

Chapter 3

Rewriting (Reconstructing) the Past Piecemeal

Uhuru Street

Uhuru Street contains sixteen stories. The first nine belong to pre-independence period and the last seven to post independence period. There is a gradual development in the sequence of the stories; the individual stories though complete in themselves form one whole wherein the narrative develops beginning from the pre- independence calm and sense of homeliness through certain shades of change just before the leaving of the British to the racial hostilities and dominance of the African ethnic groups over social, political, economic and cultural domains, and the eventual leaving of Asians from East Africa. The tone begins with familiarity, satisfaction and belongingness and gradually proceeds to one of gloom, fear, apprehension, loss and alienation.

Uhuru Street is not just a street, but a point where many worlds meet and interact. It is a contact zone, an amalgam of cultures. The short stories depict life of Indian immigrants amid the Europeans and the Africans. This life is lived around Uruhu Street formerly called Kichwele Street. The change of its nomenclature indicates changes in the political atmosphere of the place which eventually brings in many other changes which turn out to be fatal for the Indians living around Uhuru Street. Vassanji says in the Foreword of the story collection: “The stories in this volume are about the Indians of Uhuru Street during these years of change.” Actually, these stories are about the Indians living amid the Africans and the Europeans, and trace the effects of many political changes of nation making in East Africa on these Indians, thereby forming a history or alternate history of them.

These stories delineate personalities and characters of many individual characters who have some history associated with them and are known in the locality due to their typical behaviour. Their characters or histories are similes for general behaviour of the type. For example, Ali, in a way, represents general African

behaviour. And, the murder of that Indian woman in ‘What Good Times We Had’ is an example of Indian victimisation. For that matter, these historical events and incidents, given piecemeal, function as metaphors and allegories. That way personal history of some characters gets extended to form the collective history of cultures and groups. In this context, Devika Khanna Narula writes in *South Asian Diaspora: History, Memory and Identity in Canadian Fiction*:

. . . the local and the regional are laid stress upon in the face of the universal and global, and culture, the idealistic universal concept, is replaced by cultures, so that historiography is itself being conceived in terms of collective discourses. Thus, the short story cycle becomes a very effective vehicle for presenting the ‘history’ of a people since through individual short stories with their different and collective narratives, it becomes possible to build up, with imaginative rendering, the ‘history’ of a community. (65)

Vassanji creates a historical situation in East Africa wherein the British leave the area and the Indians suddenly come under the hands of the Africans who take their independence as their racial and political revolution that guarantees their economic, political and cultural dominance; subsequently, they suppress Indian presence in East Africa.

These different stories are on different themes related to one main issue – the immigrant community of Indians in East Africa. That is the most significant unifying factor in the story cycle. The stories are like different episodes of a linear plot that has time gaps. Through such narratives, Vassanji negotiates his identity and belonging in the domain of the immigrant genre.

Uhuru Street, formerly called Kichwele Street, as depicted in the short stories is a place in Dar-es-Salam of Tanzania where many cultures and ethnic groups come together. They live along Kichwele Street which runs from the hinterland up to the coast, wherefrom once Indian settlers arrived in Africa after Vasco-da-Gama discovered the sea-route to India in 1498. The street, though a confluence of many races and ethnicities, provides discreet and distinguished locations for each of them according to their social, political and economic status. There is an obvious compartmentalization of society. Vassanji gives the picture of the street as:

Once upon a time Uhuru Street was called Kichwele Street. The change marked a great event in the country. 'Uhuru' means 'independence'. This street of independence ran through the city. It began in the hinterland of exclusively African settlements, came downtown lined by Indian shops, and ended at the ocean. Here, where ocean liners came from distant lands, where a German ship was sunk to prevent a British warship from coming up close, where dhows once brought traders from Cutch and Kathiawad and Oman when the Trade Winds allowed, where the new quays were named after Princess Margaret after the old ones were destroyed by fire, Uhuru Street met the world. (Foreword, xi)

From this passage, it is clear that the hinterland is 'exclusively' the realm of the Africans. It is not accessible to other ethnic groups only because for them reaching for the hinterland is a taboo. Geographically, it is an area of difficult terrain, dense vegetation and fierce animals and insects that carry disease. This area is prone to many dangers from man and nature. It is on the far end of the street and far away from the coast where different civilizations from the outer larger world come in contact

with the street. *It is reserved for the savages of the forest, who are uncultured, uncivilized and inferior in all respects and do not know (and do not need to know) the application of modern technologies.* They are economically, politically and socially backward. They do not have any part in business and economic sector of the land. The lines of shops in the street belong to the Indians, and political power is in the hands of the Europeans. The Africans are mere *servants* who are believed to be vicious, mean and dishonest in the sense that African servants do steal from their masters' homes. They commit gory crimes of raping and murdering the Indian women by fraud and deceit. They are black not only in their skin but in their actions also. Nobody trusts them. Their culture, whatever they have, is lowlier and does not interest others by any means. So they claim the portion of the street that is close to the forest and away from the coast.

