronto. It takes decades for Anaar to avenge the insult that “defiled” her “most private”, her “woman’s moment” (*Elvis* 38). She realizes on her wedding night that she and her husband have been spied upon through an aperture in the wall of the hotel room. The next morning, while checking out, she sees the owner’s son, Salim Damani at the counter, grinning at her and making the nastiest comment that she does not dare to repeat. It convinces her that it is he who had spied on them in their most private moment. Ever since, he has been an object of hate and there are moments when she hopes that he is dead. Once she meets him at the Shamsi mosque in Toronto and realizes that she continues to hate him with the “bitterest bile” (38). It takes twenty years after her arrival in Toronto, for Anaar to hear that he is dead. The mukhi in whom she confides her story, is unable to answer her query: “Do you think that I overdid it—my anger?” (39).

As in the first story, betrayal, sense of alienation and the complex nature of human relationship become the major thematic concern in the story, “The Sky to Stop Us.” Nazir and Almas are emigrants from Dar. “They had done the immigrants’ apartment route in Don Mills, gone hustling after cheap prices from one end of town to another . . .” and later, achieved success in life—a success which could be described aptly as: “from rags to riches” (*Elvis* 44). His entry into real estate brings a spurt of success for Nazir and he emerges as a great businessman. Despite the fact
that he had given her all the comforts of life—everything she wanted and even more—she deserts him. The kids too have everything in life, everything taken care of. All they lack is “ambition and drive”. It is the same with her too. She leaves him for the sentimental reason that he does not find time to play with the kids or have dinner with them. His justification is: “I’m paving the road with velvet for you kids to walk on with ease” (48). After all the hard work, a man comes home at night “to pour out” his “frustration and be comforted . . .” (43). Victories seem meaningless when there is no one to share them with. When they were hard up for money, there was mutual love and understanding. Success can, at times, take “love” out of life. It can hamper human relationships.

In “The Expected One,” Vassanji portrays Nagji, a third generation Indian immigrant in Dar who sets out for Be-raja in Gujarat where an unexpected role awaits him, although the story is titled “The Expected One”. Nagji is ordained a guru. While embarking on his journey to India, the young man had imagined that “he was going back to the font of his essence” (Elvis 69). But he finds, instead, a degenerate people, in a more deplorable situation than his people back in East Africa. He comes to India, hoping to learn more about values and the meanings behind all the “confusing sectarian practices of faith and ritual and tradition that he had been brought up with” (65). But instead, he finds himself teaching the villagers assembled in their ramshackle mosque, about the history of the Shamsi sect that they had long forgotten.
Reclaiming one’s history is a way of asserting one’s syncretic identity. Nagji’s sermons kindle hope in the innocent villagers; he christens new born babes and blesses an old man on his death-bed. The young guru is even forced by a man to bless the womb of his wife, Kulsa who is childless. The woman takes him along a most tempting deed—“... all defences vanquished, hostage to his virility and a child in her arms.” He is chosen, but surely not to bestow blessings in such “a carnal manner” (69). The guru stands exposed when another visitor from Dar comes to Be-raja. Nagji escapes to Toronto, but comes back several years later to reclaim his son, Rahim born of Kulsa. The story of how once he had become a holy man in India, is one which Nagji tells the narrator, Shamshu in one of their meetings in Toronto. The story also abounds in primitive Indian rituals like the worship of snakes and belief in black magic.

Victimization on racial grounds, betrayal of man by woman, and sense of alienation and dispossession are some of the major preoccupations in the story, “Is It Still October?” The racial discrimination which the narrator experiences at the hands of his boss, Dr. Jim Burton, thwarts his career. The white man does not grant the narrator his PhD under the pretext that the latter’s speech and manner of presentation are not up to the mark. He says: “Granting me a doctorate and allowing a brown face among the bleached selves...” (Elvis 114) is something which they can never imagine. For twenty long years, he has
been slogging for Dr. Burton, doing his experiments and has been “the invisible hand behind his published successes” (115). When the narrator shifts to a place exclusively inhabited by the Whites, Dr. Burton simply ignores him, though a few months later, when a white couple comes to live there, all the white inhabitants come forward to give them a warm welcome. The marginalization of Third World immigrants in the First World finds expression here.

