

Chapter 5

Seeking a Larger World in America

Amriika

M. G. Vassanji explores the influence of history upon people. It is one's own history, the history of one's community and even the history of the world. Events and developments happening round the world do affect individuals also. They shape their mindset, ideology and perspective. They even shape their course of action which they have to choose because they have no other choice. Historical developments create situations which an individual or a group has to face and go through. Eventually such situations also become their history which architects their world, and they are identified with it.

Amriika explores how a Third World person belonging to an immigrant community from Africa, originally from India, comes in contact with the West, and what can be the possible results of this contact. It also shows how the victims of political dissent in the Third World get refuge and suitable environment in America despite its imperial ambitions, and some racism in the society. It further takes in its domain the absurdity of religious extremism, social extremism, and sets parallel political dissent and religious dissent.

Back home in Tanzania, the country has gone socialist and is on the side of the Communist Block in the Cold War. In other words, Tanzania is facing the East after its independence. Having adopted a certain political ideology, the citizens of the country will have to undergo a sort of political dissent. For example, they cannot face the West, let alone being on that side, or going there in search of a saviour. So, it becomes pretty difficult for one to seek a visa of America.

However, tracing his roots very deep back in India, Ramji knows that his ancestors in India had been told to seek their saviour in the west: the west has been

theirs. When the saviour did not arrive in Gujarat, they crossed the Ocean to seek him (or her, or it) in East Africa. And, when they needed him in their hard times in Africa, they once again crossed the Ocean to look for him in America. America – the West – had been their dream, their hope.

Political situation in Tanzania along with many pulls and attractions from America further reinforce the ancestral quest of seeking the saviour in the west, and Sona and Ramji, belonging to the Shamsi community in East Africa, get a chance to go to the United States for higher studies. They encounter that new world quite unprepared, like so many others of their small community. In the prologue of the novel, “Beginnings...” Vassanji says, “My people sought it (the final avatar of their god Vishnu) first in Africa, an ocean away, where they settled more than a hundred years ago. But in time this west moved further, and became America; or as Grandma said it: Amriika” (Vassanji 3). The horizons of their quest keep expanding as historical developments in a certain place affect them in such a way that they feel a deep and strong urge to move on further and further away.

The places they arrive at have their own historical, cultural, social and political backgrounds, and influencing potentials. Whereas Africa gave them the identity of ‘*dukawalas*’, they moved further to *seek a larger world*.

That larger world turns out to be the El Dorado, in terms of seeking that Holy Grail in the direction of the west. Beginning with “a more historical beginning,” Vassanji finds, or, at least, develops a continuum of his ancestors travelling in the west, across the Indian Ocean, to East Africa many centuries ago because of a certain historical and cultural situation, and his community’s going to the West and dispersing in all directions (2). The community’s being on the move is the central

motif of Vassanji's fiction. *Amriika* delineates Ramji's going away from Africa to Boston and seeking happiness in California, the Eldorado of his course, where also he loses happiness, for Rumina is gone, and he is all alone. Ramji sitting dejected, on seeing a woman approaching him says, "I very much want her to be the woman I've lost" (412). He is confused, and extremely unprepared for some new world that can possibly be his new domicile.

Vassanji places his narrative in many historical periods, and many historical events give direction to its development. He starts the first part of his novel in 1968 and ends in 1970. American troops were engaged in Vietnam in a war against the communists. Lyndon Johnson initiated the US involvement in Vietnam carrying out the country's policies which had been designed as consequences of the Cold War. With the coming of Richard Nixon in 1969, the war expanded to Laos and Cambodia. Here the US president was applying the 'domino theory', and doing his utmost to prevent the Southeast Asia's fall to communism.

The period 1968 – 1970 saw two US presidents: one initiated the war and the other escalated and expanded it. Political situation in America was very tense. There were thousands of protests against the war, especially on college campuses, in America. So, the people were on streets, the troops on war and the politicians were busy to find an opportunity to carry out the foreign policy of the country. And, in such a situation, Ramji and his friend Sona arrive in America to get higher education.

Exploring effects of history on people, Vassanji depicts the impact of historical situation and events happening round the world on Ramji and other people of his community. Eventually individual history and communal history coalesce and the outcome is a complex diaspora experience.

To get rid of the bell jar of political situation in Tanzania, Ramji and Sona reach America quite hopeful and enthusiastic. They find themselves in an entirely new world for which they have been unprepared, and they have to grapple with it. Not so long after Ramji arrives in America, he observes the difference between the two worlds. Though Grandmother and others back home had given him some advice and admonition regarding this new world, and he had vowed not to fall prey to temptations there, while in America soon after his arrival, he feels to be “plucked out from his old life and suspended...in this silence, in this darkness, in this alien air, with the alien smell” of the things of daily use – the American basic comforts (13). Ramji imagines (or Vassanji describes) the world back in Tanzania, the place he belongs to and has come from, and may return to. Will Ramji be able to be “at least in constant touch” (13) with his homeland while being in his wonderland, America? Vassanji says, “He did not know what would become of him, what he would turn into. But he had come with a vow of constancy against temptation, a promise to uphold his identity and faith . . . to return intact” (26).

Going to America itself is a temptation, and when Ramji comes in contact with the Western society and culture, he eventually adopts some of it. He, thus, changes his identity, loses his faith and may never return intact. He turns into a hybrid – a cultural hybrid, a liminal being. So as Ramji’s grandmother back home does not know whether the Schrodinger’s cat is alive or dead, Vassanji breaks open the box for us to see the cat lying dead, or in a sense suspended between life and death (39). He loses his virginity to his hostess, he loses his faith to scepticism and scientific reason, and he loses his values to the free culture of the West.

Gradually Ramji sheds off all his inhibitions, hesitations and reluctance to do things freely in America; he is told not to be shy in America. Learning about the

political violence in America, he at first refuses to go there; then he tries to avoid certain things. Ramji's hostess tells him, "You are very observant, aren't you? I mean you . . .," and he retorts saying "Yes . . . that is how I was brought up. That's how everybody was. It's a matter of faith." And only after some time, when she approaches him, he falls prey to the temptation. The world back home is still alive in him, and he feels a pain somewhere deep inside him. Going a bit closer to American culture, he turns insensitive to these feelings. Vassanji says, "And the sin he had just committed, the guilty secret He did not think about it, not then, this was one glorious night without darkness, and he slept hugging his pillow" (62).

The Cold War between the communists and the capitalists does affect Ramji and his people. Though it is public history, and has apparently nothing to do with these people, let alone an individual like Ramji, *Amriika* depicts how American imperialism and misadventures in Vietnam affect Ramji, change his views and opinions. Having taken admission in an American university, Ramji learns new ideas; he finds great opportunities in "this land of the free" (66). He learns to think differently and freely. "And, you Ramji, are coming to realise that there is a different way to view the world than the one you were used to" is the voice of his heart (66). When Nixon expands war to Laos and Cambodia, students and many intellectuals protest against this aggression in the Third World. Ramji is invited to join the movement; he refuses at first, has certain reservations, but finally joins his friends, for he does not like America to rule the Third World countries virtually. He also helps the activists of the movement. And, thus, the person who does not like the socialists back in Tanzania protests in support of the communists in Vietnam, or he protests against America in Vietnam. Or, there is another side of it: whereas communism is godlessness, capitalism is oppression which facilitates imperialism and colonialism.

