Chapter 2

Getting the Eternal City

No New Land
M. G. Vassanji has taken one of the epigraphs from C. P. Cavafy’s poem “The City” translated in English by Lawrence Durrell in Justine. The epigraph is extremely suggestive and has been very appropriately chosen as it befits the content of the novel:

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 will wander endlessly....

The epigraph suggests the immigrant’s journey from illusion to disillusionment, and finally to the realisation that all places are the same for him, which eventually results in cynicism and pessimism. Whatever, the immigrant has to grapple with his self and his world, thereby giving rise to a sort of inner conflict and an outer one that lead him to a sort of alienation. While coping with his problems in the “new world,” he can decide to go further away to some other place; and coping with his self, he can; in retrospection, go to his roots and origins. This way he traces out his background and identity, and also renders a portrait of human displacement full of strains, shattered promises and hopes.

No New Land delineates the predicaments of Nurdin Lalani in Canada, and shows a glimpse of his past in East Africa where, according to the narrator, his present plight actually begins. The very title “No New Land” itself is loaded with history and its effects on people; the effects that are manifest in their present with many displacements across geographical locations and cultural variations. Tracing
Nurdin’s past in Africa, and narrating his present condition in Canada, the narrator gets a way to tell about many other people and things. We come to realise that certain minor changes are transformations of history, and it ultimately turns out to be a narrative that gives a fictional format to history and feelings.

Vassanji’s characters do not mean anything until they have a history. It seems they develop through history, not before our eyes, but in the past that they carry with them, and that way we see them grow also. That is what happens with Nurdin Lalani also.

Nurdin is caught in the eddy of predicaments and pitfalls of the immigrant life in Canada, the world for which he is not so well prepared. It is not actually the new world solely that causes his predicament, but, “We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off” (No New Land 9). As such, according to Vassanji, it is his past that is responsible and architect of his predicaments. So the account of his present predicaments begins in Africa in a flashback which eventually converges with the main narrative.

Haji Lalani, Nurdin’s father, goes to Africa as a labourer and settles there and acquires a shop of his own. He is a man of strict disposition, who, though does not show any taste for women and prays, fasts and develops close links with the Christian fathers to indulge in theological discussions and debates, commits an offence in religion and law. He stares at a white lady with lust in his eyes and gets slapped in the face.

Two things happen in this incident: Haji Lalani’s desires of flesh rise; his biological being seeks satisfaction not with the black woman of Africa but with the
white woman (lady) of Europe, and the white woman proves to be beyond his access. Consulting with the elders of his community, he marries a woman of his own community. This forms the cultural pattern of colonial Africa. In the hierarchy of races, Asians are between the Europeans and Africans. In terms of marriage, Asians do not desire to mix with Africans. However, Govindji in *The Gummy Sack* develops a relationship with the African Taratibu, and Sona wants to be in a relationship with Amina. Critics have viewed these relationships derogatory to the African.

This historical incident related to Nurdin's roots is repeated by him in Canada. Though he has an attractive wife, Zera, to satisfy his lust that Vassanji describes as his weakness, she is not so helpful to him in this regard as she does not yield to him, and other practices of free culture of Canada, where there are no inhibitions, only reinforce his desires. He commits the same offence as his father when he approaches a Portuguese girl to help her — he sees her white breasts and sensuality and desire spring in him, though only in his thought. The woman is not only out of his reach but catches him in a severe trouble also.

Both Nurdin and his father commit cultural betrayal through sexuality. Sex is the area where people meet at the very basic level, and instincts know no reasons and cultural bounds. But in this case, history and culture emerge as obstacles, and both of them face consequences of trespassing cultural boundaries. They follow “these forbidden shadows of thoughts” which are mere mirages and lead them to the undesirable space.

Haji Lalani makes “a virtue of his desire,” marries a girl of his community as “to get married and have children is more than half God’s religion” (15). This way he
remains stuck to his faith and culture. And the flow of history and culture continues with the birth of his children.

Haji Lalani earns respect and reputation in his community in East Africa. He is known as one of the prominent citizens, the mukhi of the community. He becomes famous “for his sternness, which brooked no nonsense,” for his wrath and anger Vassanji describes as his weakness. The narrator says about Nurdin Lalani, “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” (20). Haji does not spare his oldest son Akber who sends a love-note to a daughter of a Hindu cobbler. He beats his son senseless with a cane. He even does not let Nurdin marry a girl of his own choice, and he acquiesces to marry Zera, one of his father’s pupils. That is how a woman like Zera, who likes to be engaged with religious debates and discussions, just like Haji himself, comes in Nurdin’s nuptial life. Haji “would hold his own by maintaining that the truth was known to the few and not the many; its seekers were individuals and not institutions” (14). He is a system in himself which he enforces upon others with all his might and awe.

On the beach, looking across the Indian Ocean toward India, Haji thinks of his "home" in India. Vassanji writes: “... contemplating the expanse in front of them and what lay across it: the land of their birth which they had left a long time ago, to which even the longing to return had been muted, although memories still persisted” (10). He sits everyday on a stone bench at Oyster Bay and looks toward India with desire and longing in his eyes, and nostalgia in his thoughts and sighs. In a sense, he looks unto his past, his history, roots and identity. The expanse of the ocean before him does not cut him off from his past for it is with him. This way, Haji Lalani’s past begins in India and that of Nurdin in East Africa.
Asians in East Africa consider the British colonialism in that region as protective and favourable. They thrive in its shade, do their business and labour, and find new avenues to prosper. In a way, it’s the British presence there that is between them and the Black dominance, thus sustains the Asian presence. Chanan Singh writes in “The Historical Background” of these Asians in East Africa: “Indian coinage was made official coinage in East Africa, Indian laws were extended there. Indian troops were imported from time to time to keep order. Just as the Portuguese had used Indian labour to build forts, so the British used Indian labour to build the railway systems of British East Africa” (Ghai4). Indians also take part in politics of the region, though in a very confined length, and play an immense role in its economic development. They go inland under the umbrella of the colonial power; they have carved a niche in the colonial order and play additional economic roles and assume positions monopolised by Africans themselves. As such, Indians are closer to the Empire than Africans. The Empire is their home. Vassanji also writes good things about the British administration in East Africa. The ebbing of the British dominance is his loss; his community loses a great support with the withdrawal of the British. They associate themselves with them. Vassanji writes: “The idea of empire was relinquished slowly in the Asian communities. Right up until independence, letters would arrive addressed ostensibly to someone in the “British Empire” or “British East Africa” (22). These Indians are immensely enthusiastic and fond of the Empire. They have many memories about its politicians and people of honour. They even like its literature and culture.