In his personal life too, the narrator becomes a victim of betrayal and dispossession. His wife elopes with a man called, Pious Ayub after drawing all the money from their joint account and leaving him only with their abnormal son—“Nature’s chromosomically slight deviation from the template labelled ‘normal’” (Elvis 111). The effect of toxins on babies (hitherto tried only on mouse babies) has been the narrator’s area of research. He wishes to take revenge on Dr. Burton by poisoning the candies which the white children in the neighbourhood will come to gather on Halloween night, shouting “trick or treat” (108). He wishes to teach his boss and the likes of him a lesson for “their haughty arrogance and the hoity toity racism . . . and lay out their pink babies in a row of death, like so many toxified mouse embryos” (117). But he does not follow through with the revenge. A loser in his life and career, the narrator stifles his abnormal son to death and consumes the poisoned candy balls because his conviction is: “Evil does not have to be punished and mercy, noticed” (119).
In the story "Elvis, Raja" a man named Diamond who is still reeling from the impact of his wife's betrayal, decides to visit an old college friend, but soon realizes that he is trapped in a most curious household, where Elvis Presley has replaced the traditional Hindu gods.

Strained family relationships, broken families—in most cases, it is the woman who betrays the man—sense of exile, dispossession and alienation of man seem to be recurring themes in some of the stories analyzed. In the early stages of acculturation, when the immigrants grapple with odds to make both ends meet, there seems to be better understanding and love among the members of the family. But affluence and materialistic outlook bring boredom, selfishness and lack of mutual trust between husband and wife, culminating in extra-marital affairs and broken families. These themes can be read as closely knit to the general theme of double displacement. They also seem to imply that gradual acculturation is an inevitable reality. The assertion of the immigrants’ syncretic identity however emphatically made and the resistance to acculturation however strongly displayed, a slow dilution of one’s native identity is perhaps an unstoppable phenomenon.

In "Trouble with Tea," Vassanji captures the soothing influence of "the strong, creamy, sweet" tea (Elvis 160) one got in the mosque at four in the morning. It has tasted the same in Dar, Vancouver and now in Dundas Street in Toronto. This special chai is always taken in silence for, it is served at a time when men and women have given up the “sweetest
part of their sleep to come in quest of the eternal” (160). Yet this loveable, tasty, enticing tea has been under attack, right from Dar. Its accusers consider it bad for health; besides, it makes the mind wander. Some people come for the taste of the tea and forget the sanctity of the hour and the wellbeing of their world. Even in Toronto, murmurs have arisen against the morning cup. The central character, who is referred to as “he”, is doubtful whether, in this place where many of the old ways have died, this special tea will survive. For him, morning mosque without tea is unthinkable. His day always begins with a cup of tea from the mosque, despite the fact that his mind wanders or he sleeps while the prayer is going on. Here too Vassanji depicts a way of life exclusively a part of the syncretic culture of the Shamsis that is slowly slipping away with time.

The last two stories—“She, with Bill and George” and “Farida” are reflections from Canada on the life left behind in Dar. Farida, Shamshu’s wife is the central character in both the stories. The first story depicts Farida’s friendship with Bill, the American and George Kasore, the Masai, during their university days in Dar. Farida has a passion for George, yet she keeps aloof because she does not wish to stray away from the security of her people. His being black matters a lot though she does not realize then the sort of difference it made. After her marriage to Shamshu, they settle in Toronto. In one of her reminiscences of the past, she feels guilty of having forgotten Bill and George so easily. Vassanji’s
comment is: “How easily we cast aside, walk away from voices, from love, from friendship, from parts of our lives . . . and how desperately we try to grasp them when they are beyond reach” (Elvis 207). It is Farida’s strong desire to preserve her Shamsi Indian identity that prevents her from marrying the African.

