

# “THE NATURE OF MY BELONGINGNESS”: DIASPORA IN M.G. VASSANJI AND THE SOUTH ASIAN NOVEL IN CANADA

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## ABSTRACT

This essay deals with the changing concepts of diaspora and nation in the context of contemporary Canadian literature in English. The argument involves a revision of the notions of cultural identity as well as a rethinking and even questioning of South Asian fiction as part of Canadian writing. A contradiction lies behind its full integration in Canadian fiction in English and its progressively changing nature in the last thirty years. The concept of diaspora and the South Asian critical point of view towards Canadian multicultural society will also help explain the difficulty in facing the question of belonging to the host country.

KEY WORDS: Diaspora, South Asian literature, cultural identity, contemporary Canadian literature, postcolonial studies, belonging, cultural integration.

## RESUMEN

Este ensayo analiza los diferentes conceptos de diáspora y nación en el contexto de la literatura canadiense contemporánea. Se plantea una revisión de las nociones de identidad cultural así como un cuestionamiento de la narrativa sudasiática como parte integrante de la narrativa canadiense anglófona y su naturaleza cambiante de los últimos treinta años. El concepto de diáspora y la propia crítica hacia dicha sociedad multicultural en la narrativa sudasiática ayudarán a explicar la dificultad que tienen el escritor inmigrante para su integración en dicha sociedad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Diáspora, literatura sudasiática, identidad cultural, literatura canadiense contemporánea, post-colonialismo, arraigo, integración cultural.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, many notable changes took place in Canadian literature. This was a period of opening from what had been an emphasis on writers of the so-called canon, writers who bore mainly Anglo-Saxon names like Davies, Atwood, Munro, Callaghan, or MacLennan, to *other* writers of a different origin, as well as to aboriginal writers. This change began in the 1980s, and certainly in the 1990s such writers began to achieve a long-due recognition, not only with the general public in terms of book sales, but also by



winning major literary awards (Burke 97). Something quite unusual happened when, in 1990, Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* won the Governor General's Award for fiction, garnered international acclaim and was on the best-seller list in Canada for over a year. Surprisingly, Ricci's text had its setting not in Canada, but in Italy, with protagonists that were Italians. This was a major breakthrough at the time, but by the end of the 1990s the idea of Canadian texts being set in other countries with little or no mention of Canada or Canadians had lost its novelty and become something of a norm. The immigrant novel, if indeed it can be termed so, had arrived to become a major force in Canadian literature. The writers of these novels were generally residents of Canadian cities and they could no longer be grouped together as having one discourse; the voices were as varied as the styles they employed.

One of these writers is Moyez Vassanji, an East Indian whose native land happened to be that of Tanzania, since he is a descendant of the diaspora of East Indians who settled all over the coast of East Africa. He arrived in Canada to teach physics at the University of Toronto after having received his doctorate in the USA. He then left university teaching after the publication of his first novel *The Gunny Sack* (1989), which won his first international award, the Regional Commonwealth Prize. Thus, as is frequently the case for a South Asian writer, he appeared in Canada as an educated member of the middle class who was already fluent in the English language. Vassanji was the founder of the journal *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad* which would allow the diversity in backgrounds and experiences of the writers to be reflected in "a dynamic and vital way" (Vassanji, "Editorial" 1). Arun Mukherjee cites Vassanji as the author who has played a major role in the development of South Asian Canadian literature in "his triple role as editor, theorist, and writer" (Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism* 30). Vassanji is a leading figure among these writers and has helped discover other South Asian writers and bring them to the attention of the Canadian reading public.

However, his work has not received, I think, the attention it deserves. A member of an acclaimed group of Canadian multicultural writers, Vassanji shot to fame only in 1994, when his third novel, *The Book of Secrets* (1997), a magnificent complex piece of fiction set in East Africa, was chosen as the inaugural winner of Canada's prestigious Giller Prize. In a subsequent novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, which snagged his second Giller Prize, Vassanji returns to Kenya, the land of his birth and once the pride of Britain's African colonies. The purpose of essay is to deal with the changing concepts of diaspora and nation in the context of Contemporary Canadian literature in English. My discussion will involve a revision of the notions of diaspora and cultural identity, as well as a rethinking and even questioning of South Asian fiction as postcolonial and "not quite Canadian" writing, yet fully integrated today in the concept of Canadian literature. A focus on the writings of M.G. Vassanji will serve as illustration of these contradictions as well as of the progressively changing nature of Canadian literature in the last thirty years.