Ramji does not like American hegemony in the world. However, he does not take an active part in the movement; he hangs loosely at its periphery; and the most significant act he does is to hide Lucy Anne in his room and not inform the authorities. He realises that radicals do not respect public decency, and tries to be away from them. He helps Lucy more for her friendship, and when she is arrested, she suspects Ramji. The point is, in spite of all that, Ramji does not belong to any movement or any radical group.

Subsequently, Ramji feels to be free, free of many burdens of his past and background. Vassanji writes in the first person narrative with Ramji as the narrator, “There was now a certain looseness in the step, an exhilaration, a sense of freedom. I had an awareness of a larger universe than the one I had known and of all manner of possibilities, of choice: in one’s beliefs and actions” (162). In the social environment of America, Ramji loses, willingly or unwillingly, the faith and moral order of his ancestors; he has no fear of his sins, hell and damnation after death. He does not go to the mosque any longer, the Anand Mission does not affect him, to him religious dissent is no way different from political and cultural dissent. And he gets used to a game that he plays with himself. He tries to imagine what it is like back at home. And, with the death of his grandmother, home seems very far away. Ramji says, “There was no going back to one’s previous state of being. The longer one stayed here, the more altered one became. The odd thing was that part of one’s new consciousness was to become more devoted to the country one came from, and to appreciate more its problems” (87). He sheds off that burden of faith and belief and walks away a free man with his destiny in his own hands. But, how much of his past can he shed off? And, how much is he to take with him?

That happens to be a period of enchantment for Ramji; he observes, reflects and carries on. The most significant development that happens in him is that he breaks loose the bonds with his ancestors and their traditions and culture. He betrays his world politically, socially and culturally. He reaches a liminality that will be explained later. He is in an ambivalent state like Schrödinger's cat to the observer.

That period of enchantment for Ramji in which he observes, reflects and carries on gives the reader some highlights of American society and culture. Ramji observes the disintegration of American family. He notices how the Morris family abandons his hostess Mrs. Morris, a cancer patient. Each member of the family has his own plans for holidays, and none stays with Ginnie, and Ramji exclaims, "What a time for her family to abandon her" (61). Though there is a lot of open sex and love making in America, familial bonds are not so strong. One does not have to be shy in America, and, so it is easy to make love with one's hostess. Ginnie says to Ramji, "That there is greater moral fibre and spirituality where you come from . . ." (21). The American behaviour and etiquette are characteristic of the place. One enjoys freedom, freedom to hold views and opinions, and to express them openly, and there is no fear of persecution. That is American character.

But, how does a person from the Third World feel in spite of all that flexibility? Ramji says, "There is no persecution here, but still we feel a sense of oddness, of smallness, of . . . insignificance" (27). That is what happens to immigrants in a host culture until they cross the transition and suspend in cultural liminality. These immigrants of little significance face some racism also. For example, "Abbas had been murdered in West Philadelphia," and Michel's story about the community of Shamsi Muslims in Ashfield also confirms the sense of racism in America (208). During the Gulf War, which was against Iraq, a Muslim country, this small

community of Shamsi Muslims “display[s] the usual tokens of patriotism” (363). And, in American society, there is space for stereotyping and propagating false images regarding a certain religion. That mysterious K. Ali’s book that is “an argument in theology, history and cultural freedom” and the subsequent resentment among the Muslim community show the tactics of such elements (350). They create the situation first, give it a strategic media covering, and make people believe through such heinous acts as bombing a book store of Islamic extremism. Michel says, “. . . the Movement had to be behind the bombing, it was just the sort of thing it would do, to draw attention to Islamic extremism” (364).

Involvement of American agents abroad in riots and violence to make an unacceptable image of Iran confirms such an attitude at the national level. This imperialistic stance of America shown in the narrative can be said to be a precursor of 9/11 and its aftermath. The bombing of the World Trade Centre is seen as a strategic tactic to make a formidable image of ‘Islamic extremism’ (imaginary geographies in Edward Said’s terms) and assert America’s arrogance of power anywhere in the world to maintain American hegemony and Empire as shown during the Vietnam War. America is in the habit of deciding on other countries: who rules them; who they can make friends with; making their economic policies; creating political situations in their own interest whereby these countries come under the supreme power through consent.

Ramji marries Zuli, a girl of his own community, for he likes her forthrightness and her back-home interests, and they have two children. But during that ‘grand reunion’ of 1993, he sees Jamila. The two have had an affair before, but for certain reasons could not marry. His passion for Jamila returns, but as it is now, they can do nothing for it.

However, it is during this reunion in midsummer that Ramji sees a new beauty, Rumina, who at first appears to be modest and reserved. When she takes off her head-scarf and displays her beauty to enchant men, Ramji falls for her. Though he does not give divorce to Zuli and does not marry Rumina, he certainly betrays Zuli and the two children. He abandons them to live with Rumina, who actually is not one of them, and does not belong to them. He lives in an open relationship with her. Vassanji writes, "Is this how flimsy a man's resolve is, like a tattered rag that at the slightest come-on from a pretty young woman it shreds to pieces risking all?" (233). She becomes a symbol of happiness for him.

Hanging out with Rumina and betraying Zuli have drastic consequences for Ramji. Zuli now likes to keep away from him, and the home gets broken. The author comments, "If he deceived anyone, it was himself. He should have known he could not cheat successfully; he should have known he could not belong to two worlds at the same time, that he was liable to fall off into the space between" (243). In a sense Zuli is his back home world and Rumina is his new world. He does not want to break away with Zuli, and he also does not want to be away from Rumina. That is the tragedy of the immigrant, who hangs loosely in an in-between world.

Ramji is shocked to know the family background of Rumina. She does not belong to his community; instead, she turns out to be the daughter of a man who is believed to be responsible for the forced marriages in Zanzibar. Vassanji comments, ". . . he had seen a vision of happiness for him and made a grab for it, come what may. And, what a fall he had taken" (255). And he realises the magnitude of his loss and the intensity of his betrayal. He has lost both the worlds; he is nowhere in the midst of that larger world.

Ramji continues his pursuit of happiness, his quest for the Eldorado, and moves to California. Vassanji relates his going to California, the west of the USA, with fate and ancestral history – the essential migratory behaviour of the community. His community has been going in the direction of the west to find out that saviour who they need to get protection from the consequences of making alliance with another culture, first initiated in Gujarat, India, as displayed in *The Gunny Sack* and *The Assassin's Song*. In a sense, he binds Ramji to his ancestors. Vassanji writes, “And now, looking out across another ocean, what did he seek? What did he have to give?” (270). The quest of his ancestors had never been successful, so he is also apprehensive and uneasy lest he should get nothing in the far west of America “where the sun god ruled; and the sea, the sea” (269). However he tries to run away, he cannot go without his past; he is caught in the design of his fate. His destiny does not seem to be in his hands; it is his history that determines it. History replaces his god, historical sense his faith.