But, suddenly, the British leave the area, and leave Indians in the lurch. Africans get independence, and with it cultural and political dominance, which Indians do not hail and celebrate so heartily, and are left in dilemma and chaos – an
atmosphere of uncertainty surrounds them. They have plenty of apprehensions associated with the new order. For the Blacks, independence is not only a political revolution but a racial one also. So they do not lose any time to Africanise everything — services, sources of income etc. The Revolution of Zanzibar results in the killing of hundreds of Arabs and establishing an African administration on the island. Mutinies occur in many countries of East Africa, in which Asians' properties get easily looted and plundered. In the name of cultural integrity and economic self-reliance, Asian girls are made victim of forced marriages and the properties of Asians are nationalised. Idi Amin of Uganda expelled Asians from his country as his "final solution" to the racial problems. Vassanji writes: "But as the changes became more extreme, as newer and stranger ways were imposed, the idyll of a new Africa began to appear as shaky to those of the younger generation as it had always appeared to the older" (24-25). The youth of the community have an acute sense of betrayal which Vassanji describes as the "Great Betrayal," as the new political order does not comply with the principles of the independence. The old order gives way to the new one — colonial order does not prove perennial — and Vassanji describes these changes as "a hurricane" which eventually turns extreme. The new generation is disillusioned.

Comparing No New Land with The Gunny Sack, the effects of Africanisation and political dominance of the Blacks is more explicit, obvious and pungent in the former. Vassanji has rendered his bitterness more thoroughly, and in a more powerful manner, perhaps because he writes in Canada, far away from the political grip of Africa. He says at least twice in The Gunny Sack: "Independence was painless," (156) and in No New Land writes: "Independence came suddenly but not cruelly" (23). But, at the same time, he goes on tell the woes that befall these small traders of the small overseas community. Africanisation does not imply any racial or religious
underpinnings, but cultural and geographical homogeneity. In a way, it is an ideology of assimilation aiming at the creation of one homogenous nation out of the many different ethnic communities. As Tuomas Huttunen remarks, “Africanisation meant a return to “the original tribal society” before colonialism and capitalism: authentic African tribalism “was seen as representing ideal socialism.” Indians are unwilling to have a racial interaction with the Blacks, especially when it is performed through inter-racial sexual acts. That is why Hassan Uncle mutters gravely in *The Gummy Sack*: “They have their eyes on our daughters, mind you,” when the Blacks complain: “Asians aren’t integrating enough!” then with the revolution of Zanzibar come forced marriages and many more gory things (162). Socialism paves way for nationalisation of private property and Asians lose everything, mostly their grand position in the economic sphere of the region. Many mutinies in these countries result in ransacking of Asians’ business establishments – they are so easy preys of racial aggression. And the above cited remarks of Vassanji about independence are nothing but irony; Vassanji mocks at the African independence, sneers at it.

Dharma P. Ghai edited *Portrait of a Minority: Asians in East Africa* in 1965, long before the “exodus” of Asians from Uganda. In this book, Yash P. Ghai writes about the future prospects of these Asian immigrants in East Africa. He writes: “If they want to stay in East Africa, a revision is a prerequisite; those who have been unwilling to make this revision have already left the country or else are contemplating doing so” (130). Yash Ghai refers to the revision of Asians’ attitude and behaviour toward the Blacks, as the ground reality has changed with the change in the order. According to him, they need to change their place and role in an independent East Africa, for they cannot be exactly identical to what they have been in the colonial order. The most prominent feature of the colonial rule has been hierarchy and
seggregation on ethnic and racial bases, reinforced by economic, social and political
discrimination. As a result, the political, economic and social dominance of
Europeans prevails; Asians occupy the middle and Africans the bottom place in this
system, which suited the Asian communal temper, and they grew inward-looking.
Ghai writes: “Asians are extremely communal minded, conscious of caste differences,
intensely endogamous. Both the pluralism of cultures in India and the divisions within
the Asian community in East Africa illustrate this point” (132). Ghai contends that
Asians want to be left alone to pursue their own traditional ways and to maintain their
culture. Because of certain laws, the cultural identity of these communities gets
preserved, and obstacles are put in the way of inter-communal and inter-racial
contacts. The effect of all this is to make Asians a self-sufficient, ethnocentric
community. The point here is that this has been possible in the colonial order only.

According to Ghai, Asians did not show more resentment of the superior
status and racial arrogance of the Europeans, and they had come to believe in the
myth of White superiority. However, they began to believe that Africans were inferior
to them because of the colonial social system and their better economic, social and
political status. Yash Ghai writes:

... Asians began to believe that Africans were inferior to themselves.
If the African got less wages than the Asian, if he had to live with the
whole family in one small room – ‘the boys’ quarters’, if he had to
walk miles or lift heavy weights, the Asian conscience was untroubled
because the African was different, he was inferior; he was used to these
things; he did not want and certainly would not know what to do with
modern conveniences and gadgets. It is because now the same African,
who they think has low intelligence and no experience, is in control of
government that the Asian has tremendous problems of reconciling himself to the new order. It is one thing to accept the rule of a superior race; indeed, one even tries to imitate them, but how humiliating to be bossed around by members of an inferior race! (133)