Firstly the idea of diaspora itself has evolved in such a way that has radically changed the literary landscape of Canadian literature. The diasporic imaginary is crucially connected to the idea of "homing desire." Behind it stands the denial that



the homelands of diasporas are themselves contaminated. In a progressively multi-ethnic conception of the nation-state, diasporic theory bears testimony to the fact that we live in a world where multi-ethnic and multi-communal states are the norm. Against the discursive nostalgia, the material history of diaspora leads us to deterritorialized peoples with a history and a future. We thus place under erasure a narrative that requires a theory of homeland as a centre that can either be reconstituted or imaginatively offered as the point of origin. A people without a homeland or the “unhomely” is a cultural text of late modernity. In other words, the positive side of diaspora is a democratic ethos of equality that does not privilege any particular community in a nation; its negative side is virulent racism and endemic nativism. Homelands interact with other cultures over a period of time to produce diaspora. Against the fictions of a heroic past and a distant land, the real history of diasporas is always contaminated by the social processes that govern their lives.

Thus, diasporic identities are intimately connected to the concepts of cultural identity and nation. As Stuart Hall comments, identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think of identity as a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term “cultural identity” lays claim. There are two ways of thinking about cultural identity; the first position defines cultural identity in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective “one true self.” Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as “one people,” with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. There is, however, a second, related but different view of cultural identity. This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what “we really are” or, rather, “what we have become.” We cannot speak for very long about one experience, one identity without acknowledging ruptures and discontinuities. Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of becoming, as well as of being. It belongs to the future as well as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. It is only from this second position that we can properly understand the traumatic character of the colonial experience (Hall 236-37).

The past therefore continues to speak to us. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the unstable points of identification, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental “law of origin.” The diaspora experience is defined, not by essence or purity, but by



the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through difference, by hybridity.

This concept of cultural difference is deeply rooted in the evolving concept of national communities. Our belongingness constitutes what Benedict Anderson calls “an imagined community” (2). Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. Nations, Anderson suggests, are not only sovereign political entities but “imagined communities.” How do we imagine their relation to home, the nature of their belongingness? How are we to conceptualize or imagine identity, difference and belongingness after diaspora? Since cultural identity carries so many overtones of essential unity, how are we to “think” identities inscribed within relations of power and constructed across difference, and disjuncture?

Across the globe, the processes of so-called free and forced migrations are changing the composition, diversifying the cultures and pluralizing the cultural identities of the older dominant nation states, the old imperial powers, and, indeed, of the globe itself (Appadurai). These diasporic minorities do not long remain enclave settlements. They engage the dominant culture along a very broad front. They belong, in fact, to a transnational movement, and their connections are multiple and lateral. They mark the end of a modernity, defined exclusively in Western terms. In fact, there are two, opposed processes at work in contemporary forms of globalization, which is itself a fundamentally contradictory process. There are the dominant forces of cultural homogenization by which Western culture threatens to overwhelm all comers, imposing and homogenizing cultural sameness. But right alongside that are processes that are slowly and subtly decentring Western models, leading to a dissemination of cultural difference across the globe. These days, the local and the global are locked together because each is the condition of existence of the other.

As a result, we need to rethink postcolonialism in dialogue with globalization (Brydon 691). Globalization, diaspora and cosmopolitanism have each emerged as contenders for describing a new problem-space that might replace the postcolonial. Despite the efforts of Edward Said, postcolonial analysis has not succeeded in changing media representations of non-Western cultures or in influencing the ways in which 9/11 and its aftermath have been understood. Postcolonialism does need to be revived and redirected through addressing the concepts of autonomy, cosmopolitanism and diaspora together. Postcolonial interrogations were dominated during the decade of the 1990s by the work of three thinkers: Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward Said. Despite their significant differences and the complexity of their individual work, Bhabha, Spivak, and Said have come to be associated with a brand of postcolonialism that valorizes exilic, cosmopolitan, and diasporic perspectives, and with literary modes of reading the world as text. They also agree in assigning a privileged role to the intellectual’s position as exile (see, for instance, Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*; Said, *Blaming the Victims*). Bhabha’s focus on the “transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities” seems typical (5). Although Bhabha notes “the changed basis for making international connections” in the late twentieth century, what



readers take in is his interest in cultural difference, migrant sensibilities, performances of identity, and the “unhomely” as “a paradigmatic colonial and postcolonial condition” (Bhabha 9). His recent work affiliates itself with border, diasporic, and cosmopolitan theories that sometimes seem to blur the distinctions between postcolonialism and US multiculturalism, even as his notion of “the politics of location” continues to animate contradictory positions of these matters (Brydon 699-700). Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* also helped to redirect analysis from nation-based study towards the consideration of multiple diasporic formations, travelling cultures and travelling theories in the 1990s (Clifford). Gilroy’s theorization of the “Black Atlantic as a counterculture of modernity” based on diaspora resonates with a general shift within the postcolonial field towards privileging mobility and deterritorialization.