Ramji meets Rumina, and they live together once again, this time in California. They live and work happily. Rumina loves him and often yields to him. With the passage of time and mutual understanding they put the past behind them and begin to reconcile themselves to those bitter events of history which had once caused a painful rift between them. Vassanji writes, “The past swirls in dark eddies around us, he thought, but we have to take the menace out of it . . .” (289). So, taking menace out of history, Ramji seeks happiness in Rumina to finally settle with her. Then all of a sudden Michel gets in. His coming on the scene disturbs their happy days. He actually comes to tell his story and seek refuge in that western part of the country. He is associated with the Ashfield bombing and is wanted by the police. Ramji has to give him a place to hide in spite of himself only because he belongs to his community.

And, when Ramji learns about his past, he turns more apprehensive. He, however, conceals the truth about Michel from Rumina who begins to like him. Rumina's liking of Michel believing him to be innocent disturbs Ramji. He now fears losing her to Michel, besides fearing a severe action from the authorities for hiding Michel in his house. And this culminates in an encounter in which Michel is killed, Rumina injured, and eventually Ramji loses Rumina, home and happiness.

And, now, Ramji has nothing in his hand, nowhere to go. He has his history with him; the history god mocking at him ruthlessly, not so far away. Vassanji writes:

Ramji had never been able to be unequivocal; his inner life had always been steeped in ambiguity and doubt. He had never belonged to any one place entirely, not stood behind a cause or movement without reservations; when he left a judgemental, jealous God for the cold thrill of reason, he still could not do without portents and symbols, always yearned for moral certainty. The upside to this nature was a partial immunity to betrayal and failure. (399)

That is how Vassanji sums up Ramji's character which assimilates in it the past, present and hints at the future. In other words, how history affects people and individuals, and how people are obsessed with history, their roots and origins can be said to be the central mechanism, the force at work, within the framework of immigration, in the narrative.

Ramji is very much obsessed with home and identity. Though he does not go back to his home in Africa and declines his grandmother's request to be back and marry a girl of his community, he persistently thinks and talks of his home. He remembers his grandmother back home in Tanzania. He imagines the world in Africa

and compares it with America. On various occasions, Ramji remembers and talks about his home. For example: “There is a game I sometimes play with myself, Ramji said. I try to imagine what it is like back at home now” (87). He asserts that the immigrant becomes more devoted to the country he comes from and appreciates more its problems. He is very vivid and clear about his thoughts of home. He says, “Back home – how haunting is that term home – back home times were hard” (165). But, with the death of his grandmother, home seems very far away for him. In a sense, Grandmother is the link with his past, his ancestors in Africa, hence his home. Rumina brings him home. When she is gone, this new found home is also gone. And, he is again homeless; he is essentially homeless. Where is his home?

Ramji loses that far away home across the oceans and now he does not have “a home to go back to” and he is not what he was (189). However, he is very much nostalgic of his home in Africa. A game of Bao reminds him of his home in Africa. He says, “That is what Bao brought to mind, the long walk to school and the old men; Grandma waiting at home” (377). The home is in his mind, his imagination. These are his phantom obsessions, the obsessions of the immigrant. Vassanji in the third person narrator comments about Ramji:

In that world lay all that had been in his life. He recalled walking along an empty street at 4 a.m. with his grandmother, on their way to early mosque for meditation This was the world he left twenty seven years ago, often dreaming of returning, never quite making it...a world always vivid in his mind, strongly beating in his heart. Africa. (395-96)

This excerpt is a powerful description of the immigrant’s home. The immigrant leaves a world behind with which he has affiliations. So does Ramji. Being in the midst of

his new world, he recollects in retrospection the world he has left behind, across the oceans, in Africa. That world is there in the deep recesses of his unconscious; his personal memory occupies that world of his. He carries all his worlds with him. But, finally, where does he lie? Nowhere, or everywhere. He has ambivalent affiliations with all of them; his is the in-between world.

There are other people of the community also who remember their home and carry its memories with them. Zuli has back-home interests. She is very much conscious of their homelessness. She says, "Our loss of home and dispersal to the four winds, for which we gather periodically to perform this bloody ritual" (184). She has a strong sense of their loss of home and their immigrant life in North America. Others like, Darcy, Rumina and Sona also remember their home in Africa. All of them identify Africa with their home.

It seems this homesickness itself is a sense of guilt to some and a sense of loss to others, a consciousness that these immigrants have left behind something that belonged to them. Both ways, its seat lies in their feelings, and it depends upon their sensitivity. Ramji neglects his home, declines his grandmother's suggestion to return home and marry a cousin of his. He falls prey to the temptations of America and breaks off his bonds with his ancestors. His grandmother sends him a letter thereby making him aware of the nasty political situation back home in Tanzania and urging him to return to marry an Indian girl of his own community to save her from a forced marriage with some black African. He feels bitter about the forced marriages and nationalisation of the Asians' property, but never goes back to Africa. The women of his community present him a *khanga* with a message printed on it: "Wayfarer, keep looking back" before he leaves for the US. He does keep looking back in his memories, but never returns intact to his own world in Africa. There are inner and

outer conflicts going on in his character. Lucy Anne's describing him as 'the betrayer of his world' haunts him. He carries on with a quest of happiness or something like, a desire of some new world, some new home, and a sense of guilt, betrayal and loss.

Associated with homesickness and a sense of homelessness are the obsessions of history and past. The immigrant's memories of the 'home-country' he has left behind form the mental landscape on which he develops all feelings associated with home. Alison Blunt and Ann Varley hold, "Geographies of home are both material and symbolic and are located on thresholds between memory and nostalgia for the past, everyday life in the present, and future dreams and fears" (Blunt and Varley 4). So, Blunt and Varley give a symbolic aspect of home and with it a new dimension to home-building, primarily based on the immigrant's remembrance of the past which in turn transverses his everyday life to give rise to certain dreams and fears in the future. Rosemary Merangoly George holds almost the same: "Home is also the imagined location that can be more readily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography. The term 'home-country' suggests the particular intersection of private and public and of individual and communal that is manifest in imagining a space as home" (11). Vassanji relocates home through memory and history. He is very much obsessed with his past. He not only tries to dig it out of his deep and dark recesses of his mind, many objects and events and people remind him of his past – they are fossils of his history – but he also excavates these fossils of his history through research in archives. As Vassanji himself says that to him writing is reading in the sense that he does a lot of research to write novels. At many places in *Amriika*, Ramji talks about his past in India and Africa. Sona is the historian of the community set to reconstruct the past. Darcy is the past; through him they learn the history of the

community in East Africa. Some other characters also narrate their past which in turn gives them their identity.

While at the university, Ramji chances to meet Professor Linda Hodge who teaches *Imperialism and History*. She talks about big events in the world history. But Ramji is preoccupied with the past of his own small community – the Indians in East Africa. It happens because he has affiliations with that history of his small people, and he identifies himself with it. Ramji says, “Her interest is in large systems; history a’ la Tolstoy and Lenin. Civilisation and its discontents, imperialism and capitalism, declines and falls. And I tell her of the woes that befall shopkeepers . . . small people” (73-74).