The Indians from Cutch and Kathiawad and the Arabs from Oman have taken separate portions of the street in the downtown. These two ethnic groups are mainly traders and predominantly cover the economic sector of the country. They, particularly the Indians, are better than the Africans in all respects. Their social and economic condition is better. They are superior to the Blacks. They keep distance from the mainstream and maintain their own culture, and thus hold their ties with India strong and fast. This point is clear from the text as the narrator says in 'In the Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon', "The last strains of Akashwani on the airwaves from India mingle with the smell of hot ghee, fried onions and saffron that wafts down from people's homes" (01). Strains of Akashwani (All India Radio) and smell of hot ghee, fried onions and saffron are marks of Indian culture and ethos. Indian immigrants in East Africa are not ready for acculturation and assimilation. They are not willing to pick up any of the local culture. Instead, they set up walls and barriers

whereby they manage to establish their own communal world. This is how a bride and groom are greeted in the traditional Hindu way when they enter home just after having performed the rituals of marriage: “A shower of rice fell upon us at the doorstep as she greeted us in the traditional way, cracked her knuckles against our heads for luck, and pushed sweets into our mouths” (8-9). These passages from within the text make it clear that the Indians of Kichwele Street are very conscious of maintaining their own ways, their own culture. There are other scholars and researchers who also substantiate this point. Yash P. Ghai writes in ‘The Future Prospects’ about the communal sense of the Indians:

On the social level, the colonial compartmentalized system suited the Asian temperament. The 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. The Asians wanted to be left alone to pursue their own traditional ways and thus to maintain their culture. (Ghai132)

The Asians of East Africa maintain their cultural and religious identity. They follow Indian religions and show their alliance with some Indian sects and organisations. They even have the RSS in East Africa; the Ramakrishna Mission works there also. Through the enactment of various laws (personal laws), the Asians manage to preserve the cultural identity of their communities. However, inter-communal and inter-racial contacts do not occur.

Do the Asians display the same attitude toward the Europeans? No. Though the Indians are a mote in the eye of the Europeans, who also propagate many

derogatory epithets to describe the Indians, and the latter create many problems in the way of the former, this case seems to be different. The Indians do not keep distance from the Europeans in the way they do with the Blacks. Yash P. Ghai makes clear the Indian standpoint in these words:

It is surprising that there was not more resentment of the superior status and racial arrogance of the Europeans. In a curious way, the Asians had come to believe in the myth of white superiority. The pyramidal racial structure was sometimes taken too much for granted; it was proper and inevitable that in the order of things the white men should be at the apex. Rather as a corollary of this attitude, and, partly as a rationalization of the better economic, social and political status of the Asians compared with that of the Africans, the Asians began to believe that the Africans were inferior to themselves. (Ghai 132-33)

The Asians, though not all and always, mimic the ways of the Europeans. Most prominently KhojaIsmailis, *the community to which Vassanji belongs*, adopt European style. Their women wear western dresses and indulge in liberal behaviour. The Ismailis are thought to be “the epitome of western culture in an Asian milieu” (Ghai 59). Their religious outlook has also changed radically. Their religion has given way to the western culture and western ways which are so readily adopted by the decree of their religious head to modernise their sect. And, consequently, this communal group is the most westernised and the most modernised of all Indian communities in East Africa. Daniel Akoto, the African professor of Sociology from Ghana, in ‘Breaking Loose’ says to Yasmin, the young Indian girl, “. . . truly colonized . . . mesmerized . . . more so than the African I dare say.” According to the

professor, the Indians are westernised, mesmerised with the western culture. And truly Yasmin does not know anything about her India. In reaction to Akoto, the African, she acknowledges her origins and identity.

The point of this argument so far is that in “The crazy world of our daily associations – of Arabs, Africans, Asians and assorted half-castes” (*Uhuru Street* 35) there are no cultural contacts, and it is the Europeans only who are at the apex of the pyramid of racial standards, thus, capable of being copied, and the Africans are inferior to all of them.

As for the growth and development of inter-racial relations with the Africans, the Indians do not seem to have been so flexible. There is not considerable mixing of the two ethnic groups. Especially, before the leaving of the British colonial rule, the Africans are servants and drivers to the Asians. So, there is a relationship of master-servant between the two groups. In another role, the Asians are traders and shopkeepers and the Africans are customers and consumers. The relationships are, thus, defined mostly in economic terms.

The Asians take the Africans as their servants and assistants. They are better than the Africans in economic and political terms. They own almost all economic sources, especially trade and commerce of the country. All the shops and trading units belong to them. Under the umbrella of British and German colonialism, the Indians dominate all business, and finance many projects of the colonial governments. As such, they are close to the governments also and enjoy more political power and influence than the indigenous Africans.

This privileged position of the Asians gives them an edge over the Blacks, and they come on a higher rung in social hierarchy. Corresponding to the colonial

compartmentalisation of society and the taste for the Hindu caste system, the Asians act as masters and the Blacks do the menial jobs. Ali is the prototype of the Black servant. The narrator says about African servants, “When Ali came to work for us, we were in the throes of domestic disruption. His predecessor had failed to show up after borrowing thirty shillings to add to what little remained of his salary at month’s end, and for a few weeks we were at the mercy of a spate of temporaries who could not be relied on for their honesty or their work” (12). Ali’s predecessors, surely African, have set an example of dishonesty of the Blacks. Temporary servants are sent back and told not to return. Jobs like washing of clothes, ironing them, cooking food, cleaning latrines etc. aren’t handled by the Asians themselves. They have the Africans available for them. It is their low economic status and no political power that makes them available for such menial jobs for the Indians and the Europeans.