This situation and feeling is hinted at, rather referred to, in *The Gunny Sack* and *No New Land* also. The former narrative describes how Black servants became powerful after obtaining independence. Uncle Goa says to Kulsum, “The world has changed too rapidly for us. We have decided to go to Lourenco Marques,” and his wife, Madam, says, “We cannot watch our servants turning around and throwing insults at us” (*Gunny Sack* 165). Kulsum, who is of a lower status, also wants to go away, but she has nowhere to go to. With independence, the colonial hierarchy gets demolished and the Black come to the top; they gain authority and control over everything African. In *No New Land* Nurin works in a shoe company with his African assistant Charles. After independence, services and many other things are Africanised, and, as a matter of policy, Charles is promoted to a higher position, surpassing Nurin. Vasanji writes: “Peons, it seemed to Nurin, rose above him merely because of their black skins. The Europeans had always been masters; their higher positions he had taken as a matter of course. But now in the scramble for promotions he saw himself overlooked, neglected, as a matter of policy, and felt bitter” (*No New Land* 28). Nurin realises, and recognises the position of the Europeans, but does not tolerate the dominance of Africans. He cannot adapt to new changes, and is unwilling to understand the new discourse that defined the new political order. With the change of the order, the city, Dar-es-Salam, is a new world for them, where they cannot sustain their presence any more. Vasanji writes: “No one could tell when it happened, but it seemed, suddenly, that a switch had flipped, transforming the mindset, the worldview:
from a position in which Dar was your world, its problems your problems, to one in which leaving became an option, and to many an imperative” (28). So, with the transformation of the mindset and worldview, as Ghai has remarked, Indians do not revise their attitude and behaviour toward the Blacks, instead choose to leave the region.

However, there are other aspects also. The Blacks take independence as a racial revolution also. The nationalisation of private property, though explicitly aiming at a classless society in economic terms, is mainly against the Asian economic positions in its implicit motives. The Europeans being remote and out of reach, it is Asians who have to bear the brunt. Africanisation is apparently aimed at assimilation and egalitarianism, but it does not tally with assurances of equality and fair policy when implemented. Yash Ghai also contends that the policy suffers from some inconsistencies. Egalitarianism being its purpose, it ought not to be applied as indiscriminately as it has been. According to him, “the Udoji Commission itself voiced that ‘Africanisation is not merely a policy of equalisation, it is also that all key and policy-advising posts in the Civil Service should be held by Africans’” (140). So, most of the government policies are aimed at undermining Asians’ economic status, and at dismantling their position upheld by them in the colonial hierarchy. In a way they are excluded from nationalism and nation-building.

The younger generation of these Asian immigrants is more poignantly disillusioned. These youth are more conscious of issues of human rights and fairness and social justice. They support the Blacks in “their” cause of national independence, hoping after gaining independence, as its founding principles promised, they will be treated equally with them as authentic citizens of these African countries. But the
Blacks assert their dominance through a sort of racial and political aggression. Yash Ghai writes:

... African political agitation was based on principles of equality, justice and fair play. This factor also accounts for the disillusionment of some of the younger Asians. They actively supported or favoured African nationalism because it was based on these principles, even though this meant isolation in their community, but some of them now have a feeling of betrayal; they feel that the African leaders have not lived up to these principles once they have attained power. (133)

This is what Vassanji describes as "The Great Betrayal." He writes, "But as the changes became more extreme, as newer and stranger ways were imposed, the idyll of a new Africa began to appear as shaky to those of the younger generation as it had always appeared to the older" (24-25). This disillusionment of the youth reinforces and confirms the suspicious and apprehensive attitude of the community toward the Blacks. And, the "black anger" and "black power" turn against Asians in the form of nationalisation, Africanisation, Urusha Declaration in Tanzania, the revolution in Zanzibar, army mutinies in Kenya and Tanganyka, and most awfully the expelling of Asians from Uganda, which Vassanji describes as the "Uganda exodus." According to Yash P. Ghai, Asians are a more hated minority than the Europeans; their difficulties are not merely that they have to revise their own attitudes and behaviour, but also that they have to overcome a huge prejudice on the part of Africans. Even university colleges which bring different races together have not produced a generation of young people free from prejudice or ignorance -- ignorance of the conventions of other races. With increased social contacts, the bitterness of past happenings, the prejudices, come to the fore. Thus achieving racial harmony is still out of reach. Ghai writes, "Most
Asians think that they have no future in East Africa; they feel that race is too fundamental a factor in East African relationships, and that no measure of integration will help Asians” (151). Asians fear they will become scapegoats in the hands of the politicians of independent Africa, taking example from Zanzibar Revolution of 1964, when the Arabs became victims of a pogrom. As such, according to Vassanji, “Cynicism replaced faith, corruption became a means” (25). This uncertainty and cynicism prevails after independence with a deep sense of loss of the colonial order, which gave them a privileged world, and the nostalgia for the “order” looms heavily on their minds. With all this and the feeling of betrayal on the part of the Blacks, these immigrants uncertain of their home and nation commit another migration moving further toward west. Vassanji writes: “Haji Lalani, who 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 have 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). Haji Lalani has India in him, on his mind and in the deep recesses of his unconscious. He carries the past with him and at times indulges in remembering his land of birth with a strong feeling of nostalgia in his looking across the ocean and sighing the sigh of the loss of his homeland and longing for it. However, as Peter Simatei remarks in “Diasporic memories and national histories in East African Asian writing”:

... translocated into the new place, India becomes dislocated and hybridised and ceases to stand for a pristine culture and homeland and while the “old country” is still evoked by the pioneer migrant to sustain an illusory perception of radical difference from the indigenous people, the new generations born in Africa are beginning to understand
themselves as subjects of multiple histories, locations and cultures.  

(Diasporic Memories 61)

Vassanji's passage contains these "multiple histories, locations and cultures" along with many generations of these immigrants. There are India, Africa and "yet another continent" in it, and Haji Lalani and his descendents negotiate their identity between them. This point is further substantiated with Esther Peeren's argument as cited by Peter Simatei in "Diasporic memories and national histories in East African Asian writing"; she argues that leaving the homeland need not imply a complete loss of its way of life and subjectivity since multiple places can share the same organising chronotope. Diasporic subjects are never wholly part of either the home or the host chronotope; they do not move from one to the other without the inference of memory, but are always in negotiation with both.