Yet our reading of the homeland must be placed alongside another truth about diasporas: as a general rule diasporas do not return to their homeland (real or imaginary). The modern Indian diaspora has a long history which is in fact continuous with an older wanderlust, the *ghummakar* tradition, that took the gypsies to the Middle East and to Europe, fellow Indians to South-East Asia and Sri Lanka as missionaries and conquerors, and traders to the litoral trading community around the Arabian Sea (Mishra 2).

Rethinking the argument that “it was poverty at home that pushed them [Indians] across the ocean [to Africa]”, M.G. Vassanji writes in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*: “but surely there’s that wanderlust first, that itch in the sole, that hankering in the soul that puffs out the sails for journey into the totally unknown” (17). This Indian diaspora is a complex social formation of collective memory which can be read by the terms “old” and “new.” The subjects of the traditional concept of diaspora occupy spaces in which they interact with other colonized peoples with whom they had a complex relationship of power and privilege; the subjects of the modern diaspora are people who have entered metropolitan centres of Empire or other white settler countries such as Canada or the USA as part of a post-1960s pattern of global migration. The cultural dynamics of the latter are often examined within a multicultural theory. As is clear from Vassanji’s treatment of “Shamsi” traders of Gujarat who migrated to East Africa, the binary of the old and the new is not meant to isolate communities or to situate experiences within non-negotiable or exclusive frames. It should be self-evident that the old has become part of the new through re-migrations and that the old has not been immune to a general electronic media culture that has tended to redefine the diasporic self.

The binary therefore has a strategic function: it recognizes an earlier phase of migration, the psychic imaginary which involved a reading of India based on a journey that was complete, a journey that was final. In contrast, the new subjects of diaspora surface precisely at the moment of postmodern ascendancy; it comes with globalization and hypermobility, it comes with modern means of communication and it comes, since 2003, with the gift of dual citizenship from India. In a thoroughly global world the act of displacement now makes of diasporic subjects travellers on the move, their homeland contained in the simulacral world of visual media where the ‘net’ constitutes the ‘self’ and quite unlike the earlier diaspora

where imagination was triggered by the contents in gunny sacks. Indeed, 'homeland' is now available in the confines of one bedroom in Vancouver or Toronto (Mishra 3-4):

Even now, in this Canadian wilderness, I cannot help but say my namaskars, or salaams, to the icons I carry faithfully with me, not quite understanding what they mean to me. But I am convinced they represent some elemental force of nature, some qualities of it, gravitation and the electric force and all other entities conjured up for us by scientists from our mundane existence. (Vassanji, *Vikram Lall* 20)

Nostalgia is less important than the posterior re-subjectification and restructuring of the subject that is the consequence. Whenever the nation-state is perceived as racist or imperialist and the therapy of self-representation is denied to diasporic peoples, a state of melancholy sets in precisely because the past cannot be constructive, interpreted, the primal loss cannot be replaced by the new object of love. Mishra suggests that the diasporic imaginary is a condition of an impossible mourning that transforms mourning into melancholia. In the imaginary of diasporas "both mourning and melancholia persist, sometimes in intensely contradictory ways at the level of the social" (Mishra 9). Diasporic melancholia is related to a moment of trauma "deeply tied to our own historical realities." The exact dating of the historical moment of trauma is less important than its posterior re-subjectifications and the restructuring of the subject that is the consequence. For Indians in East Africa, the trauma is often connected to demands for their repatriation to India by African nationalists, even though most are at least second-generation Indo-Africans. The Kenyan expulsions and, more dramatically, Idi Amin's declaration that Asians were no longer welcomed in Uganda are cases in point. For Indians from India living in the diaspora, that moment could be the tragedy of partition which Salman Rushdie continues to try to come to terms with, or which the histories of the Parsis evince in the works of Rohinton Mistry (Mishra 13).

Another kind of homeland trauma may be discussed with reference to the lives of those members of the East Indian diaspora in Canada who see themselves as twice-displaced. Although there is no single moment of trauma, the literature of writers such as Bissoondath or Vassanji is marked by both a different memory of the homeland and a different kind of accommodation with their new land. We can talk of an 'unfixed self' (Mishra 154) who moves from one locale to another, who comes from an earlier space where foundational narratives are constructed, where the metaphors of 'living' have their origins. In this type of writings, movement from one country to another creates a consciousness about one's past and produces the dilemma of unfixed selves. How does one write about these selves? How does one negotiate living in Canada and writing out narratives invaded by earlier memories?