In Vassanji’s narrative mechanism, Sona is there to be the scholar-historian of the community. He pries out his roots and origins in India. He does a profound research to discover (not uncover) the past of his community. Vassanji comments about his project and the origins of his community in these words, “Sona was immersed in the past, reconstructing, as he put it, all the byways taken by a small community of Indians over four or five centuries, who simply, and seeing no contradiction, had extended their customs and beliefs and love for their gods to embrace Islam” (83). When Sona pleads Ramji for communal integrity, he tries to convince him about the significance of their small community overseas. He says to him, “Look. We are a community, with a history, language, identity. Would you that it evaporate into nothingness?” (141). According to Sona, as he informs Ramji, people of their community are questioning their identities, reading about their history and roots and even rewriting their past. Sona is there to know and reconstruct the history and beliefs of his people who have been maintaining intact a syncretistic belief, combining Islam and Hinduism, for some centuries.

Vassanji is acutely conscious of the past and history. Writing fiction is a way to manifest his historical sense. He gives more importance to history and culture than faith and beliefs. About the history of his community, there are several occasions where Sona hints at the rewriting of it. People of the community are bent to know their past and reconstruct it.

This reconstructing the past, the rewriting of history, “my history, our history” is a reference to Vassanji’s fiction (205). It is actually Vassanji himself who is rewriting the history of his community, his history, his self and identity. And, this subjective act of his may overlap the history of some others like, the Africans. It may erase their history to make space for his. It may destroy their history to mere debris out of which Vassanji reconstructs his own history.

Vassanji has clearly grievances against fate and history and the Africans in East Africa. As Amin Malak says, “Of course, ‘history is in the eye of the beholder or projector, we do not have one history but histories which are products of perspective’” (3). Almost throughout the fiction of Vassanji, there are these grievances against the past and fate. For example, *Amriika* contains many comments and little narratives about political and cultural dissent in East Africa, and mostly the victim is the Asian. This is how Vassanji opens Ramji’s feelings toward Africa to us, “Ramji thought, what couldn’t draw the bonds of Africa any closer, the feeling of black anger and the defiance that was an expression of ‘black power’” (50). “Black” obviously refers to the African. But it also indicates being heinous and gory and aggressive. There are many references of ‘forced marriages’ when there are no historical evidences to this phenomenon, nationalisation of properties and Idi Amin’s ousting of the Asians from Uganda. Vassanji gives an account of atrocities done to his people:

In his absence many changes had taken place back home – in that country in Africa that would gradually over the years assume the shape of a thorn to prick his conscience. There had been the business about the introduction of forced marriages on the island of Zanzibar, news of which had come from Grandma and left him bitter and angry. (188)

Ramji is so much obsessed with his past, the history of his community. Desiring to be ‘a new man’ in America, he can run away from his past so easily. The ghosts of the past often disturb him, and he sometimes expresses his deep inside feelings. This is how he feels, “But was it the idea of Black communist too, impregnating white, Indian virgin, that made the crime seem even more terrible; made our – my – horror and anger so obsessive? Perhaps there was a twinge of racism in my reaction” (291). There does not seem so much of horror as there is anger and reaction. This point can be substantiated by the fact that the assumed phenomenon of forced marriages has been very much highlighted, rather exploited.

Taking into account the African perspective, Dr. Godwin Siundu has written an article, ‘The Unhomeliness of Home: Asian Presence and Nation Formation in M.G. Vassanji’s Works’. Having recourse to Rosemary Merangoly George’s *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*, he challenges Vassanji for claiming East Africa as ‘home’ and ‘home country’. According to him, that claim is a political act, and for the Asians “invoking history is more likely to undermine than strengthen their claims to East Africa as home.” He substantiates his argument by referring to that history of the Asians in East Africa which Vassanji conceals or just omits. He writes:

By constructing the railway line [the Kenya-Uganda railway between 1896 and 1901] and starting small businesses in the region (both ventures that were motivated by capitalistic desires for improved personal welfare), the Asians thus took part in ‘helping imperialism extend its tentacles to another part’, laying with their own hands the physical and economic infrastructure that facilitated the implementation of colonialism. (17)

Siundu considers the Asians as active participants in the process of colonising East African region. According to him, there was the tendency among the Asians to be reclusive and to shun opportunities for interacting with their African neighbours, a habit that is partly responsible for the mistrust the Africans hold for the Asians. He cites Shiva Naipaul’s *North of South: An African Journey*. According to him, Naipaul contends that the Asians have not bothered to inculcate an appreciation of the Asian culture in their African neighbours, which is why the Africans find it hard to admire and emulate the Asians. Siundu says:

Hence for some Asians, the Empire is home, and its decline is also the decline of home, the beginning of their “essential homelessness.” Awareness of this fact breeds a consciousness among the East African Asians of ambiguous claims to belonging in the region, an ambiguity that is born of their attachments to their ancestral homes as well as a longing for emigration to the metropolises of Britain and the USA, all of which constitute processes of recreating new identities with new homes. (22)

He contends that the Asians have never been at home in Africa; they were agents of colonialism; and their role ended with the independence of the region. And, they have to reconstruct their home elsewhere. He further cites Paul White who argues, “Migration can be an outcome ‘of tensions between the individuals’ desires and opportunities – as a reflection of past circumstances and of expectations for the future.” When these new places do not meet the expectations of ‘homeliness’...the migrants move on once again. Hence the suggestion by Russel King et al, ‘once the [first act of] migration takes place, the migrant may never be quite sure where home is, ever again.’

Ismailis in East Africa are known to be the most Westernised group of Indians there. Agehananda Bharati claims in his essay ‘A Social Survey’ edited in *Portrait of a Minority: Asians in East Africa*, that Khoja Ismailis “are the most alienated from among the Indian groups, tending to keep aloof from the others. Moreover, they have succeeded in creating a separate identity in the alter-image of all other people in East Africa” (19). According to his survey, they do not adhere to the orthodox conventions of worship, and there is a strong tendency among other Muslims and Hindus in East Africa to suspect Ismailis, in general, of moral laxity.

This seems to be in consonance with Vassanji’s saying that one should be identified with one’s culture and history, not one’s faith. Religious flexibility, syncreticity and distinctiveness have been Vassanji’s inheritance from East Africa. His community has been ‘the epitome of western culture in an Asian milieu, especially the younger generation.’

Yash Tandon gives a different portrait of the community in his ‘A Political Survey’. He says:

In retrospect it would seem that if the Asians in East Africa had shown the same amount of exuberance for freedom, and if they had completely identified with the African aspirations, and still more if they had taken the initiative to start the struggle against colonialism even when the Africans were not ready themselves, then the Asians might have reserved for themselves a position of respect and leadership among the African today. (76)

Further, according to Tandon, these Asians were primarily traders focussing on the improvement of their economic fortunes. As such, British colonialism in East Africa was in their interest, which ensured them economic prosperity. But when the British Empire ended in this region, the Asians were dominated by a sense of fear and uncertainty at the prospect of independence.

As the Asians were a separate economic class with vested interests, and they constituted a minority immigrant community which could easily be identified as belonging to a different race altogether, it seemed as if two revolutions – economic and racial – had happened with the going away of the Europeans, and they found themselves at the other end of the stick. As a result, the Asians could not identify themselves with African nationalism absolutely. Tandon writes, “African nationalism was therefore black African nationalism, even though there were individual Asians who were genuinely in basic sympathy with the African aspirations. Self-determination was known and seen in racial terms by the Africans and not in purely national terms” (78). Black African nationalism is what Vassanji calls ‘black anger’ and ‘black power’ against which he has grievances. And, it is also correct that the Asians had to face some prejudice and injustice on the part of the Africans. Principles

of equality and fraternity were ignored. It can be said that the truth lies somewhere in-between.

