

Tracing The Shadows of Empire: The Legacy of Empire and Forgotten Histories in the Works of M.G. Vassanji

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Abstract

M.G. Vassanji, one of the most prominent voices in contemporary diasporic literature, intricately weaves the histories of migration, identity, and memory in his works. This article traces the evolution of Vassanji's literary career, exploring how his novels and short stories reflect the complex intersections of East African, Indian, and Canadian identities. Beginning with The Gunny Sack (1989), Vassanji's debut novel, the study highlights recurring themes of displacement, generational trauma, and the search for belonging that define his oeuvre. Through a chronological analysis of his major works, including The Book of Secrets and The In-Between World of Vikram Lall, the article examines how Vassanji's writing mirrors the shifting landscapes of postcolonial East Africa and the immigrant experience in North America. By delving into Vassanji's use of historical narratives, myth, and memory, this piece underscores his contribution to global literature and the ongoing dialogue about M.G. Vassanji, one of the most prominent voices in contemporary diasporic literature, intricately weaves the histories of migration, identity, and memory in his works. This article traces the evolution of Vassanji's literary career, exploring how his novels and short stories reflect the complex intersections of East African, Indian, and Canadian identities. Beginning with The Gunny Sack (1989), Vassanji's debut novel, the study highlights recurring themes of displacement, generational trauma, and the search for belonging that define his oeuvre. Through a chronological analysis of his major works, including The Book of Secrets and The In-Between World of Vikram Lall, the article examines how Vassanji's writing mirrors the shifting landscapes of postcolonial East Africa and the immigrant experience in North America. By delving into Vassanji's use of historical narratives, myth, and memory, this piece underscores his contribution to global literature and the ongoing dialogue about identity in a transnational world.

Keywords: history, myth, unwritten past, landscapes

M.G. Vassanji's novels are a testament to his masterful exploration of the intersections between personal and collective memory, colonialism, migration, and diaspora. Through works like *The Book of Secrets* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vassanji sheds light on the often-overlooked stories of marginalized communities, particularly the Indian diaspora in East Africa.

Vassanji's narratives delve into the complexities of colonial rule, exposing the racial hierarchies and power dynamics that governed the lives of South Asians in East Africa. His stories critique the romanticized ideals of postcolonial nation-building, revealing the injustices and exclusions faced by minority communities during periods of political upheaval.

Memory plays a pivotal role in Vassanji's storytelling, serving as a tool to reconstruct histories that have been fragmented or silenced. By weaving cultural and religious histories, such as those of the Khoja Muslim community, into his novels, Vassanji highlights the resilience and adaptability of diasporic identities.

Vassanji's writing challenges the dominance of official histories, giving voice to the forgotten and the silenced. His nuanced portrayal of immigrant experiences bridges the personal and the historical, ensuring that the echoes of unwritten histories are heard and acknowledged.

As Michel de Certeau remarks, "the past is not a 'what,' but a 'where.'" Vassanji's enquiry into the past is remarkable, as he visits the past with a purpose. In novels like *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, he travels through the past guided by artifacts like the sack and the diary. This journey allows him to beautifully establish the tradition and culture of the Shamsi community, which finds a place in the narration of all his novels.

Vassanji's characters, often hailing from the Shamsi community, are displaced in East Africa and then migrate to either Canada or the United States. The past acquires significance in understanding the present in Vassanji's novels, as he masterfully weaves together personal and collective memory to create a rich tapestry of stories.

The past, in a sense, becomes the inert blank page on which the present writes and on which the ink of the present etches its own narratives. (10)

M.G. Vassanji's novels demonstrate exceptional skill in interweaving past and present, as evident in works like *No New Land*, *Amriika*, *The Assassin's Song*, and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. In *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, the narrator embarks on a journey through the past, while in other novels, characters recollect their past to make sense of their present.

Vassanji's protagonists often attempt to recapture the past, confronting it as a means of moving forward. The past serves as a clarifying force, illuminating their existence in the present. As Harish Narang observes, Vassanji's purpose is to probe the past and write about the present, creating a space where words, images, and landscapes converge.

Vassanji's first two novels, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, aim to reconstruct the history of a community that migrated to East Africa. In *No New Land* and *Amriika*, he analyzes postcolonial despair, characterized by homelessness and a historic consciousness. The colonial and postcolonial worlds have witnessed two waves of migration, with Vassanji's early novels narrating the first wave, which saw Indians from Gujarat migrate to East Africa in the late 19th century.

The Gunny Sack and *The Book of Secrets* portray the experiences of Vassanji's fictitious Shamsi community in East Africa, describing them as traders who occupied ambivalent positions between native blacks and colonial whites. The first generation of migrants-maintained connections to their homeland, with characters like Dhanji Govindji, Ji Bai, and Pius Fernandas making visits to their ancestral land. Despite physical displacement, they remained mentally attached to their homeland, preferring to marry women from their own community while also engaging with European concubines. M.G. Vassanji's subsequent novels, including *No New Land*, *Amriika*, and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, narrate the second wave of migration that occurred during Africa's decolonization and after Idi Amin's expulsion of Asians from Uganda. This generation of migrants experiences double displacement, feeling the agony of homelessness and dislocation. They are caught between past and present, neither fully belonging to their ancestral homeland nor fully integrating into their new surroundings.