That is what the pioneer immigrant, Haji Lalani, does in Africa, and the same happens to his descendents in Canada. Their burden of the past is heavier, their location is more ambivalent and ambiguous; it oscillates between India, Africa and Canada, with so many histories and cultures, that is what Vassanji describes as "unfinished and incomplete migrations" in A Place Within: Rediscovering India.

It is actually Nurdin's predicament in Canada that so much of the past in Africa is invoked to understand his transnational and transcultural belonging. Vassanji's invoking of the past to shade Nurdin's portrait with an appropriate background confirms that "the new generations born in Africa are beginning to understand themselves as subjects of multiple histories, locations and cultures." For them "home" is a very complicated feeling which arises from the debris of the past and the plinth of the present, knowing no future. Vassanji expresses his feeling in A
Place Within: rediscovering India as, “If only home were such a simple matter” (43). Canadian Embassy in New Delhi reminds him of Canada, but his home is “more than Canada.” Having lost their home, they go in search of home, the homeliness of which is very uncertain. As Peter Simatei remarks:

Home, for this generation, is “not merely a place of origin but also a displacement of movement [where] consciousness is hence predicated on a paradoxical process of home-haunting and home-hunting, in which diasporans may experience a radical discontinuity, but, at the same time, they develop a desire for cultural reconnection. (Diasporic Memories 58)

So their home comes somewhere between nostalgia for the past and the drive to experience the new place culturally and socially.

Canada is altogether a new world with its own way of life, its own cultural and social patterns. Nurdin Lalani and other immigrants from East Africa catch this world quite unprepared, so sudden were the changes in Africa. While trying to adapt to this new way of life and to fit in these mosaic patterns, Nurdin grapples with this new world, and the past continues to interrupt through the channels of memory.

Exactly on reaching Canada, Nurdin and his family face the harshness of winter with its snow and chilly winds; they are unaware of fallen snow, blistering winds blowing; they have on ill-fitting clothes, and shiver with cold; that is how they start their life in their new world. Vasanji describes their first experiences in Canada as, “Toes freezing, faces partly paralysed, eyes tearing, they stood outside, shoulders hunched. The two children were moaning and shivering, weeping, hiding behind adult coats, creating fresh pockets and exposing fresher areas of anatomy for the wind to
snatch at” (35). How unprepared they are for this sort of weather, this kind of terrain. It is actually well before their experiencing the Canadian winter, while on board to Cairo, that these immigrants have a sense of “portents and symbols” which suggest the difficulties and problems to come. “Goodness, 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). That is how these immigrants from the Third World feel while on board going to Canada. In a semi-dazed state, Nurdin watching Canada at his very arrival, goes in a sort of trance and imagines Haji Lalani’s punishing of Akber, the eldest son. This harsh punishment continues to haunt him, it is in him. Vassanji dramatises the beating as, “...Haji Lalani’s cane on your buttocks until you cry out Mercy, mercy, Father, but Haji Lalani will complete his quarter-century – Mercy, wails the lover Akber, but the strokes keep coming, regulated, calculated, for it is God’s punishment...” (36). By invoking Haji Lalani in Canada (it seems to be the induction of Nurdin’s portrait of immigrant life in Canada), Vassanji links this displacement to Canada with the past in Africa, and generalises that event, rather, gives it some abstract cosmic connotations. As, earlier, Vassanji says, “His father operated like Fate,” here he makes that fate all prevailing, and even after Haji Lalani’s death, Nurdin comes under her shadow (20).

In Africa Asians are traders and small shopkeepers (dukawallas). Chanan Singh, in his survey “The Historical Background,” writes:

Indians were the virtual monopolists of retail trade. In 1873 Sir Bartle Frere noted that ‘throughout our whole circuit, from Zanzibar round by Mozambique and Madagascar and up to Cape Guardafui, we did not, except at Johanne, meet half a dozen exceptions to the rule that every
shopkeeper was an Indian.' Above all, Indians financed and supplied
the caravans to the interior. (Ghai 3)

In East Africa, Indians are known as "dukawallas," and are very famous by this
epithet. In other words, they are "sellers" in Africa, and control the economic aspect
of these nations. But, in Canada, these immigrants say, "Buying is a narcotic . . . ."
They know how to bargain and haggle. Vassanji says about them, "They began to
buy. Business runs in the blood, they are former shopkeepers after all, and the thrill of
chasing a bargain is irresistible, a pleasure which sharing can only enhance" (42). The
habits and traits that they have inculcated in Africa reinforce their behaviour as
"buyers" in Canada. They take pleasure in buying. They are not (no longer) the
monopolists of the economy of Canada. Their place changed; their role changed.
However, buying is as narcotic as selling.

Christian missionaries in Canada grind their own axe; they play "their"
politics. They fish in troubled waters and try to take advantage of the destitution and
plight of these immigrants from Africa. The victims of the Uganda exodus, on
reaching Canada, are given food and Bibles. These refugees from Uganda are treated
as "hungry pagans," and through some tactics, some politics of religion propagation,
they are urged to be Christian. Incorporation into the Christian religion is easy and
desired earnestly: incorporation in cultural and racial terms is not so easy – those
domains are not so flexible. Vassanji describes these missionaries as "harbingers of
hell," and they are kept at bay. Centuries before in Gujarat, India, the ancestors of
these people accepted another religion and culture, Islamic culture, and turned into
seekers of some saviour in the west as an implication. Now, they are not willing to
take upon them yet another religion. Thus, Vassanji gives a multidimensional portrait
of this human displacement. And, the ambitions of missionaries are akin to those of
the African politicians: politicians caused displacement in terms of place; these are
ten to cause displacement in terms of religion and faith. Though losing faith is not so
important in Vassanji’s fiction, faith determines culture in a great degree, and colours
one’s history. Both culture and history give identity to an individual, according to
Vassanji.