Broad description of Ali has been given; he has been described as “a proper *mshamba*— a man from the farms, from the interior” (13). His hair is ruffled and thick. He is barefoot with broken toenails and fissured soles. Most of all, he is coal black. He is accepted as ‘the servant’ for he “looks honest”. And, this is how Remtibai proceeds to grill the African to know if he can be a “prospective servant”: ““Can you sweep? she would ask a nervous applicant. Can you do beds? Can you cook *biryani*? Come on, tell me how! My sons, when they return from work, require a clean house, like those of the Europeans. Do you clean latrines? Yes Mama, yes Mama, yes Mama, he would answer; and then, only if she liked him, she’d come out with: ‘And *can you steal?* (emphasis added)’” (14). Ali, the African servant, is stupid also. He sips hot tea from the spout of the teapot to taste its sugar, and holds the plug of an electric iron in his outstretched hand waiting for the current to flow from his body to heat the iron. He is uncultured and does not know how gadgets work – a proper *mshamba*.

Though Ali is indispensable for the Indian family, his being in the house so long is suspected and the motive is at once detected. He is caught peeping at naked Mehroon, the narrator's sister, and is dismissed immediately. So, even Ali like honest Black servant does not prove to be so honest as to stay for a long time in an Indian family. Elais, another African, follows Ali and stays longer. Someone else follows Elais, and that someone is followed by someone, and so on, always an African. This is how the Africans come in contact with the Indians.

Idi, Nurmohamed's African driver, uses the toilet meant for the Indians several times, and is caught one day emerging out of it by his master's wife and bawled out. The narrator says about Idi, "So it was the wall for him, or one of the row of toilets in the mosque courtyard, where he could sneak in unseen. Wait, he had thought then, smarting from the insult. We'll have our day" (52). It is Idi's social, economic and political status that determines his role in this colonial set up where the European is at the top, the Indian in the middle and the African at the bottom. In this set up, it is inevitable for the African to do these jobs, and act and live lowlier than others. They are servants, labourers, porters and customers. They act as guides in the forest and lead foreigners into the hinterland, their home; they are the guides that can't be trusted for their honesty. It is only to this extent that inter-communal and inter-racial relations between the Asians and the Africans grow and develop in East Africa before the independence of these countries.

After the colonial order is gone, the British have left and the Africans have come in power, Idi has his day. The quiet of Sunday afternoons gives way to the sounds of nights. The Africans take their revolution socially, politically, economically and racially. They exclude other races from their nation building and give their race the topmost position. They take away from the Asians what the colonial order has

given them. 'What Good Times We Had' is a glimpse of their racial aggression. 'Leaving' is a paradigm of cultural intolerance. The Indians leave East Africa but do not (and cannot) assimilate with the Africans who demand cultural integration from them. However, 'Breaking Loose' is a rare instance where an Indian girl chooses an African groom, and it is nevertheless *breaking loose*. The girl's parents and others of the community do not approve of this renouncing of tribalism.

There are not any considerable inter-racial contacts between the Indians and the Africans. The Indians maintain their communal, ethnic and cultural identity and keep distance from the Africans. They do not give space to them, instead, regard them as inferior to them and deserving the treatment they receive in the colonial order.

Getting clues from the 'Foreword' it can be said that the writer is concerned with the political changes that initiate social and economic changes also in East Africa and affect the Asians. The writer says, "Over the years Uhuru Street changed its looks; so did Dar, so did the country. The stories in this volume are about the Indians of Uhuru Street during these years of change" (Foreword, xii). Kichwele Street comes to be called Uhuru Street with the most significant historical development of independence of Tanganyika. This change of nomenclature of the street refers to the historical situation in the country in the colonial order and after its end in the country. As described earlier, the colonial order is in the interest of the Asians and other settlers in East Africa. It gives them political protection and greater opportunity to thrive and settle in the area, and lesser chances of opposition and competition from the indigenous populations. They get a privileged position which eventually benefits them to be better than the native Africans.

However, after the British are gone, and the rule of the country is in the hands of the Blacks, circumstances change which subsequently turn upside down everything in the country. The Africans take their independence not only as a political revolution but a racial revolution also. Through Africanisation, every position is held by the Blacks. Through nationalisation, economic sources, business establishments, trading units etc. are taken by the African governments. The Blacks achieve power and confidence. Now they confront settlers boldly, and are bent to take revenge on them – on those *bloodsuckers and exploiters, those who would grab every penny from them, those who helped colonialism to spread and take strong roots in this region, those who treated the Blacks very badly.*

The narrator moves to Upanga Street, along with his family, which seems quiet except for the croaking of frogs and the chirping of insects. Aloo, the narrator's brother, an Indian student, is not given the subjects of his choice in his African college. Racial discrimination seeps to this level also. He wants to go to America for higher studies. But Indian mothers fear sending their children abroad lest they lose them to some western girl or boy and they settle there forever. So does Aloo's mother, but Aloo is finally sent to America. The narrator concludes 'Leaving' with aphoristic statements, "A bird flapping its wings: Mr. Velji nodding wisely in his chair, Mother staring into the distance" (78). Aspiring Indian students going to Europe and America on scholarships in a wave that surged after independence do not think they have any future in Africa now. So do Indian businessmen and other settlers. They take their savings with them and leave the region quietly and stealthily. They take with them whatever they can and leave behind the rest in East Africa where they have lived so long.