However, Vassanji is engaged in rewriting history from his own perspective. He gives his own version, hiding plenty of other things and highlighting only some others. He seems to be acutely subjective as the discourses his narratives contain make a different world. He himself says that he does not have an objective voice.

Vassanji's characters carry a history with them. They mean nothing unless they have a history. It seems Vassanji bases his characterisation on Henry James' principles where character is incident and incident is character. There are several narratives within the narrative that are accounts of people's histories. Darcy narrates history of Pork Riots, his life history. Vassanji says, "Darcy was their past, a rich source of history, and there was a wholesomeness to sitting before him and listening to his stories" (*Amriika* 311). There is Ramji's grandmother's story; Michel narrates his story; Rumina narrates her life in Africa. Chapter three contains Ramji's own history, and there are some other accounts of historical happenings like, Zanzibar revolution, expelling of the Asians from Uganda. Vassanji is so much obsessed with history that even his characterisation is based on it.

About his obsessions with history and prying of roots and origins, Vassanji has written many comments in *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*. There he admits that there is a scientist and a mystic in his writings, and his is the way of history and fiction. He has undertaken to give history to a small people that is otherwise without any history. According to him, it reflects his deep dissatisfaction of incomplete migrations and a perpetual homelessness in his life. It is also to recreate that unorthodox communal culture that is in the process of extinction and reinvention

because of the exigencies of globalised living and modern politics. However, the ultimate purpose is to learn about his self by the way he connects to history.

There is a strong communal sense in the characters of the novel. They share history, culture, feelings and problems. They have one identity; they are one community overseas. Memories of 'lost home' and a keen sense of nostalgia for much that they identify themselves with are explicitly rendered between the lines. Rumina tells Ramji, "Let me teach you a game called Zanzibari Yes, he said, proudly, nostalgically" (150). Ramji so much remembers his home in Africa. Many things remind him of the world back home. The sea invokes a lot in him: he remembers Africa and India. This is how Rumina and Ramji chat at the sea-shore, "When was the last time you walked by the sea?" she said. "Twenty five years ago", he said. "I thought I had got it out of me, the sea Reminds me of home, a bit, but home is on the other side of the ocean, straight ahead of us" (282). This conversation shows how these immigrants from Africa remember and recollect home. Such an attitude is manifest in others also. In fact, the community tries to maintain its African culture; at least, these people want to retain some of their home culture. Grey woollen Indian waistcoat is a symbol of devotion to one's homeland; samples of Arabic calligraphy, wearing headscarves, taking African and Indian foods, a game of Bao, and speaking of Swahili are some indicators of their culture consciousness and that strong urgency of retaining their old culture to claim their history. They make strategies and take measures to ensure the welfare of their distinctive group in a host society. They do get-togethers to be in touch with one other and to celebrate their overseas existence, and to share their experiences. They even have their own place of worship. They are one ethnic, cultural and racial group. This is how Naaz expresses his feelings to Darcy, "– do you know how much effort we are putting into creating a good solid

image in this country?” (312). Making space and maintaining good image in the host society is inevitable for a diaspora community. These people have their national interests in mind also. Ramji says, “For me, there came the years of hard work, when I began to study the philosophy of science, while making annual guilt-ridden resolutions to go back to Africa, to do my bit for nation building” (164). It is not clear what he means by nation building. Does his ‘nation building’ include the Africans also? Or, it is the Asians in Africa only? However, it can be guessed rather bleakly that he means the welfare of the Asians in that region.

One more characteristic of this community is the generation gap. The children are not so much aware of their home culture. That difference is because of a different context and environment in which they are brought up and socialised. They integrate very easily and do not face such problems as their elders do. They do not suffer from homesickness and nostalgia; nor do they have any sense of loss.

A distinctive characteristic of this particular community is the figure of ‘*mukhi*’. He is a religious leader who helps the migrants and travellers of the community in his village; he is the village head-man also. He actually suggests the essential migratory trait of the community. There is a *mukhi* everywhere where there are the people of this community. He helps those of the community who happen to pass by, or reach late to settle there. He is the keeper of the flame. Vassanji writes about this character, “There is a *mukhi* in every town, village and city in the world where there is a Shamsi; he is an honorary consul, so to speak, an American Express officer, traveller’s aid, keeper of the flame” (28). It is he who sustains the communal sense, and gives a sort of unity to his community. In the communal character of this ethnic group, this character is the pivot.

And, Sona is the designated *mukhi* of their student community in Boston. He represents the intellectual of the community and has undertaken to know its roots, to reconstruct its past. In a sense, he is a link to the history and past of the community. Through this character Vassanji refers to history and historiography many times in the text. That implies his own project of using history in his fiction. He gives the community its burden of past, reminds it of its cultural and historical identity which turns out to be ambivalent lingering between multiple cultures and multiple histories.

This is a multicultural narrative. Basu takes Ramji and others to a wedding that highlights the hybrid nature of a diaspora community. Vassanji writes about this wedding, “One reason why Basu had brought them to this wedding in Torrance was to show them an exotic, “multicultural” event – an American wedding that was also Indian, and Hindu” (389). It is a wedding in which a Christian boy weds a Hindu girl, in other words, it is a marriage of two cultures.

The title ‘Amriika’, as the word is Indian pronunciation and idiom of America, or the Indianised version of it, carries within it both Indianness and American culture. It is a hybrid, an interstitial space where the Third World comes in contact with America, and the contact zone, a liminal space, where the immigrant negotiates his identity and belonging between multiple cultures, having ambivalent affiliations with them.

‘America is everywhere’; it just happens around Ramji. In its midst, Ramji and others belonging to the community maintain their distinctiveness and communal sense. They identify themselves with their history and culture. There are a good number of Swahili and African words in the text. Forinstance:

Ndizitamu; sansara; janjaara; vitumbua; nusu; mreno; santuri; ndugu; sala; muezzin; mpenzi; najua; ugali; kameez; mbaazi; ngoma; et cetera.

Ruminamimina / maziwanasukariis a Swahili riddle; *santuriis* an African musical instrument; *Jungbaris* the African name for Zanzibar. They greet in Swahili as: *karibu, karibusana*; and answer the greeting as: *ahsante*. Similarly, *kameezis* an African dress. They eat Indian and African foods like, Gujarati *thali, daals, biryani and pilau*. They have both African and English names: Ramji, Sona, Jamila and Zuli like African names, and Darcy, Nancy and Michel like English names.

They have their own community amidst all of America. They live just at the borders between the two cultures; rather they claim Indian culture also. The hybrid present (hybridity in terms of time) that they are contains multiple histories and multiple cultures. In modern approaches to postcolonialism, hybridity is regarded to be the key element of postcolonial theory.