Generation gap in the immigrants is prominent. The preceding generation is
very close to the home culture; the succeeding generation is inclined toward the host
culture, or at least is not so well aware of the culture of its origins. This creates certain
differences, a sort of tension, among different generations of immigrants. Older
generation does not like the ways of the newer one, and is not so flexible toward the
host culture. Younger generation immigrants generally identify themselves with the
culture of the place they live in. They do not maintain any sharp connections with the
past. They do not hoard any great memories about their ancestral home and culture in
their unconscious. Their personal unconscious is shaped by their new environment.
Nurdin and Zera have two children, a girl and a boy. The girl has already gone the
Canadian way – being rather aggressive, disrespectful and having her own way. And,
the boy also likes the local culture. There are many questions that the children ask and
the elders cannot answer: the children want to celebrate Christmas. The most evident
effect of Canadian way is getting rid of inhibitions and an instinctive bent toward
open sex. These immigrants from Africa are not so clean from this contamination
also; they are not intact. This creates a severe anxiety in the older generation; the
elders remain connected to their home-culture through a sort of aptitude for the values
of their home-society. Having lost her daughter to Canada, Zera does not want to lose
her son also.
In Canada, Nurdin and his wife Zera belong to the older generation. Their children Fatima and Hanif belong to the new generation. In this case also, the generation gap is quite obvious. The children have gone the Canadian way. They are not so close to their parents; they do not obey their will. According to Tetty and Puplampu, “The authors...find considerable tension and conflict in the relationship between African parents and their children, whether born elsewhere or in Canada.... These differences stem mainly from the different contexts in which the two generations were socialised and developed” (19). These children, who, according to Vasanji, are “objects of immigrant sacrifice and labour,” speak the local languages better than their elders (63). They are, as Peter Simatei says, “subjects of multiple histories, locations and cultures.” In Simatei’s opinion, “It is through this generation that a future diaspora that accepts “contaminated” and “impure” relationships as its defining characteristic is visualized...” (56-67). These children born in Canada or migrated at very small ages have more Canadian experience than their parents. They are at a stage where they can have much closer contact with the local culture and society. So, their Canadianness is more authentic. However, they also have to negotiate their identity and belonging in a multiplicity of factors; they also have to face those problems that Diasporas generally do.

Racism is a social phenomenon of a host society. Ali A. Abdi writes in his essay, “Reflections on the Long Struggle for Inclusion: the Experiences of People of African Origin”:

There was undoubtedly some physical freedom that accompanied the escape to Canada, but the rest of the story, that is, definable and reliable notions of equity, full socio-economic and political rights, and the support and open mechanisms required to earn a decent living were
never a reality. It is indeed the case that this country has always been organised around a complex web of, if not legal, at least institutional, racism and its attendant modes of socio-economic and political exclusion. (Tettey and Puplampu 51)

The experiences of the people of African origin in Canada as mentioned by Abid Ali find an echo in Vassanji's *No New Land* also. Going to Canada is coercion, but making it with Canada is liberation, freedom. Vassanji has also dealt with racism and discrimination as implications of displacement to a host–society, Canada. Nanji sits alone all the way in the streetcar; no other person sits beside him, for he is not one of them. That is a sort of apartheid. Vassanji describes his feelings as, "Racism, the word kept intruding into his mind and he kept pushing it back. On what basis racism?" (93). Whatever the basis, Nanji is given a feeling that he does not belong to them, he is different, and so exotic. But more shocking is the incident at a railway station where Esmail is abused and attacked by three local youths. He is punched in the stomach and thrown down on the railway tracks. Here racism is manifested in violence and bullying.

According to Ali Abdi, there is institutional racism in Canada. Stokely Carmichael defines this kind of racism as, “the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin.” In *No New Land*, Jamal, the well-known student of law in Africa, sells samosas in Canada; Nurdin with so much of experience as a salesman in Africa, does not get a small job in a shoe company; Nanji, so well educated, does not get permanent job, and has to do private tuition. So, human capital theory fails to explain why African-born immigrants earn less, on average, than Canadian-born people with the same level of education, experience and skill. This shows the
Canadian labour market is ethnic specific. But the events in which Nanji sits alone in the bus and Esmail gets abused and attacked show a different sort of racism – racism embedded in the Canadian society and social thought. There is discrimination and segregation on ethnic basis. Although racial discrimination is illegal in Canada, racial stereotypes and epithets persist in everyday social and cultural interactions, which give motivating factor in social discrimination, racial segregation, hate speech and violence; and violence is the most radical form of racism. There is an atmosphere characterised by a collective conspiracy to degenerate and exclude these immigrants on ethnic bases. According to Ali Abdi, the concept of race in Canada persists, and its permanent feature is shown by “the presence of a system of racial meanings and stereotypes of racial ideology.” He writes, “The reality is that racism is alive and well in multicultural and multi-ethnic Canada, whether it is structured through the mechanics of modernity or sustains itself in the more nuanced framework of postmodernism” (Tettey and Puplampu 58). Similarly, George S. Dei, in “Racism in Canada: Exploring public and private issues in the Educational System,” contends that “there are also critical perspectives on racism that see racism as a system of structural, material and ideological advantage that some groups have over others in society” (97). According to him, “whiteness” is a racial category that is anchored in a powerful identity. This perspective sorts out these immigrants from Africa as the “other,” “the inferior” as different from “the superior,” and because of their racial identity the whites are powerful and have the upper hand in social, cultural, political and economic interactions. In Africa, it is “the black power” after independence that makes Asians object to political discrimination. That “black power” gives the African new confidence and a feeling of “being in control,” which turns Asians vulnerable,
thus prone to discrimination and disparity. That implies, there is a psychological aspect to feeling the pleasure of being in power through essentially ethnic superiority.

Racism within the host society reduces its assimilating capacities. As such, “the impacts produced by contact between immigrants and host cultures, result from complex processes of negotiation, adaptation and reinvention. As a result of these processes, immigrants retain elements of their cultures of origin even as they adjust to the norms and practices of their new environment” (152). Retaining elements of their original cultures, these immigrants from Africa carry their culture and social values with them. They do not approve of the fashion shows where naked women walk on the ramp displaying their bodies. They eat their cultural foods and dishes, and wear their clothes of African identity. Touching of feet and cracking of knuckles, as associated with the Indian culture, is not exotic to them; they do it. Below are given many items, words and phrases, and foods related to African and Indian cultures, and used by Vassanji in his narrative to make it multicultural:

qawali; Kaunda suit; masala tea; Masai woodcarvings; wax Taj Mahal; samosas and kebabs; bhajia and chappati; din; ghazals; chacha; sherbet; Zanzibari saucepan et cetera.