Shamshu is the narrator of the last story, “Farida”. It is an attempt to connect the past with the present—his romance with Farida during their university days in Dar, their passion for each other, marriage and migration to Canada, soon after their son, Ashiq is born. The narrator remembers how three decades ago they had come to settle in Toronto. The city has changed into the exiting and exotic metropolis it is now. He also remembers going to the Shamsi mosque in the mornings and evenings when their mosque was only a small room on the lower level of Flemington Park Mall. “Come rain or shine, hail or snow, it would open for prayers, and the chorus of singing or chanting . . . echoed through the corridor . . .” (Elvis 212). The Shamsi religious practices are thus carried across continents, reinforcing their faith and identity. Shamshu and Farida now lead a settled life in Toronto, even gracefully accepting the fact that their son is gay and can never be a father and suppressing the frustration of being unable to become grandparents. However the story ends with the narrator’s remark that there is a preoccupation, “a yearning for someone else” (218) that is uncontrollable and which stands between himself and his wife. He thus leads a dual existence on “borrowed times” (218),
reinforcing the theme of betrayal though it is the man who betrays the woman this time.

*Elvis, Raja: Stories*, as a whole, is a vivid portrayal of lives transplanted in Canada—the daily experiences that are closely knit to the history of migration and the trauma of double displacement of the fictional characters. They realize that they must learn to belong to the adopted land and adjust to its ways. Nevertheless, there is a desperate attempt on their part to assert and preserve their syncretic identity which, they know, is under threat of Canadianization. Thus the assertion of a syncretic identity appears to be as much a celebration of the phenomenon of their double displacement as their defiant but doomed-to-fail resistance against the eventual destiny of total merger with the host culture.

Through his novels and short stories, Vassanji shows an urge to portray an ethnic community (however hybrid) at a fleeting moment in history before it gets assimilated totally with the culture of the adopted land. Vassanji’s contribution thus lies in narrating his community to existence and reminding the forgetful, fast-paced world that there once thrived a community whose identity was a uniquely hybrid one, a community which tried its best to preserve its exclusivity before succumbing to the inevitability of naturalization. With Keats-like craftsmanship, Vassanji tries to freeze a way of life before it passes into total oblivion. And it is here that one sees his postcolonial stance. In a sense his canon constitutes Vassanji’s anxiety to present an insider’s
perspective before the world can possibly be misled by other, less sympathetic and foreign versions. Though couched in fictional terms, it also records the history of a unique group of people in their brief period of existence in the Western world.

Vassanji's own experiences of migration, uprooting, transplantation and the ensuing trauma of displacement render credibility to the portrayal of his protagonists who are in much the same predicament as their creator. Autographical elements too make the portrayal of his protagonists quite convincing. Though he attributes mixed parentage to Salim, there are many instances in the protagonist's life, especially in the depiction of his childhood, which have striking parallels with those of the writer. In his attitude to his homeland and adopted home, Vassanji expresses views which are similar to those expressed by Ramji. Ramji, for whom "home" a haunting term, feels that there is no return, once a person enters the portals of a new land. In an interview with Gene Carey, Vassanji says: "Once you come here, cross the oceans, there's no going back" (Carey 2). He further tells Carey that once he came to the United States, he feared losing his links with Tanzania. At the same time he feared going back because he would lose the new world he had discovered. Like Ramji, the writer is torn between his homeland and adopted home. Despite the fact that the writer, in interviews, claims that he feels at home in Toronto, he also says that there is a spiritual alienation
which cannot be easily nailed down. The creative tension between home and exile leads to the writing of narratives of dislocation.

Vassanji is all praise for hybridity and syncretism and indulges in a valorization of what he positively calls “impurity.” In an interview with Shane Rhodes, Vassanji claims that he was brought up in a more syncretic culture than Salman Rushdie and remarks: “Anything that stinks of purity is just abominable. I personally cannot tolerate these calls to purify” (116). The writer uses terms like “hybridity” and “syncretism” rather interchangeably in order to refer to a contaminated (in a positive sense) identity which is a characteristic feature of people who occupy in-between spaces. In A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory (1996), it is stated that the term “hybrid” is commonly assumed to be anything of mixed origin, of unlike parts. While the word “hybrid” has different genealogies, “in literary and cultural studies it refers to the idea of occupying in-between spaces, that is, of being of many, composite or syncretic entities, new formation, creole or intermixed people . . .” (251).