The novel has some modern appeal also. It has its relevance to the world politics prevailing now. Though written before the event of 9/11 which happened in 2001, it is said to be the precursor of 9/11 and its aftermath. Whether that is coincidental or not, the narrative certainly contains a political portion akin to that event. Vassanji writes, “Zayd was currently covering for *Inqalab* the trial of a blind Muslim cleric who was being held on suspicion of instigating the bombing of the World Trade Centre building in New York City. He had just returned from Manhattan, excited by news of the cleric’s previous association with the CIA” (*Amriika*301).

On the 11th of September 2001, two towers of the World Trade Centre come down to make way for Ground Zero, and a political wave blows throughout the world,

described commonly as “war on terror”. This war is a universal war waged for an indefinite time. It can take in its hold any place (mostly, perhaps only, the Third World countries) and at any time. It has its own mechanism and mode of operation.

Derek Gregory, in his book *The Colonial Present*¹, contends that the ‘war on terror’ is the return of colonialism, only this time ‘the white man’s burden’ is on the shoulders of Uncle Sam. He regards it as one of the central modalities through which the colonial present is articulated. Gregory writes, “...what else is the war on terror other than the violent return of the colonial past, with its split geographies of “us” and “them,” “civilisation” and “barbarism,” “Good” and “Evil”?” (11). According to him, colonialism was always as much about making other peoples’ geographies as it was about making other peoples’ histories. He works out how the apparatus of 9/11 helped colonial powers to devise these ‘imaginary geographies’. He writes:

. . . ‘America’ and ‘Afghanistan’, ‘Israel’ and ‘Palestine’ were jointly produced through the performance of imaginative geographies in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington on September 11, 2001. I also explore the ways in which America took advantage of those same attacks and mobilised those same imaginative geographies (or variants of them) to wage another war on Iraq in the Spring of 2003. (19)

According to Gregory, the attack on America on 9/11 is seen as an attack on humanity² itself; it has been universalised. It has resulted in the reconfiguration of terrorism as a single global force that simultaneously cancels out other forms of terrorism and creates the enemy as a totality that was to be vanquished in the interest of a universalism that is embodied in the American nation.

Repeating the era of Vietnam War, protests are organised on university campuses in America itself and in many countries of Europe. Communism gives way to Terrorism, and in lieu of ‘the domino theory’ there is simply the ‘war on terror’. Gregory writes, “As Cambridge University’s Campaign Against Sanctions in Iraq put it, ‘suffering is not an unintentional side effect of sanctions. It is their aim. Sanctions are instruments of coercion and they coerce by causing hardship’” (178). According to Gregory, the colonial present is the continuum of the colonial past. He says, “In a hideously real sense the Gulf War that ‘never took place’ never ended either . . .” (170). After Sep. 11 Bush was certain who ‘they’ were and his new found certainty . . . reactivated the interpretative dispositions of the Cold War: ‘the sense of endangerment ascribed to all the activities of the other³, the fear of internal challenge and subversion, the tendency to militarise all responses, and the willingness to draw the lines of superiority between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (48). That is how the aftermath of 9/11 has not been so different than the Cold War.

American stance in the Vietnam War finds continuity in the Desert Storm and the Operation Infinite Reach. In Vassanji’s narrative, the Muslim cleric is held responsible for the bombing of the World Trade Centre, and the bombing of the book store is instrumental to draw attention to Islamic extremism and fundamentalism, as a result of which Michel is shot dead in an encounter and his two compatriots are arrested. The publication of K Ali’s book followed by the bombing of the book store is political tactics in which a certain religion is made target in compliance with the American interests in the Middle East and Iran.

The novel has three main parts:

1. Schrodinger’s cat

2. A Grand Reunion
3. Phantom Obsessions

Each of them has an epigraph. Time is given differently for each part. There is no continuity in time. The first part is set in 1968 – 1970. After that there is a huge gap, and the second part is set in 1993; then there is some more gap, and the final part is set in 1994 – 1995. These intermissions are part of the narrative. They are meant to give compression and density to the text. The time periods in which the narrative is set help the author with a historical framework within which the experiences and growth of the characters happen. The turbulent era of the Vietnam War, many historical phenomena that happen in Africa, the Gulf War and its aftermath are some of the historical elements that make the outline of the narrative.

There is a prologue ‘Beginnings . . .’ in the start. It is a sort of introduction (or induction) hinting at Vassanji’s roots and identity. It suggests the nature of his community’s immigration and diaspora experiences abroad. It also hints at the essential and innate migratory behaviour of the community. It describes America as ‘a promised land’ where they will find the final avatar of Vishnu thereby relating it with faith and fate.

The novel has a grand epigraph from Walt Whitman. It is very suggestive. It hints at the disillusionment that the immigrant reaches in the host society. The lines: “But where is what I started for so long ago? And why is it yet unfound?” – these two questions suggest what the immigrant wonders about. When he, in the end, does not find the ‘promised land’, the home, the larger world not so large for him, he falls into the space in-between.

This epigraph sets tone for the novel. It corresponds with the themes and nature of narrative – the immigrant genre. It also points to the core issues in the novel: the community’s seeking the saviour in the west, not finding him and futility of the quest.

These epigraphs can be read as other writers’ influence on Vassanji. Or, we can say, Vassanji has done a profound research and reading for writing this novel. He himself says, “. . . writing for me is not just writing, it’s also reading. So I do a lot of research in the sense that I read books” (The Exchange). That means there are many more writers present in his narratives. He confirms the influence of Joseph Conrad in terms of his relocating home in his fiction, and Fyodor Dostoevsky in terms of his multidimensional narratives. However, Vassanji, in this novel, starts with Walt Whitman; we can find John Donne, Frantz Fanon, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul also in this text.

There is an allusion to John Donne: “I loved you, Ginnie, I loved you...in so many ways. My new found land – remember that poem I sent you, highlighting the lines” (396). T. S. Eliot’s famous ‘The Waste Land’ starts with the famous line, ‘April is the cruellest month’, and it is there in *Amriika*: “April is the cruellest month, yes, but for sheer doomsday bleakness, for gut-wrenching, soul-searing emptiness, you can’t surpass Christmas” (48). There is yet another allusion to this poem of Eliot: “Spring brings forth protests on campus – loud reckless rebellion against the war in Vietnam . . .” (65). The reader can find Fanon: “But Ramji was convinced that the concerns of his co-principals for the wretched of the earth were genuine” (295). Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of one’s Own* and V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas* are also hinted at: “Now that I had a place of my own, I thought of inviting my grandmother to come and visit” (165). Salman Rushdie is referred to like this: “If that

other satanic author had received his due –” (304). Here Vassanji seems to set a parallel between Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* and K. Ali’s *101 Letters*. According to him, both are a case of religious dissent. At the other place: “Ramji recalled the time a few years before, when a death sentence was pronounced on a certain internationally renowned author for his published writing.” This is a reference to Iranian Ayatullah Khamini’s death sentence on Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*. By invoking this historical event, Vassanji is at work to convince the reader of the gravity of religious dissent in the case of K. Ali’s *101 Letters*.

William Shakespeare’s line: ‘What revels are in hand?’ from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* appears as the epigraph to *A Grand Reunion*, and there is a mention of *Julius Caesar*: “. . . lines from *Julius Caesar* – appropriate political drama for Africa during the decade of the popular dictators” (270). Through *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Vassanji convinces the reader of the nature of those periodic celebrations and parties in one of which he falls in love with Rumina, and he gives *Julius Caesar* as an example for the political situation in the countries of East Africa.