Vassanji writes:

Of course, the Shamsis of Dar had recreated their community life in Toronto; the mosques, the neighbourhoods, the clubs, and the associations. They even had the Girl Guides, with the same troop leaders as in Dar. But no Boy Scouts: 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. (*No New Land* 171).

These immigrants actually negotiate between two worlds. They wish to retain their affiliations with their home culture while being in a new social and cultural environment. They “carry their experiences, values and predictable patterns and contexts into the struggle to make ‘a home away from home’” (Tettey and Puplampu 208). But in the contact zone of their cultural interactions with the local culture, they cannot be intact: they cannot make their original home. For them “place is at once a physical construct and a mental imaginary. Thus, while people may be separated from the physical construct of “home” as a result of immigration and other forms of geographical mobility, they tend to retain their attachment to that space through mental connections and outward practices that invoke that geographical location. This is the case even though signifiers of their cultures of origin are adapted to their new settings, new cultures, and by new generations” (151). That way these subjects of the interstitial space negotiate their identity and belonging between multiple cultures and histories. They suffer from an anxiety of losing their old and picking up the new. This anxiety marks their new world and new life very prominently. They pick up some of the new and drop off some of the old. That is how they relieve this tension, and shed off the anxiety.

As Vassanji himself says that his characters do not mean anything unless they have a history, Nanji strikes one as a learned man so disappointed by life that he has no faith in it – a person gone bereft of faith, hope and love. His parents die in a boat accident in his early childhood, and this tragic incident is buried deep in the recesses of his unconscious. He goes to California for higher studies, and his grandmother dies back home. At the same time, political atmosphere stirs in Africa, and as a
consequence of nationalisation and Africanisation in East Africa, Asians leave the area for North America and Europe. When Nanji returns, he is alone, adrift and floating. The Vietnam War and many events associated with it have contributed to the making of his personality and character. All this history and a lost love have moulded his mind, thought and character. He is so much interested in existentialism, and has grievances against history and fate. Subsequently, he has ceased to have faith in God.

Nanji seems to resemble Ramji of *Amrika*. However, Vassanji admits that his character is autobiographical. In an exchange with Chelva Kanaganayakam, he says:

> ... Salim in *The Gunny Sack* was also autobiographical. These are different segments of me. I never lived in Rosecliffe Park nor Thorncliffe Park. I used to take my son there for babysitting. Since I never lived there, the episodes that happen there are not autobiographical. But the characterisation to some degree reflects the extreme frame of mind I was in before I came to Canada. You might call it a very existentialist phase – a sense of hopelessness, searching for an alternative to the way of life that I had lost. (30)

Then in a way, Nanji can be said to be the existentialist aspect of the immigrant; the state when the immigrant loses his faith in God and in man, and complains against the past. So, in the narrative the artist himself plays a role in its making. As his characters do not mean anything without some history, virtually, Vassanji renders his own history and its implications in the form of displacements and the resulting predicaments.

Nurdin is the main focus of the novel. His history begins in Africa. He is brought up in a strict atmosphere where his father operates like Fate. He marries Zera,
a pupil of his father, and she is so much interested in religion and religious discussions, in spite of himself, to avoid his father’s wrath and fury. With the passage of time, at a point, to some extent, this relationship does not prove to be so organic and creates huddles in adjustment for the male in terms of satisfying his ‘desire’.

Nurin and Zera have two children. Nurin works in a shoe company, works quite hard round the clock, takes many risks in the difficult terrain and dark forests of Africa. But with the end of the colonial order, and the Blacks coming to power, all things fall apart. Africanisation provides a pretext to dismantle Asians’ economic position. They lose their privileged world suddenly, and feel under-privileged and betrayed. They do not have any faith in the new order any more, for it does not support their taste and aptitude. Nor are they willing to adapt themselves to these changes. They decide not to face this new situation, and leave. Vasanji writes about the urgency of migration in the following diction:

They talked of Don Mills as if it were in Upanga. The buildings of Rosecliffe Park were known, it seemed, in intimate detail. The rich had left almost overnight following the great nationalisations. As the uncertain tension-filled months passed, friends would come to say goodbye; others simply disappeared, and you understood or were told that they had got there landed and were now probably somewhere in Don Mills. (29)

They make an imaginary world in Canada that can be their new home. They imagine it according to their desires for home. In a way, in their minds, they adapt that world to their attitudes and behaviour, for here that world is very plausible and can be moulded according to the bent of their mind. They are the architects of that imaginary
world so far away. So, believing it to be suitable for them, they leave for the concrete
world with that concrete god, the CN Tower, in their life all through their presence in
Don Mills. So, imaginary precedes the concrete. And, finally it is the imaginary that is
real in the world of the narrative.

In “this new country” things are not as familiar, and life is not as smooth as
they had imagined. To begin with they face rough weather. Then the problems of
being without a job in a society that is inclined to competition. Vassanji gives a
glimpse of the competitive life in Canada; how young boys and girls aspire to
“Become rich,” and how “making it” is meant to be their growing up. Nurdin does
many odd and menial jobs, and gives them up for one or the other reason. In the
meantime, his morale degenerates, his self-confidence comes down. Vassanji writes:
“Notch by notch it seemed to Nurdin he had come down in self-esteem and
expectations, grasping whatever odd job came his way, becoming a menial in the
process. Back home even your glass of water was brought by a servant. A servant to
fetch you from school, to hold your bag. Things had changed there, of course, but not
that much” (88-89). He carries cases on his back, presses trousers, cooks French fries,
sweeps and mops floors. There are pressures from the children who want luxuries,
and reputation within the community along with prestige and honour also matters. All
this agony and tormentation he keeps to himself.