With independence starts African cultural revival. The authentic African literature gets prominence. Daniel Akoto, a professor of sociology from Ghana, in 'Breaking Loose' presents his theory about African literature, "It is at present digging up the roots", he said. And that's what he was trying to do. Dig. "So you can understand my obsession with authenticity. Even my name is a burden, an imposition" (85). Africanisation of culture, language and literature is what the postcolonial Tanganyika is up to. The Blacks demand cultural integration from the Indians also. They do not term it as assimilation and acculturation, but just *integration* which the Indians understand as their cultural aggression. And, in Tanganyika, at least, the Blacks do manifest cultural aggression to some extent.

'What Good Times we Had' presents the best paradigm of the changes that Vassanji is talking about. This is a story of an Indian woman who is desperate to leave Africa for the others have already gone, and Africa is no longer safe for them. She goes to see a bank clerk, an African, who promises to arrange 'airplane tickets for foreign travel' for her. Because of her desperation and urgency, the African clerk deceives her and through fraud and cheating of extremely unpleasant kind, takes her to a devastated area of burnt huts. He rapes her and then murders her. Her body is found hanging by the feet from a tree branch.

After independence, the outlook of the Indian woman has changed. She does not regard Africa as her home any longer. While the woman is driving with the African clerk, the narrator comments, "There was a price for everything here. And after all that, there was no peace to be had even at night time for fear of robbers. They lived on the edge, not knowing if they would be pushed off the precipice the next day – or if the hand of providence would lift them up and transport them to safety" (93). She wants to go to Canada. And while driving with the African bank clerk, she thinks

about the good times they have had in Africa – about their picnics in open trucks, abundant food, fruit and servants, singing, playing and laughing at the breeze blowing their hair and muffling their voices. She also thinks about violence not known to them at that time.

The thoughts of the Indian woman give a lot of history of the Indians in East Africa and the changes happening since the country got independence. Her thoughts are a source of peace and quiet the Indians enjoyed in the colonial order, and mistrust and turmoil prevailing in the country after the Blacks came to power. She also falls prey to this Black power and confidence. ‘Ebrahim and the Businessmen’ depicts the plight and predicament of the Asian businessmen. Ebrahim is an Indian who has made friends with the Blacks since his childhood as the Indians treat him badly. Consequently, when the Africans come to power, he is given a position in the new political set up. And, he gets an opportunity to take revenge on “these petty bourgeoisie *dukawallas*” (96).

The business establishments of the Indian businessmen have been taken away by the government in a socialisation move. Those big shopping malls, complexes, small units – all is taken away. That way the Asians lose their properties set up in scores of years with tremendous of hard work in no time. Jaffer Teja shows his resentment in these words, “This government has betrayed us. We put our trust in it . . .” (99). A small section of the Indians do favour African nationalism. In fact, a few of them have been inspiring founders who give impetus to this movement, like “Isher Das with his policy of boycott and non-cooperation” (*Portrait*, 08) and “Makan Singh, the Sikh trade unionist who organised the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, established contact with Kikuyu labour leaders, and played a key role in the Mombasa dock strike of 1939” (Ghai 8). These and other younger Indians who have been in

favour of African nationalism do think new governments have betrayed them when phenomena like, Africanisation and Nationalisation come about after independence. And, above all, the civil servants of these governments do nothing without bribes, so does Ebrahim Kanji; he gets bribe from the Indian businessmen for saving one house from going into the hands of the government. Corrupt governments of postcolonial nations are manifestation of neo-colonialism.

Vassanji renders the painful condition of the Asians through 'Refugee'. In the whole collection this is the story that truly catches the predicament of people who are essentially homeless (or are rendered homeless by some political aggression). Here, the writer is able to show the psyche of the refugee. His mind is as much inflicted with despair as the situation he is in.

Karim, the Indian refugee from East Africa and bound to Canada, does not know how to travel through Europe. This is what the narrator has to say about him, "He looked, felt, so shrunken and small in this strange, alien environment. Alternately he sat forward; leaned back, pressing his arms onto the armrests; arched his back, stretched out his shoulders. He just was not right" (117). Karim faces difficulties at every step in his travel. The only thing he says about himself is, "I'm a refugee." He reiterates this statement many times in reply to every question he is asked. It thereby becomes his identity. I'm a refugee means I do not know anything; I have no documents to produce because I am homeless in an alien environment.

Karim does not have enough money on him. He has only one telephone number which he has learned by heart; but he cannot make a phone call for he does not know how to do it. He cannot decide who to trust in this far away world. At last a German helps him make the phone call, and he is told to see Anand in Bayreuth. Now

he is laden with anxiety. He does not know how to get to Bayreuth, where to change for the city. The German helps him take a seat in the train. He feels strange, preoccupied by some anxiety. He is to get himself and his two bags to Bayreuth. Unfortunately, he misses the train to Bayreuth only because he does not understand the conductor.