Syncretism or the co-existence of different cultural identities is something unique about Vassanji’s concept of identity, which is very clearly summed up in his essay titled “Creative Conflicts: Multiculturalism in the Mind.” The crux of Vassanji’s views on identity is reflected in the statement that suggests “a mental state that is . . . a confluence of many streams, a multiplicity of identities; a palimpsest” (17). Identity, according to Vassanji, is “all the time evolving, becoming
...” (15). In this context it is perhaps appropriate to recall Stuart Hall’s view on identity. He considers identity as an invention “which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within . . . representation” (Hall, qtd. in Benita Parry 175). Vassanji’s interviews also play a crucial role in projecting his views on syncretism. Says Vassanji: “I think ultimately I see myself as everything that’s gone into me—Africa, India, Britain, America, Canada, Hinduism, Islam. The search for essences, it is a kind of fundamentalism” (Kanaganayakam 130). Like Bhabha and Spivak, the writer also seems to be opposed to the idea of an essentialized subject.

Vassanji’s fictional world is peopled with the old and the young, the traditional and the modern, and the assimilated and the displaced. Thematically, his fiction attempts to connect the past and the present, assimilate traditional and contemporary values, and a sense of community with the individual’s struggle to belong. His works portray characters who, like the author, are of South Asian ancestry and have come to North America after experiencing and surviving periods of political instability in East Africa. “The instability of double migration—hopping continents, trading cultures, and negotiating marginality—has prevented them from establishing roots” (Malak 281). To quote Rushdie, these nowhere men are “bastard [children] of history” (394). Trapped between disparate worlds and different cultures, they can neither forget the world or culture from which they emigrated physically and sometimes culturally and
which would be different if they returned to it now, nor can they fully assimilate into the host culture by totally subverting their identities. Finally, a total integration may be hard to avoid but Vassanji, through his works, seems to celebrate his characters’ attempts to defy it as long as it is possible for them. It is in this mindset that one sees a pride in one’s uniqueness, a desire to be counted as a significant and different entity; in short, a postcolonial urge to narrate contrapuntal stories to resist the dominant discourse of the host nation’s history.

In the context of multiculturalism and pluralism, diaspora identity goes beyond the concept of single subjectivity, taking in its stride a hybrid derivation of several cultural influences. Sura P. Rath in the article, “Home(s) Abroad: Diasporic Identities in Third Spaces,” throws light on the way in which an immigrant tries to resolve his crisis of identity. In his view, a person who is permanently settled in Canada or the US. may call himself a Canadian or an American; it is a mere spatial identity constructed from the external territory. He has to resolve his relationship with at least two spaces, “two geographic regions, that are externally located on the opposite sides of the globe but overlap each other in the internal space of my body, even deeper, in my mind” (Rath 2). Imbibing the best of all cultures gives the transplant a very broad perspective of life.

In this respect, Vassanji can well be regarded as a writer with a cosmopolitan outlook. He seems to be neither a purist nor a religious
fundamentalist. His fictional Shamsis, who combine the tenets of Hinduism and Islam, make ethnicity and hybridity go hand in hand in their world. Relapse to myths, legends, the fabulism of folklore, and the use of Cutchi / Gujarati and Swahili terms in his writings, are some of the ways in which Vassanji retains the ethnic specificity of the Shamsis. Of the seven books he has written, four novels and most of the short stories are devoted to the Shamsis, thereby reinforcing his strong sense of community. True to his definition of a postcolonial writer as myth maker and folk historian, Vassanji serves as the preserver and transmitter of his people’s history. A prolific writer with a strong social commitment, he writes his community to existence and through it, the larger history of East Africa and thereby fulfils the mission of a postcolonial writer. South Asian writers as a whole and Vassanji in particular seem to have carved out literary spaces of their own in the colourful Canadian mosaic.
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