After that, Nurdin begins to corrupt. A new life begins for him with his job at
the Ontario Addiction Centre. He comes closer to the local culture. He eats pork
without any hesitation; thus begins to shed off inhibitions which his life with his
father in Africa had inculcated in him. His father would operate like Fate upon him.
By taking pork, drinking beer and going to peep-shows, he, in a way, defies and
challenges the authority and grandeur of his father. And, that is not his upbringing.
So, Nurdin has changed. He falls prey to the temptations of this world. It seems to him that his sins have increased in number ever since that first act of serious incontinence – tasting a bit of pork sausage and then proceeding to consume a sizable piece of it. He does not “change himself” to get adapted to the new place; he does not play any tactics, any strategy to find out a way to resolve the problems associated with the ‘newness’ of Canada. It is actually ‘the place’ itself that takes its new subject into its grip and changes him. That is why there is an anxiety of influence of the host culture, an inner conflict within the personality of Nurdin. And, it seems to him, as he understands the situation, his predicaments are a scourge on him because of his sins. He continues musing on his condition, and there is turmoil inside him. He thinks:

You are already changed when you think about eating pork. Think about that. There must be something in the Canadian air that changes us, as the old people say. The old people who are shunted between sons and daughters and old peoples’ homes – 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. (136-137)

How hard it is to live that traditional life of Africa in the Canadian air! Nurdin is a man of African making; his upbringing is very different. His African consciousness does not allow him to go the Canadian way. But he is too weak to resist the local air. The resistance that the immigrant shows toward the host culture is essential, and it turns out to be disturbing as for his assimilation and integration in the other culture are concerned.
There is Zera, his wife, who can satisfy his desire and save him from committing any carnal sin; she can save him from many Canadian temptations, thereby making a way for their permanent settlement in Canada. Though Nurdin gets attracted to her, she does not let him come close to her and turns against his desires. Vassanji writes about her indifference as, “Zera was married to God, the idea of God. Not that she was other worldly or excessively devotional. Her obsession was to discuss God and religion . . .” (138). Zera is devoted to her teacher Missionary and likes to sit at his feet to hear his religious discourse. Nurdin, having been deprived of Zera’s love, goes astray to see peep-shows, and to have a chat with Sushila that promised him release. It is in this scenario that he happens to see a ‘white’ girl apparently in want of help. And, as he approaches her, touches her slightly, he feels her being a ‘woman,’ and her white breasts without a bra rouse desire in him – he just thinks of it. Though he does not rape or molest her, he has some obscene thought about her in his mind. That proves to be a trap for him; the girl accuses him of an attempt to rape her. False accusations are a form of repression that these straightforward immigrants face in Canada. Such acts make a mess of their immigrant life. This is the climax of their predicaments.

Nurdin is full of desire. He is aware of woman as different and beautiful. Zera’s turning away from him and his being in a land free of inhibitions take him close to the Canadian free way (liberal behaviour). Later he feels guilty, and remembers: “Lust and anger, those two you shall avoid” (141). Vassanji says, “Anger was not his problem, that was his father’s. Let him pay for it. Nurdin’s problem was lust” (141). Lust being Nurdin’s problem, Zera can be there between him and the Canadian ‘immorality’. Who is there to bring Zera back to Nurdin?
After committing every sin, Nurdin is guilt-ridden. He eats pork, takes beer, sees peep-shows, touches the white girl with lusty thoughts in his mind – immediately after committing these sins his conscience accuses him and he does not go any further. It is his past, his history that intervenes and interrupts. His upbringing with his stern father, Haji Lalani, comes in his way. It is not so easy to defy his father without being taken to task. Vassanji writes, “The following days he wasn’t himself; wasn’t 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 intact” (184). Actually his problem is not to lose all of the old; he wants to retain some of it, or most of it. After every contact with the host culture, he reconnects with his home culture. Thus, he oscillates between the two and falls in the space in-between. This is the immigrant’s predicament. Even Nanji, who does not follow any faith any longer, identifies himself with the culture and the past of his community. According to Vassanji, faith should be taken at the individual level; and it is culture and history that give identity to a group. So, tracing affiliations with a certain culture and history, or more precisely with multiple cultures and histories, is the main engagement of Vassanji in his fiction.

Nurdin does not get freedom with Sushila, as he thinks earlier like: “Sushila promised release,” but Missionary comes and by wearing the red fez of Haji Lalani exorcises the past and releases Nurdin. Missionary tells Nurdin that he sees he has installed a goddess down stairs, and asks him where the god is. There is a plastic statue of Aphrodite in the lobby of the building. These immigrants compare it with Lakshmi. Or, they identify it with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. That comparison is itself across cultures; it brings two cultures in a blend. Vassanji even goes to the extent of saying that some Hindu immigrant places idols of Krishna and Radha beside
this statue. The plastic statue, in a way, is the statue of multiculturalism. It has two aspects: the CN Tower, and Haji Lalani’s portrait.

The CN Tower is a continuous presence in their lives. It is all around and never ceases to be. Vassanji comments about it as, “What I had in mind was the sense that the CN Tower represents the city. It also represents concrete, and it sends out signals. It somehow represented the mystery and the possibilities of the city, a mystery that one could not understand” (Kanaganayakam 31-32). It represents everything associated with the city, the new country, the new home and its uncanny pull toward its interior. As such, it takes Nurdin to the temptations of the Canadian culture and society.

Haji Lalani’s portrait reminds Nurdin of the past, of his upbringing under a very strict religious code. So, whenever he views the photo, it reminds him of his stern old father who had terrified him, and he relives that terrifying authority through affiliations with his past. After going close to the free ways of the local space, he retreats when he sees his father with that red fez. The CN Tower pulls him toward the city; the portrait takes him back to his past. That way he has ambivalent affiliations with both of them.

It is Missionary who resolves Nurdin’s problem. He is himself both traditional and modern. He is partly Westernised and partly steeped in Eastern mysticism. He is actually invited to reinforce these immigrants’ faith and reconnect them to their roots. He is there to help them out of the predicaments of in-between space they come to occupy.