Vassanji's own experiences of displacement and migration deeply inform his writing. As Sayed notes, moving between geopolitical spaces also involves navigating emotional, psychological, and mental states, which can profoundly impact identity formation (11).

For Vassanji, this crisis of displacement oscillates between feelings of homelessness and a desire to reclaim his past. Having experienced double displacement himself, Vassanji is haunted by the thought of homelessness. When asked about his concept of "home" as a writer, Vassanji responds that his writing is, in part, a search for home.

Vassanji reflects on the notion of home, stating that it is a constant process, a search for belonging that is intertwined with feelings of homelessness. He likens the experience to being on a train, where the thrill of motion and rhythm is more significant than the destination. For Vassanji, arrival would be an anticlimax, a betrayal of the search itself. Ultimately, he suggests that writing has become his home, a space where he can explore and express the complexities of his identity (8).

M.G. Vassanji's writing serves as a means of comfort and solace, allowing him to explicate his experiences of homelessness. Similar to V.S. Naipaul, Vassanji finds refuge in his writing, using it as a tool to navigate the complexities of displacement.

The characters in Vassanji's novels, such as *No New Land* and *Amriika*, often find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, caught between the anxiety of arrival and the uncertainty of departure. As Chelva Kanaganayakam notes, Vassanji's second novel, *No New Land*, marks a shift in focus from reconstructing the past to exploring the challenges of the present (56).

The protagonists of these two novels, both members of the Shamsi community, embark on journeys to Canada and the United States in search of a sense of belonging. However, they soon discover that their experiences as immigrants are marked by tension and dislocation. The novels' traditional structures serve as a backdrop for exploring the complexities of immigrant life, highlighting the difficulties of navigating between two worlds.

The epigraph of *No New Land* sets the tone for the novel's exploration of displacement and belonging.

"There's no new land, my friend no
New sea; for the city will follow you,
In the same streets you'll wander endlessly"(46).

The epigraph of *No New Land* resonates with V.S. Naipaul's assertion in *The Bend in the River*: "Nowhere is safe." Naipaul's statement underscores the universality of homelessness in the postcolonial world, where individuals are perpetually displaced and seeking refuge. He astutely observes that people often trade one prison for another, shifting from one place to another in search of a sense of belonging.

M.G. Vassanji, like Naipaul, is doubly displaced, having experienced migration from India to Africa and subsequently to Canada. This dual displacement is reflected in the protagonists of *No New Land* and *Amriika*, who embark on journeys from India to Africa and eventually to Canada or the United States.

These two novels primarily focus on the immigrant's predicament, presenting a sequence of incidents that highlight their feelings of alienation in their adopted countries. Unlike *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, which explored historical narratives, *No New Land* and *Amriika* delve into the personal lives of the protagonists, where history is deeply intertwined with their individual experiences.

The protagonists' struggles and negotiations in their new environments reflect Vassanji's own experiences in America and Canada. As Harish Narang astutely observes, the protagonists' double alienation stems from their inability to fully adopt the new value systems of their adopted countries, while also facing challenges from more radical elements within their own community (48).

The novel *No New Land* revolves around the Lalani family, specifically Haji Lalani and his son Nurdin Lalani, who represent the first and second waves of migration, respectively. Nurdin's experiences in Canada serve as a prototype for the immigrant experience, highlighting the challenges and disillusionments faced by those who seek a new life in a foreign land.

In contrast, *The Book of Secrets* is a more complex and multilayered novel that explores themes of colonialism, identity, and displacement. The diary serves as a powerful symbol, uncovering buried truths and forcing characters to confront their past. Vassanji's masterful weaving of past and present narratives creates a vivid picture of East Africa's multicultural tapestry, celebrating resilience, storytelling, and the human desire to connect with one's roots.

In the context of "Traveling Memory and History," M.G. Vassanji's novel *The Gunny Sack* offers a compelling exploration of the intersection of family history, political history, and memory. The narrator, Salim Juma, unpacks his family's history, uncovering the past and its attendant features, including political events and personal memories.

As the essay notes, family history serves as an extension of political history in *The Gunny Sack*. Vassanji's novel demonstrates how history impacts the present, and how memory can be both a powerful tool for understanding the past and a fragile construct that can be shaped and reshaped over time.

M.G. Vassanji's novel, *The Gunny Sack*, showcases memory as a powerful narrative device that bridges the past, present, and future. Salim's story highlights the importance of learning from history to prevent its repetition. He hopes to be the last migrant from his family, emphasizing the need to break free from the cycles of displacement.

The gunny sack serves as a symbol of collective memory, containing mementos that tell the story of Salim's family history. Vassanji masterfully preserves collective memory by presenting it through the experiences of individuals. The novel is both a story about an extended family's life in East Africa and a repository for the collective memory and life stories of Asian-Africans.

Vassanji's novels offer a profound meditation on history, memory, and identity. By intertwining personal narratives with broader historical contexts, he reconstructs the lives of those often marginalized or excluded from historical records. His works invite readers to question the authority of official histories and consider the voices and stories that remain unwritten.

Vassanji's exploration of history is not merely about the past; it is an inquiry into how the past shapes and informs the present, particularly for diasporic and marginalized communities. Through his rich storytelling, Vassanji ensures that the echoes of unwritten histories continue to resonate in the collective consciousness, giving voice to the silenced and forgotten.

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