How is it that he has fallen in this situation? The narrator says, “How stupid, he thought, to venture out like this into the unknown. But he had been pushed out, ever so gently. From a sitting room full of family in Dar into this utter, utter loneliness under an alien sky” (122). The inference is that because of political aggression and discrimination against the Indians Karim leaves East Africa, his home for many generations, and seeks his future in Canada. Somehow he reaches Bayreuth accompanied by two policemen. There are a lot of people in the flat where Anand is living. Karim eats food, and Anand tells him how to go to Canada. The way of going to Canada is shocking to Karim. He is to lie the Canadians about his travel to Germany and tell them that he is from Beirut, Lebanon. He is also to take some risk and spend some money. That is the way the Indian refugee from East Africa can get to Canada.

After independence, the Asians in East Africa face a lot of difficulties and miseries. Everything is taken away from them. They are forced to leave the region. They also face some violence at the hands of the Blacks.

At the beginning, in ‘Foreword’, Vassanji says, “The Dar es Salaam of these stories is a place in the world of fiction. But it is the real Dar es Salaam, just as it is also the other towns there, on the coast and beyond, through which Uhuru Street runs and seeks access to the world” (Foreword, xii). Dar es Salaam is fictitious, so are

Uhuru Street and the stories associated with it. But it is the real city also. It is a metonymy for other towns there in East Africa. In other words, Dar es Salaam is everywhere, so is Uhuru Street. That way the stories can be understood in generic sense, specifically associated with the Indians in East Africa.

These stories of historical stance are allegories: individuals are types that symbolise the general nature and behaviour of the group. Ali and Idi are all African servants. Their stories are indicative of African behaviour in general. The quiet of a Sunday afternoon is the peace and tranquillity that the Afro-Asians experience in the colonial order. The sounds of nights are foreshadows of coming political changes and the turmoil associated with them. It is not only Aloo who aspires to go to America for higher studies and his mother is afraid of losing him, but most Indian students aspire to study in American universities and their mothers are apprehensive of their not coming back to them. 'What Good Times We Had' isn't about one Indian woman only; it is all others who fall prey to Black aggression. In it is compared the scenario before the changes happened with the scenario after the changes begin to take place with the independence of the country. It covers the situation in East Africa in general vis-a-vis the Indians. Jaffer Teja is not one businessman, but the entire business community that lost properties. Karim is not one refugee, he represents all Indian refugees.

Beyond the level of facts and history proper, these stories constitute an alternate history of Indians in East Africa before and after the independence of the Blacks. They comprise the collective history of the community, not of certain individuals only. As such, they function as extended metaphors. Uhuru Street functions as a metonymy for all of East Africa. As on the structural level, the

individual stories are organic part of the whole; so on linguistic level, the individual incidents and events are in organic relationship with the whole history of Indians.

These stories create a discourse that defines the relationship between the Indians and the Africans in the colonial order, and after that order gets dismantled with the coming of independence. That discourse gets established when these stories are taken as a whole. It defines the African behaviour; it defines the position of the Indians. It also defines the effects of political independence and Black power on Indian immigrants in Africa. As such, it goes beyond the historical phenomenon of independence, and covers the minute details of Indians' plight, predicament and tormentations that history proper generally does not cover. In other words, we can say Vassanji explores that portion of the iceberg that usually remains under the water, and surprisingly enough, that is always the major portion. If the portion that is above the water surface is history proper, Vassanji starts with it, goes along it and reaches beneath the water surface to explore beyond history proper. He emerges with a discourse that is an alternate history of the community.

Sixteen short stories with their own beginning and ending are asunder and several in the collection. Though the general context, the Asians in East Africa before and after independence of these countries, prevails all through the collection, the immediate context is different for different stories. They are like dots of the outline of a sketch that has many gaps; and by joining the dots the sketch can be completed into a figure. Here, the result can be the whole history of the immigrant community.

As such, the short story cycle is the history of the community in fragments. It is not only in *Uhuru Street* that Vassanji has presented the history of his community piecemeal, but also in other novels like, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. As

there is no written record of this history, according to Vassanji, he recollects the life lived in East Africa through introspection and the result is a non-linear narrative of many events presented in the way as remembered, without any chronological ordering. It is a montage of episodes of personal and collective history. This fragmentation also implies the complexity and complicity of this past and the relationship between the Asians and the Africans. It is an index to the plight and predicament of the Asians – their life shattered with multiple migrations and political backlash of the Blacks.

These stories though independent and complete in themselves are thematically and contextually related to one another. All these stories are set in one single general context i. e., the wider context of the Asian immigrants' life in East Africa during colonialism and after it. With its own immediate context, each story is placed in the collection in sequence with independence as the point of reference, and the changes happening as determiners of the sequence. In other words, the collection can easily be divided into two main parts – the stories belonging to the period before the coming of independence, and the ones belonging to the period of post-independence. The first nine stories are of the former period and the last seven are of the latter period. The collection begins with peace and tranquillity in 'In The Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon', and is indicative of the calm and prosperous life of the Asians in the colonial order. Many other stories related to this life follow; one can find here the seeds of changes that are to happen in future. For instance, African servants are shown crude and without manners, no civic sense and cultured behaviour, which eventually turns into barbarism. Idi, the driver, says, "We'll have our day" (52). And, when 'they' have 'their' day after their independence, they show their Black power and Black anger. These predictive signs are followed by fear and fright of the night in 'The Sounds of

the Night'. This much happens in pre-independence phase. After the independence, the Indian students and businessmen start to leave the region. 'What Good Times We Had', 'Ebrahim and the Businessmen' and 'London Returned' are stories of the miseries and nasty situation of the Indians who have no other way but to migrate to Europe and North America. And, this situation culminates in 'Refugee'. 'All Worlds are Possible Now' can be the resolution (or denouement) of the grand narrative.