William Blake’s comment on John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that Milton is on the side of the devil without knowing it, can be worked out of Vassanji’s narrative: “. . . the journal is political, polemical; its position is deliberately antagonistic. It’s the devil’s advocate – although I shouldn’t use that term, it puts us on the side of the devil – and that is precisely because we work with certain presumptions about power politics in the world – and how information is controlled” (276). There is also an allusion to a painting called ‘water under the bridge’: “What of our love for each other, what of all those promises and plans we made together? Simply water under the bridge?” (406).

Vassanji gives a lot of bookish information in this novel. He has read so much on African history, literary genres, literary techniques; he knows about Einstein, Eliot and Huxley (126-27) and The Divine Anand Mission in Boston. He is very much conscious of his form. Historically, the content of the novel spans 27 years, from 1968 to 1995. These are the years of Ramji's immigrant life in the States. So extensive a sloop, Vassanji takes some intermissions. However, certain things give the narrative continuity. The character of Ramji is the most significant of them. He is the pivot on which the whole gamut of the novel revolves. With him begins the novel, and it develops with him and finally ends with him. The second factor is the diaspora nature of the narrative. Diaspora experiences prevail throughout the length of the narrative. The third thread running all through the novel is American imperialism. Starting with the Vietnam war, American aggression is at work in the Gulf War and its aftermath, the targeting of Muslims as extremists and fundamentalists, the World Trade Centre bombing and its consequences. The presence of America, American culture, society and politics, a sense of Americanness in and around these immigrants is also a unifying factor in this novel. Memories of home, nostalgia for the world left behind, and many obsessions with the past also give it unity. Ramji's sense of guilt and betrayal and failure makes a thread of continuity running through all of Vassanji's fiction.

Vassanji uses a good number of technical and literary terms which show his knowledge of literary form and literary art. For instance:

1. Oxymoron (218)
2. An impressionistic haze (220)
3. Nostalgia (237)
4. Exoticism (239)

5. Irony (269)
6. Symbolism (270)
7. High objectivity (294)
8. The wretched of the earth (295)
9. Nostalgia and academic analyses (296)
10. Narrative; narrative form (351)

The use of these terms within the text hints at his being aware of diaspora literature and literary form. He is conscious of his writing techniques, and his narratives are a conscious effort and labour. Metaphor, simile, allegory and irony are the most common literary devices Vassanji uses in his fiction. Rhetorical questions are very widely used. Symbols and images are also there in his narratives. There is verbal irony in the following excerpt: “. . . little did he know that one day he would take a ride on just such a bus and emerge in New York” (19). Vassanji’s wit and use of irony is clear from the following: “They always invite you. Americans are kind” (49). One another example of irony is: “But after independence we didn’t have segregation anymore,” he concludes” (75). There is a sort of cosmic irony prevalent in all of Vassanji’s fiction which gives it a tinge of pessimism that Fate never favours his community, and the individual immigrant, in spite of its move to the west. He has grievances against history, fate, gods and men. Even though he shuns gods, he cannot do without portents and symbols.

Schrödinger’s cat is a simile exemplifying the immigrant’s state in the host society vis-a-vis his home. The El Dorado is a metaphor used for a futile quest. Vassanji describes his going to the States in search of certainty, happiness as the Eldorado. Ocean, sea and quest are used as symbols and motifs. Generally ocean and sea symbolise life, here, they seem to symbolise distant past and uncertainty. Quest

symbolises the immigrant's desire for assimilation which ultimately results in nothing more than liminality. Home and past are motifs. They occur again and again. Vassanji is obsessed with them. They actually occupy the immigrant's unconscious and surface with some nostalgia.

Mostly the novel is rendered by the third person narrator, the omniscient narrator who knows everything about Ramji and his community, his history, roots and origins. However, his knowledge is very much determined by his pedagogy, his bookish knowledge. Vassanji switches to the first person narrator at some places with a certain urgency to express some immediacy of experiences. Some of the text (160-169) is entirely narrated by Ramji and is subjective, his personal feelings, no authorial intrusion. So, it is lyrical and highlights his participation in the experiences. In some other text (256, 260, 266 and 269), the first person narrator can be found there. Similarly, some more of it (page 405 onwards) is all narrated by the first person narrator. The prologue 'Beginnings...' is also said by the first person narrator.

This switching of the point of view (to the first person narrator) highlights the personal note and immediacy of the experience. It reinforces the postcoloniality, or the diasporic nature, of the novel, for these experiences are not far-fetched, but experienced by the protagonist himself. Also, using the mode of memory is in compliance with the first person point of view. There are some instances of direct narration also. They are the rendering of the narrator's mental state and introspection. For instance:

I don't believe in murder or assassination for any cause, but when I heard of your father's killing, I quietly celebrated: a warm feeling in the heart, like a glass of eggnog on a chilly December night. Can you

believe that, Rumina? I could have stood a round of drinks were I so inclined, I felt like running out into the street and shouting for joy, O my wish has been fulfilled, someone finally went and got one of those lecherous bastards. And it is his daughter I'm making love to
(289)

It is a sort of interior monologue. Rumina does not know this, but the reader does. There are similar instances of this direct narration (291, 296, 336, 366 and 382). All these passages are written in italics, and are directly taken from the mind of the protagonist, Ramji. Some of the narrative is in epistolary mode. There is a letter written by Lucy Anne to Ramji (410). It is when Ramji gets known to people in general with the encounter in his apartment that Lucy learns about him, and she writes to him. Vassanji has given the letter full in its original format.

Vassanji's form and content are in agreement. He is not consistent and certain in his form – no linear and straightforward structure is there – so is his protagonist, Ramji, in his immigrant life. Ramji has never been unequivocal; he has always suspended in ambiguity and ambivalent affiliations; he has never belonged to one world entirely.

Invoking history to construct a hybrid narrative is a postcolonial act, so is writing the immigrant experience. Vassanji recollects his past to pry out his roots and origins; thereby he gets connected with his home in India and Africa. He identifies himself not with faith, but with history and culture. In an interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, Vassanji says about his fiction:

. . . . And it is also a way of testing how intimate a relationship can be, how much of the past can be shed so that something new emerges. And

the conclusion seems to be that there were still too many obstacles. The past was still too close for that type of relationship to flourish. The characters cannot shed their histories. (26)

That is what happens to the narrator of *The Gunny Sack*, Kala, and so happens to Nurdin in *No New Land*. Vassanji says, “A similar thing happens in *No New Land* with the character Nurdin. Here again he wants to reach out, but his past does not let him go. So at the end he is again a very helpless character” (26). And, the same happens to Ramji. He cannot develop a lasting relationship with Rumina. Although he puts the past behind him, and takes the menace out of it, yet the relationship does not sustain. He has to hide Michel in his apartment only because he has a past, an identity, is one of them and belongs to his community.

Ramji has grievances against history and fate. History comes in his way, hampers his relations with the new world. In Vassanji’s narratives, history emerges and re-emerges to make a cultural hybrid, and push the protagonist into the space of liminality, between two worlds with which he maintains ambivalent affiliations, and always remains unequivocal and uncertain. History takes him to the world of his ancestors, and his heart grows heavy with portents and symbols, and a sense of betrayal and guilt despite his losing faith to scientific reason and living in the world of positive logic and experimentation.

