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Immigration and its Aftereffects in M.G. Vassanji’s Novels
- K. Suneel Kumar

M. G. Vassanji was born in Kenya and raised in Tanzania. Before coming to Canada in 1978, he attended MIT and University of Pennsylvania, where he specialized in theoretical Nuclear Physics. Canada and from 1980 to 89 he was a Research Associate at the University of Toronto. During this period he developed a keen interest in medieval Indian literature and history, co-founded and edited a literary magazine (The Toronto South Asian Review, later renamed the Toronto Review of Contemporary Writings Abroad). He began writing stories and a novel, and then in 1989, with the publication of his first novel, The Gunny Sack, he was invited to spend a season at the international writing program of the University of IWOA. That year ended his active career in nuclear physics. He was never tense; he considered it a blessing, for it freed him to pursue his literary career. Vassanji is the author of six highly acclaimed novels and two collections of short stories. His work has appeared in various countries and several languages. His recent novel, The Assassin’s Song, was shortlisted for both the Gellar Prize and the Governor General’s prize for the best novel in Canada. It will be argued that while the works of Vassanji are typical for immigrant fiction in that they are concerned with both multicultural as well as post-colonial issues respectively, A comprehensive analysis of his works must treat him as a Canadian writer. Vassanji lives in Toronto with his wife and two children.

M. G. Vassanji’s wonderful and satisfied narrative style attracts the readers a lot. His reader-oriented ways and his gripping story-telling way stand out to be very special as it is as natural as his life-reflecting characters in his novels. His concern is the problems the immigrants face in their exile. His contribution to the Canadian literature in passing the problems of Indian immigrants in Canada, speaks a lot about his postcolonial perspective in terms of immigration as well as multiculturalism in the present Globalized society. Multiculturalism is the key whose effect is shown on every social sphere.

In this age of Globalization, the effects increase influence on
considerable parts of the world. Globalization does not only describe international cash flows but also draws attention to the colonial/Neo-
colonial underpinnings of the wealth of the Western world and the deprivation of the developing countries. From its origins as a merely descriptive term, globalization does become a critical vocabulary demanding social justice and global responsibility from the countries of the Western world whose wealth still depends on exploitation of the resources of the South. In the wake of colonialism and neo-colonialism, large number of people all over the world have turned their backs on their home countries and migrated either in order to escape persecution or poverty. The large-scale of migration from Africa, the Caribbean and the Asian sub-continent into the Anglo-American Diaspora has altered the composition of Western society considerably. The immigrants have also brought with them cultural identities of their own.

Canadian society is considered to be a multicultural society where all ethnic groups enjoy equal rights and status. The rules and regulations in Canada argue strongly and try to protect the rights of the immigrants. In spite of such constitution, there are a few minor incidents of racial prejudice in the normal routine experience of people. The national policy of multiculturalism has been adopted by Canada to ensure that all multicultural groups enjoy an equally meaningful and recognized space on the horizontal plane, but in the regular practice of day-to-day living, different ethnic groups occupy different ranks in the society. Though the policy of multiculturalism is ideally a real attempt to forage a new lively society consisting of various diversified cultures to mark a unified identity; it has just remained as a patchwork or a mosaic. In practice it doesn't work as it could certainly eliminate racism. If there is equal opportunity and equal status to immigrants, it would cause feelings of economic insecurity, moral outrage, and conscious superiority among certain groups. Moreover, as many South Asians are well qualified and prove better in the right to work. This certainly deprives the employability of the people who have been called the locals. These things have been described with authority in their novels and stories by various writers like M.G. Vassanji. Canada's multicultural or ethnic fiction provides a particularly rich showcase for exploring modes of living together in a multi-cultured society. Here an attempt is made to analyze how immigrant writer views Canadian...
Multiculturalism is a new paradigm which could be said to recognize the effects of globalization by accounting for the migrants cultural differences. No matter which view on multiculturalism as a policy one takes, it seems beyond dispute that a truly multicultural perspective cannot but acknowledge that migration is a move with far-reaching consequences for the host society. It also often more drastically affects the individual migrant. Arguably one of the most pressing problems for those forsaking their homes for a new country is the construction of a new identity. In more accessible terms, the central concern for many who feel themselves uprooted is how to make life in the diaspora 'livable'. 'Livable' here can refer to an attempt to reproduce the old country in the now; however it might also imply in some cases that the country of origin is discarded in favor of the country of adoption.