That way, with every short story, the grand narrative develops episode by episode. Structurally, the story collection is another episodic novel like, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. Surprisingly enough, the quiet in 'In the Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon' develops to sounds in 'The Sounds of the Night'. This forms one main section of the collection as a whole. The second section starts with the leaving of Aloo in 'Leaving' and develops to the predicament of an Indian refugee Karin in 'Refugee'. Finally, 'All Worlds are Possible Now' resolves the problems, and the narrator reclaims Africa and Dar es Salaam as his 'home'.

Employing the technique of the short story narrative, Vassanji does what Salman Rushdie says in *Imaginary Homelands* about human perception:

Human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death. (qtd in Devika Khanna 75)

Vassanji writes as a victim of political aggression and forced migration. Political decisions taken back in East Africa render his community hopeless and homeless, desperate in search of another host society. Multiple migrations make their life a canvas of different patches. This fragmentation and multiplicity of their ethnic life in East Africa is properly presented through this short story collection, in the form of a montage of different episodes – political and historical events. Devika Khanna Narula writes in *South Asian Diaspora: History, Memory and Identity in Canadian Fiction* about Vassanji's *Uhuru Street*, "The various narratives in the short story cycle, through their inter-relatedness, link individuals, in different stories, to a larger scheme of communal consciousness that comes out of the totality of the cycle" (75). Just to substantiate the point, I refer to Vassanji's interview with Susheila Nasta, contained in *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk* ; in this exchange, Vassanji says about *Uhuru Street*:

. . . I wrote a collection of short stories which deal with a view to recreate Dar es Salaam where I grew up, during a specific period. And what I thought of doing was just to basically turn off and turn on lights, in a manner of speaking, one by one so each short story would be a flicker of light and then you would have a whole street emerging or a whole city if you like. A few short stories don't do that but essentially that is what I was trying to do as that street and that life will in a few years almost be non-existent. (78)

Through the collection of short stories, Vassanji is able to negotiate his fragmented and torn world in East Africa, the communal consciousness of his community. In other words, these stories are like individual dots of the outline of a sketch, which

when joined complete the figure structurally. In totality, the short story cycle is the collective unconscious of the community that forms its past and history.

The last story of the collection 'All Worlds are Possible Now' is in fact the 'ending', the 'denouement' of the novel – the collection as a whole. It resolves the problems set in the collection. All through the stories Vassanji delineates the coming of his community to a situation where most Indians prefer to leave behind Africa to obtain educational enlightenment, better career and cultural, social and political security in Europe and North America. He starts with the good times of the colonial rule and takes his narrative to miserable and desperate wanderings of the Refugee.

In the final story, the narrator reconciles with his past in Africa and decides to return to Africa. He says:

I returned, I suppose, because I always returned, ever since those student days I spent abroad. But a broken home also pushed me out as did concern for a palsied father spending his last years alone. There was an element of escape in my return as there was once in my leaving. So what right did I have in proposing, in holding up beggarly promises to someone who had never made the voyage out even once and was now finally promised the world? I remember my first day back. I had been brought home the previous night, had been made aware of the new airport road during the drive, a dual carriageway, some other sights, but shutting them out, closing my consciousness, until I had properly set my foot on the ground the next day. After ten years of absence, I had told myself, the reclaiming had to be ritual, complete, not something done in wondrous spurts. (130-31)

The narrator goes back to Dar es Salaam to reclaim it completely, to make it his home once again. According to him, there is an element of escape in his return also. Most probably he escapes the pangs of nostalgia and homesickness. Maybe, he just escapes homelessness in Europe and North America. Whatever, his return is also a migration – his return migration. He is keenly in search of belonging and self-identity. He finally identifies himself with Africa and that very life lived in Africa.

Back in Africa, he visits all those places that have been known to him. He colours himself with that Africanness again, and announces his ‘first reclaiming of Dar’ (132). However, will there ever be a second or a third reclaiming also? Rosemary Marangoly George writes in *The Politics of Home*, “And yet, wandering at the margins of another culture does not necessarily mean that one is marginal. Home in the immigrant genre is a fiction that one can move beyond or recreate at will” (200). Being marginal in East Africa does not mean Asians can’t regard Africa their ‘home’. Vassanji recreates and reclaims his home in Africa through narrative though he is himself at a long distance in the West. In the middle of the narratives, the writer clearly indicates his marginality that is so much enforced on the community after independence; and, finally he comes over this feeling of being marginal, and goes back to his Africa to reclaim it as his home. He gives his past life, the history of the community, to substantiate and corroborate his claim. He identifies himself with African locations and the life lived there. So, he has affiliations with Uhuru Street and Dar es Salaam which he confirms through these narratives of recreating and rewriting his past piecemeal. His self is at home in Africa, though he once leaves it behind to escape nasty situation there which engulfs him - the Indian immigrant. When he confronts the foreign, the alien that is not so readily his home, his search for the

authentic home begins and settles in Africa. However, can there be an 'authentic home' for the immigrant?