Missionary has brought Haji Lalani’s red fez with him. He wears it on his head in front of Nurdin and, thus, invokes and relives Haji’s authority but only to
distort and dismantle it, and, in a way, does a sort of purgation and purification of his fear. He wrings life out of it; the past goes ineffective and cannot disturb their modern syncretistic life. He does not abort the past; he only renders it ineffectual so that it cannot interrupt them. Vassanji says, “That instant the red fez was exorcised. 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” (197). So Canada becomes Amarapur, the eternal city, for them, and this is the land in the west their ancestors had gone out in quest of.

Missionary brings the past with him, renders it ineffective in the way that it does not come in their new ways, and makes the community a genuine Canadian community, so that Nurdin has obligations not only to the past but also to the present. That way one more migration is avoided. Nurdin realises Missionary’s achievement and appreciates that he has exorcised the past for him, and also entrenched it in their hearts so firmly. He is now more committed to his family, and Zera has already gone closer to him – she is very likely to yield to him. Eventually his tryst with Sushila has also lost any meaning and enthusiasm. Vassanji rounds off in these words, “That afternoon of opportunity, the tryst he had almost agreed to – and the freedom it would have led him to – now seemed remote and unreal, had receded into the distance, into another and unknowable world” (208). That unfamiliar and mysterious world whose guardian was the CN Tower gives way to a familiar and intimate one that operates upon him from within his own self that carries the past with it and advances toward new opportunities.

As there is the relationship between Ramji and Rumina in Amriika so is the relationship between Nurdin and Canada. The former two take menace out of the past on their own, the latter cannot do it himself; it is Missionary who takes menace out of
the past, and the community continues to live in Canada. However, Ramji still fails, or history fails him, and he is finally a lonely man going adrift in that larger world of dream and promise.

As for the structure of the narrative, Vassanji uses a narrative within a narrative technique. He starts with the present predicament of Nurdin Lalani in Canada, then goes back in time in a flashback, changing the setting also, to show his history in East Africa. This technique is in compliance with the title and the writer's perspective. The writer traces his history to show his misfortunes in different places, every time the past lingers along, and torments them, teases them and disturbs them.

Though *No New Land* is not a complex novel in terms of form and condensation of content, history is surely one of its main dimensions. Unlike *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, historical content is thin and treated in a straightforward way. As Vassanji himself says, "My characters do not mean anything until they have a history" (Kanaganayakam 24), his mechanism throughout his fiction is to bring the past and the present of his characters on the same plane; even private history and public history coalesce (Kanaganayakam 24). Amin Malak contends:

...Vassanji gives an emphatic socio-cultural role to the writer, "... as a preserver of the collective tradition, a folk historian and myth maker." He gives himself a history; he recreates the past which exists only in memory and is otherwise obliterated, so fast has his world transformed. He emerges from the oral, preliterate and unrecorded, to the literate. In many instances his reclamation of the past is the first serous act of writing. Having reclaimed it, having given himself a history, he liberates himself to write about the present. (7)
However, the point is, how much of the past Vassanji reclams and how much he disclaims. To him, history is selective and discontinuous, as the modern philosophies of history propound: historiography incorporates subjective elements also. Many people who have given a critique of his writings and many other sources of history of Asians in East Africa indicate that Vassanji does not give all that is there; he conceals, selects and represents and misrepresents.

Though it is a work of fiction, Vassanji puts his narrative in the framework of history. Tanganyika was under Germany and Indians were employed by the Germans to help build the German empire in Africa. And, Bagamoyo was a slave market until slavery was abolished. Stanley going looking for Livingstone is history; Burton and Speke searching the source of the Nile is also history. The Germans built Dar es Salam, and the British built Nairobi.

By knowing the past of these characters, their present can be understood. History shapes the present – the hybrid present. As Ali A. Abdi contends:

> History, it is often said, tends to be unkind to people who neglect it. Historical accounts of a society, whether accurately recorded or not, play a major role in our interpretation of the contemporary social world. Therefore, the historical context of African Canadians, to a large extent, is the appropriate starting point for understanding their contemporary experiences. (Tettey and Pulampu 50)

With that much historical realism, we understand that these immigrants have multiple histories, multiple cultures and multiple identities: they receive in inheritancethe transnational nature of their present realities. Vassanji historicises this diaspora as a condition of pain and double alienation, and finally, when Missionary takes menace
out of the past, glorifies it as a mode of perennial liminality. In an exchange with Shane Rhodes, Vassanji says about the mechanism behind his use of history in his fiction:

I don’t see the novels as capturing African-Indian history. I just wrote the novels to investigate certain aspects of the life that I knew. The intent was not to write a history but to use history and to see what happens to a certain group of people over a certain period of time. Each of the novels forefronts a narrator so as to indicate that this “history” you are reading has been focused through a certain individual prism; in this way, for me, the process of trying to understand the past, of featuring characters who are in the process of reconstructing it, is an important part of my fiction. (117)

However, Vassanji produces a discourse which establishes his relationship vis-à-vis multiple histories and cultures he belonged to at different points of time. He chooses historical material selectively and omits some purposefully. He claims East Africa as home, still he establishes a distinctiveness from the Blacks. And, at the end, making Canada “the final stop” and “the land of the west in quest of which his community had embarked some four hundred years ago,” he cancels out all his claims for East Africa as ‘home,’ and renounces it as his ultimate ‘destination.’ East Africa turns out to be only a stop on his way, a pause on his journey, to his ‘real’ destination, Canada.

Vassanji not only writes the history of his community, what woes befall small shopkeepers, he also overwrites the history of the Blacks of East Africa, so as to make some African writers challenge his version of events. Though fiction, his narratives generate a discourse that define his East African world in a particular perspective that
has grievances against 'the black anger' and 'the black power'. East African history comes to us in his narratives, designed to react against some historical events, whereby most of it is concealed, omitted and left out. History runs through all his fiction and some of non-fiction. There is appropriation and selection of history through the mode of memory in him. Taking the past out of his memory gives yet another turn to his writing: it is self-exploration and self-discovery. So, the way he connects to history leads him to the discovery of his own self
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