East Africa, during either colonization or after decolonization does not show solutions to many problems faced by immigrants community. Even the so called Nyerere's socialism too fails to bring in justice to this community. The subversive situation prompts these people to move farther lands further, where they don't belong either. The frontiers may have changed but they have simply created imaginary homelands. There are many illustrations derived from M. G. Vassanji’s novels where protagonists feel uneasy with their cultural tradition and modify or even discard it.

M. G. Vassanji's first novel The Gunny Sack is a novel which explores the history and the story of the Indians in East Africa. During the colonial period, they were forced to leave after the independence of Africa. The novel spans four generations from the beginning of the Indian settlement on the coast of East Africa. It was under the Germans then passed on to the British in a course of time. As Ji-Bai says at the beginning of the novel, "Memory is represented by The Gunny Sack, and also the sack possesses many tales of the Shamshi community of Indian origin, having first migrated from India to East Africa and from there to the new world in search of a better life". The community's movement is part of a historical sketch drawn in the novel. They are from Kutch. They move from there to East Africa because of the
pressing social and economic problems at home. They went in search of a better life. They face many troubles in the day to day life in the alien land, which was already under European colonial rule. They think again and act upon another place to settle and thus move westward. The Gunny Sack stands witness of new history as it throws out many memories as regard the unfolding events in the centre genealogy of Dhanji Govindji.

Salim is the narrator of the story; he vividly catalogues the descendants of Dhanji Govindji, their ups and downs while living in East Africa. Every character's personal life is a historical manifestation told in the tricky conditions of being now here. For example, besides Dhanji Govindji’s ventures, his African slave keep, Bibo Taratibu and her son Hussein are the victims of the circumstances. The alien minority and their dispatchment, their predicament, the forced dispersement of the half century settlers are part of personal history reflected in the novel. The Mau Mau uprising, the operational will to wipe it out, the German and British colonization, the liberation of East Africa from foreign rule and the socialistic system of governance as replacement of colonization are the historicity in the textuality of The Gunny Sack.

No New Land is also the text that stands for co-textuality which starts in the Canadian present, journeys through African past and moves to the present with futuristic outlook. The two novels deal with immigrant's problem of coming to terms of new land, the real illusionary land colliding in the author's psychological landscape. M.G. Vassanji, for a change uses real raw materials from the historical truths to narrate his novels. Vassanji in his The Gunny Sack and No New Land tries his utmost best to paint the real picture of the life of Shamshi community which is made a prototype example of how life is like in transcontinental wilderness. Vassanji’s another novel Amriika may be viewed as classic immigrant story which speaks how far political commitment and radical dissent can go. This novel begins in Boston–Cambridge in the Vietnam War Era. It is seen as documenting the travails of an immigrant. The reader of this novel can draw his or her own conclusion.

The portrayal of woman characters in Vassanji’s novels is no big a surprise in the sense that they have many extraordinary roles to play
in the circumstances that are both favorable and unfavorable in new places. The male dominated and chauvinistic treatment against women characters in his works are simply the prototype examples. As to how Indian traditionalistic and orthodox womanhood stays intact with what they do and how they behave at home, and it is no different either when they go abroad.

Under colonization, the woman's role is being what she is generally expected to be and how she is supposed to behave depending on the cultural and traditional parameters. Vassanji's women's portrayal in the feministic perspective is not out of bounds other than how they should be. They are casual, traditional, eccentric, sometime heroic, subdued, submissive and more dependent. Their role is marginal when decision making is concerned.

Immigration is a new phenomenon spanning mostly from 19th century and intensifying through twentieth century; gravitating itself before the independence right across the continents. Immigration is not regional that confines itself to only a particular geographical space but its tentacles spread from oriental countries to African hinterlands and from there to trans-Atlantic geo-spaces. Neither immigration is by only one set of people belonging to one specific region of country, nor does it have any zeal of settling in a specific nation out of fascination for that Geo-space, but it is all due to the situation on the ground.

The ground reality is the pressing effect of colonization. Colonizing the third world for material development indicates the imperialist arrogance geared to the appropriation of a weak and backward society through domination and thanks to which people's prompted movement from one part of the world to the other part occurs and reoccurs. This forced displacement has visibly proceeding and culminating causes of victimization, marginalization, economic degradation and most importantly the quest for survival. The issue of immigration and its after effect is the theme of the writings made by the expatriate writers like M.G. Vassanji. His displaced descriptions through images of the historical reminiscences speak volumes of the South Asian Diaspora.
References