Through specific historical and literary settings, Vassanji points out the locations that can be his home. History corroborates the Asian presence in East Africa and the continuation of life through many generations. It also is witness to the exclusion of Asians from African national projects and nation making. However, literature recreates through narrative that history – the past – which enables the writer to revisit his home; thus counters the political moves taken by the Blacks that rendered these Asians homeless. Rosemary says, "Nationalist movements narrate one story, literature creates its home through tangential locations. Literature may, thus, serve also as a site for resistance to dominant ideologies like nationalism" (5). *Uhuru Street* undercuts and denounces the exclusion of Asians from the African nation. It is conscious of the interpretation of 'home' in the times of globalisation and immigration, and creates one for Asians in Africa despite all changes taking place back in Dar es Salaam. As such, through these narratives, and taking recourse on history, Vassanji creates a barrier of resistance (or dismantles the walls of racial and ethnic segregation) against the African stance and backlash that coerced him to migrate to some other host society. History and literature both work for developing this resistance.

Eventually, it all comes to searching for one's self and identity. The author delineates his African self as an immigrant originally from India, and identifies himself with Africa through his African history and his associations with African culture, society and the environment. Africa is there in the back of his mind, and even in the West he decides to reclaim Africa as his home and brings about his

homecoming through narratives and research trips. That way he makes peace with his self and truly rediscovers his self and the lost world he is tied with.

Giving the history of generations in Africa through fictional narratives, the author, in a sense, mythifies historical events and incidents to give them larger scope for interpretation and greater width and weight for metaphoric implications. That way, he goes far beyond facts and history proper. Or, we can say, he overcomes the limitations of history proper, recreates his past, rediscovers his lost world in Africa and revisits his 'home' in East Africa to reclaim it as his own.

One of the significant preoccupations of an immigrant writer is his endeavour and ambition of discovering and recreating his self as located in an in-between world. And, that is a very complex self, for it contains many places and cultures along with their differences. The self that emerges out of these narratives of immigrant genre incorporates his immigrant legacies, his pasts, and his new social, cultural and political environment. These narratives of self-defining contain displacements, migrations, obsessions with the past, negotiations with the present and return migrations to claim those legacies left behind, though only in nostalgia and imagination.

Vassanji uses a short story cycle to recreate his world that he has lost in Africa. That way, he draws a portrait of his Indian-and-African self. These stories focus on the changes taking place in East Africa, and according to Rocio G. Davis, "There is the recognition [in these stories] that the culture of a nation is shaped by the complex processes of memory and language as well as by identifiable historical events." Davis continues, "Uhuru Street itself, the organising concept and unifying principle of the cycle, functions as both a social structure and a configuration of

consciousness and memory, subject to historical change and psychological disturbance, profoundly affecting those who live there, those who leave, and those who return.” For Vassanji and his community, the ‘identifiable historical events’ are those that set them on the track of migration and then carry on this process with further displacements. These events begin in India and continue in East Africa when the political atmosphere there begins to change with the going away of the British.

As characteristic of the immigrant genre, Vassanji is engaged with developing and discovering “an appropriate identifying relationship” between East Africa as his lost home and his immigrant self. But he enlarges his self-portrayal to his deep roots in India. As such, the parameters of place within which he recreates his self extend beyond borders to rediscover his roots and origins through the means of history and methods of archaeology. Many associated events of history, together with objects of the past that function as fossils of the past, and eventually sources of history, are general outline of this portrait. As mentioned earlier, Vassanji is actually up to recreating Dar es Salaam where he grew up during a specific period of time. Vassanji is referring to a specific period of historical and political events happening in a particular location, East Africa, and the World in general that affected the lives of the Indian immigrants living in Uhuru Street. But, there is tremendous scope for crossing the temporal and spatial borders, for Uhuru Street does not connote just a street in Dar es Salaam, but far beyond that very point – the contact zone where many worlds have been meeting for so many generations. Thus, while living in Toronto, Vassanji draws his African portrait with Indian shades. The extension of the temporal and spatial edges is not imposed on the portrait from outside, but the urge emerges from within the writer’s self, for the past is carried in his self, his being. He is well conscious of his Indian origins, his African belonging and his new found world in Toronto.

In a way, that is so much of remembering the past as it is negotiating the present – rediscovering the course of history that led the community to the present situation. Vassanji exchanges with Nasta, “I was dealing with the life of my generation. We cannot dissociate our lives from politics, from the politics of the continent. We are what we are right now because of certain political decisions made nationally and internationally” (73). Vassanji’s generation – the third generation Indians in East Africa – face discrimination on ethnic and racial basis, and that is widely and generally believed to be a backlash earned by the Indians for the favour they did to the British imperialism in East Africa. The Indians occupy an in-between place and have to linger in a limbo after independence of these countries. Such political events as pushed the Indians to the margins of the society have pivotal significance in Vassanji’s fiction.

Consequently, the complex relationship between the writer’s self and his place of belonging becomes more complicated with further displacements and unstable position in the host societies – the position that rises and falls – in short, that changes with changes in local forces of influence like, social, cultural and political powers. In East Africa, the Blacks take their independence as a racial revolution and seek Black domination through Africanisation and, thus, push the Indians further closer to margins. This marginal position of theirs does not get them any power and privilege (except those that are in nexus with the Blacks), instead they become the subaltern.