About fate, Vassanji says:

I suppose that is a view of life, that growing up is to grow up disappointed. At least for me growing up has meant that, although some would consider me very successful. Especially for someone from my background, the world did what, in fact, it had to, and we were

almost completely helpless. It made you somehow think of fate as something that you had no control of I think having been brought up in the colonies and having no control over my independence, or the policies of the government, etc. I realised that all these factors determine what would happen to a person. (27)

It seems here that history and fate are inter-related; Vassanji relates the political issues of Africa with those invisible forces that operate upon man. History determines fate, and fate, in turn, determines history. Whatever, Ramji has grievances against both of them, and his fate is that he is helpless in the end wanting the woman approaching him round the bend with a familiar quick walk to be the woman he has lost. Here history is reduced to a mere allegory. It just exemplifies a situation in which human beings strive for the best but they always fail because of their conditions and environment, social, cultural and political. And, we see Vassanji going beyond history, where history serves as a figure of speech in the narrative mechanism of his fiction.

Paying some attention to Ramji's claims of Africa as his 'home', Vassanji seems to highlight certain things and conceal a lot. Godwin Siundu, as explained earlier, has perforated Vassanji's claims of East Africa being his home. Other historians also hold certain views which somehow substantiate Siundu's position. J. S. Mangat says in his book, *A History of the Asians in East Africa*, ". . . the Indians were described as mere 'birds of passage' who had no thought of settling down in Zanzibar" (22). In German East Africa also, as in Kenya, the Indians were said to have no interest in becoming permanent settlers but only thought of returning to India with their savings. This argument had been a campaign of the Europeans against the Asians in the region. How much of it was true and how much false, that is not the

point; the point is the Indians reinforced imperialism and colonialism in the region. Mangat writes, “The fact that the Indians served the interests of colonial policy, thus helped their penetration of the interior . . .” (97). They helped the British to build Kenya-Uganda railway which was vital to the spread of colonialism. They set up small shops in remote areas of the interior and supplied the British and other European explorers necessary commodities. Mangat mentions a comment which hints at the imperial ambitions of India in East Africa after the going away of the British. This attitude of the Indians is also mentioned in Robert G. Gregory. About the Asians’ social and cultural interaction with their African neighbours, Mangat writes: “The process of social change among the Asians was, however, largely held in check by their growing isolation in East Africa. This was a historical legacy, for the Asian community had from the earliest times occupied a rather anomalous position” (175).

Robert G. Gregory cites Frederick D. Lugard as having said in 1893, “It is not as imported coolie labour that I advocate the introduction of the Indian, but as a colonist and settler” (48). According to Gregory, the axiom ‘trade follows the railway’ is more useful than ‘trade follows the flag’ in summarising the history of Indian settlement in the East Africa protectorate. And, Lyttelton described East Africa as ‘natural outlet for Indian emigration’ (74). Similarly, referring to Harry H. Johnston, Gregory writes, “East Africa is, and should be, from every point of view, the America of the Hindu” (96). Delineating race relations in Africa Gregory further writes, “In November 1919 when it was evident that the territory would become a mandate under the supervision of the League of Nations, the East Africa Indian National Congress ‘respectfully’ prayed the league and the mandatory power ‘to reserve the said territory for the purpose of Indian colonisation” (159).

Gregory has so much emphasis laid on the fact that East Africa was a colony of the Indians, or at least, they had colonial ambitions in that region. In Vassanji's narratives, the Indians do not celebrate independence of these countries. They keep aloof and show sheer indifference toward political revolutions of any kind. As such, they do not take part in the building of the nation states that undermines their claims to East Africa as 'home'.

However, there is the other side also. Mangat writes, "The Indians continued, however, largely as an act of faith to support the demands of African nationalism" (177). They played immensely great roles in the economic development of the region. But after independence, the Africans were unwilling to accept the Asians on equal terms within their nationalist movement. And, Africanisation marred everything. Mangat writes:

The resulting pressures of Africanisation in public and private employment, the problem of choosing between an East African citizenship or an expatriate status, and the recurrent danger of their being used as a 'scapegoat' posed a major dilemma for the Asians in East Africa. It seemed that their future in East Africa would be as difficult as their past. (87)

Vassanji's claims of East Africa, as his home itself, are ambiguous. There are reservations on all sides – all is murky, nothing is very clear.

Notes

1. Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present* has been cited rather widely only to substantiate the relevance of *Amriika* to our times. Gregory develops his idea of colonialism in the present in the context of the political and military adventures of the US and its allies around the world, particularly in the Middle East and Afghanistan, after the event of 9/11. Though colonialism is a taboo in our times, there are others who also agree about the imperialist role of the US, like Hardt and Negri in their *Empire*. So, an effort has been made to make clear the imperialist stance of the US through a detailed reference of *The Colonial Present* so that the 9/11 and its aftermath can be related to the political crises in the text of *Amriika*.
2. Gregory refers to Salman Rushdie saying, "To this bright capital, the forces of invisibility have dealt a dreadful blow" (49). He also cites George Bush, the then president of the States, as saying, "This is a conflict with opponents who believe they are invisible. Yet they are mistaken" (49). This 'invisible enemy' is located through the creation of these 'imaginary geographies' whereby he is made available as an appropriate target of hatred and military power. And, such recognition of the enemy is always at once imaginative and performative. In other words, making the enemy visible is more than a technocultural achievement, and it requires the production and performance of other imaginative geographies.
3. Gregory depicts how the event of 9/11 was used, manipulated and manoeuvred to create that enemy on the other side in the psyche of common people. He writes, "'Imagine a Sep. 11 with weapons of mass destruction', Rumsfeld warned on CBS television's 'Face The Nation'. 'It's not three thousand – it's

tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children” (185). According to him, in these and other ways 9/11 was repeatedly appropriated as a tactics to further the project of the colonial powers, and the ‘war on terror’ provided a welcome blanket of geopolitical disguise.

Works Cited

- Blunt, Alison and Varley, Ann. "Geographies of Home." *Cultural Geographies* 11. 3-6 (2004). Sage Journals. Web. 11 Nov. 2012.
- Ghai, Dharam P. ed., *Portrait of a Minority: Asians in East Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University P, 1965. Print.
- Gregory, Derek. *The Colonial Present*. Blackwell, 2005. Print.
- Gregory, Robert G. *India and East Africa: A History of Race Relations Within the British Empire (1890 – 1939)*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1971. Print.
- Kanaganyakam, Chelva. "Broadening the Substrata: An Interview with M.G. Vassanji". *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 31. 2 (1991): 19 – 35. Web. 11 Nov. 2009.
- Mangat, J. S. *A History of the Asians in East Africa 1886 – 1945*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1969. Print.
- Siundu, Godwin. "The Unhomliness of Home: Asian Presence and Nation Formation in M.G. Vassanji's Works" *Africa Insight* 35. 2 (2005): 15-25. Print.
- "The Exchange: MG Vassanji" (19 Feb. 2010). Serengetia Advisers. Web. 18 Aug 2012.
- Vassanji, M.G. *Amriika*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1999. Print.
- . *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 2009. Print.