This deep sense of being victimised prevails all through Vassanji’s fiction. Grievances against the new political situation in East Africa – wounds of the past – are still there in the writer’s memory. Rocio G. Davis contends in ‘Negotiating Place, Identity and Community in M. G. Vassanji’s *Uhuru Street*’, “About half of the stories in *Uhuru Street* are narrated in first person, emphasising personal dramas of identity;

the remainder are recounted mainly from a third-person view point, expanding the range of subject and consciousness to give a many toned portrait of the street – this, perhaps, to fulfill the author’s desire ‘to write a kind of people’s history, but make it personal’ (14). Making personal the history of his community is an act of tracing his identity and belonging, which eventually is rediscovering his self from among the dust of the past. Referring to Hertha Wong, Davis writes that story telling is an act of self-definition and cultural continuance, and it can be empowering because it helps create a community. And, it is through stories that one can counter the “grand metanarratives” of history. Vassanji is rewriting his past, the past of his community in Africa, which is surely a process of self-identification and giving space to his marginal community in literary artifacts.

Several short stories contained in *Uhuru Street* give glimpses of the immigrant life lived by the Indians in East Africa. They recreate that vulnerable world and the life lived around the Uhuru Street amid other ethnic and cultural groups. Rocio G. Davis enumerates the thematic preoccupations of the writer as:

1. Stories of intra-community interactions
2. Stories of inter-racial interactions
3. Stories of immigration and adaptation beyond the Uhuru Street

And, these are the experiences of the immigrant in a place where he relocates himself after dislocation. The Indians make intra-community relations strong to preserve and protect their group identity. They make a world of their own within their community where they maintain their social and cultural identity. They do not open the borders of their communal territory for other racial groups. ‘Breaking Loose’ does not highlight

the flexibility of the Indians as much as it shows the repulsiveness of the Indians at the mere thought of including other ethnic and racial groups.

Still there are some inter-racial interactions. Such interactions vary after independence when the privileged position of the Europeans and the Indians is tampered with, rather destroyed, by the Africans. Before independence, the Africans are mostly servants to the European and Indian settlers. This is the period of colonial order where the society is compartmentalised with the European at the top, the African at the bottom and the Indian enjoying the middle position. After independence, the Africans obtain political power and social dominance. They turn to the 'collaborators' of imperialism and colonialism with anger and push them closer to margins.

This sense of marginality and despair prompts the Indians to leave behind Africa and seek another world beyond Uhuru Street where they can settle and adapt with economic, cultural and political security. Young people go abroad to study the subjects of their choice – far advanced branches of sciences. They do not return. Others seek career in Canada and London.

So, in other words, Vassanji is up to presenting the immigrant's world; the concerns of the Indian immigrant in East Africa. The Indians look back to India for cultural identity which they do not wish to lose at. They hold their Indian culture with teeth and acutely identify themselves with it. As such, they have a feeling that they have a home in India which is not theirs any longer though they belong to it. They have also a home in Africa which they do not belong to though it is theirs. They have yet another home somewhere which they feel in their aspirations and apprehensions.

They aspire to go to America and Europe for education and fortune; they are apprehensive of living in Africa after political changes in the region.

The immigrant's obsessions with the past, home and homelessness are explicit in these short stories. The writer is predominantly preoccupied with history which runs as a thread all through the stories. In fact, Vassanji recreates the past piecemeal through a montage of various historical events. Remembering, assessing and reviewing the past are the general preoccupations of the immigrant.

Home and homelessness weigh heavily on the minds of the immigrant in the stories. Rocio Davis contends, "The protagonist-narrator, absorbed in an exercise of definition of home, finds that his steps have led him back to where everything began. His conversations with the various characters reveal a generalised obsession with that theme: Uhuru Street has been home for many lost souls, the only home they had known, in spite of Lateef's jocular proclamation that 'the whole world is our home. It's a global village'" (135). How much are they at home abroad is clear from 'What Good Times We Had'. The Indian woman recalls her bitter experiences with the Africans and is desperate to leave the country to seek a new home in Canada. The refugee bears with humiliations; he travels in a very miserable and pathetic condition through Germany intending to get to Canada by the help of a certain contact and, to his utter despair, comes to know that he has risked everything, and yet is not sure to get to Canada. Nevertheless, the protagonist-narrator decides to reclaim his home in Africa.

The Indian immigrant has to face problems in Africa as generally faced by people abroad. Through his story-telling, Vassanji describes how it is like to be Indian in East Africa – the Indian that is marginal in African literature also. African

literature, according to the African professor of Sociology, Daniel Akoto, has to be authentic, and in this authenticity of the national literature there is no place for the Indians who are not indigenous to the land. However hard the narrator strives to reclaim Africa as his home, he is essentially homeless. His reclaiming of Dar es Salaam is in itself a return migration. And, Vassanji does a sort of intellectual migration – his displacement from Toronto to Africa in his fiction to recreate his lost world there, to reclaim his home there, to trace his belonging and affiliation with that space.

Why does the immigrant commit a return migration? There is a very complex relationship between place and self. The immigrant does contain some of the place, and reiterates his affiliations and belonging. Through migration, the immigrant, in a sense, suspends his belonging to the place he leaves behind and begins to belong to the new world. And, the immigrant is always in search of ‘a home’ where he feels at home. By virtue of return migration, he revisits his home in spaces left behind and, thus, reaffirms his belonging to the past, the lost world. Finally, the point is, he settles between the two worlds, or many worlds.

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