Thus, what does it mean to be a South Asian Canadian writer? How are South Asian Canadian writers received in Canada? Finally, how are they received in the countries of their origin? (Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism* 30). It is clear that they frequently share culture, memory and a repertoire of linguistic signs. However, the South Asian group of writers does not form a community as such, but it is composed of many communities. They also differ from many other immigrant groups





by the fact that they are not generally “political and economic refugees,” “exiles,” or “peasants” (Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism* 33). Rather, they are usually economic migrants, and as such, they lack the anti-colonial stance as well as the critique of racism often found at the basis of postcolonial texts. Instead, these writers often focus on memory —of Bombay and the middle class Parsi community in the case of Rohinton Mistry and of the fictionalised Shamsi community of Vassanji’s texts, to provide two examples (Burke 97-99).

But, is there, then, a South Asian Canadian literature? (Vassanji, “Is There?” 1). For Vassanji the term South Asian is perhaps a little unfortunate as South Asia refers to the Subcontinent -India, Pakistan, Bangladesh- and Sri Lanka. South Asians come to Canada from these countries ultimately, but also from East and South Africa, the Caribbean countries, Fiji, and elsewhere, mostly from a former British colony. This “meeting of streams,” as Vassanji himself would call it (Vassanji, *A Meeting*), did not begin in the 1960s and 1970s, but it “began with the presence of the British in our countries” (Vassanji, “Is There?” 1). In this context, we note an important diasporic meditation in his novel *The Book of Secrets*:

We were intensely aware of our essential homelessness. Our world was diminishing with the Empire. We were all travellers who had on an impulse taken off, for all kinds of personal reasons... We were now aware that we would have to choose: to return home ... but what was home now? to take up a new nationality ... but what did that mean? to move on to the vestiges of the Empire, to the last colonies and dominions, or perhaps to retreat to where it all began, London. I of course had chosen to throw in my lot with the new nation; being a solitary man without close attachments has been a help in living up to this resolve. But for the others, even after they had opted to stay, the question always remained to plague them —to stay or to go, and where to go? (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 274)

The world of the South Asian immigrant is a large one, a geopolitical world whose boundaries are arbitrary and even unreal. For the writer, this has important consequences in order to define his literary identity and his audience. One question would be: Can a body of work be naturalized together with the writer? There are fiction writers such as Selvadurai, Ondaatje, Bissoondath and Mistry who are published by the big presses, and who have no choice but to write in English, speaking only English or having been brought up to be literate only in it. But there is a choice of audience these writers write for, the English-speaking world primarily. Others, like Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, write in Kikuyu and translate their work. Ultimately, all these writers, like Vassanji, have a private world they write about, be it Sri Lanka, Dar es Salaam, or a fictional and symbolic one like Bissoondath’s Casaquemada. But there is a trust in the readership, the audience, if not always in the publishing empires (Vassanji, “Is There?” 5). The South Asian Canadian experience has therefore two aspects, a public and a private one.

Bringing a private world into public life, for Vassanji, the postcolonial writer is a mythmaker and a folk historian as he preserves in his fiction the collective tradition: the past is evoked in specific historical events (as in Ondaatje’s recreation of the Sri Lankan Civil War in *Anil’s Ghost*) or in evocative scenery and imagery (as



in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. We have many individual Canadian writers of South Asian origin playing their individual trades but not a clear and unified trend (Vassanji, "Is There?" 8). These writers loosely hang together, like segments of an unfinished jigsaw puzzle: not quite fitting but belonging together as they complement each other in time and space, and together they span the literary record of a collective experience (Vassanji, *A Meeting* 63).

Despite the critical stance by which a writer matures when he begins to talk of his "Canadian experience," these South Asian writers have shown the opposite. Diasporic writing is not, however, a narrative of heroic deeds. Nor is it a narrative of oppression and victimization, the narratives privileged these days. It is a narrative about mundane things, about day-to-day lives of people who did not 'resist' but colluded with the empire. And to the extent that it does not position itself as the voice of the colonized, it is written from a hard place:

When one is positioned as the wronged party and can write about generations of oppressions, it is a position of moral rightness. And there is nothing more powerful than this kind of writing. It is the position that rightly belongs to those Fanon called "the wretched of the earth." It is the position that belongs to African Americans and the aboriginal people in North America. It is the position that Afro-Caribbeans and Indo-Caribbeans seem to be fighting about to determine who has suffered the most. (Mukherjee, *Oppositional* 172-73)

Vassanji and other writers write about unheroic people and this requires an understated style that stays clear of lyricisms and tragic events. These characters usually show allegiance to the colony, his narratives speak from that space of collusion and collaboration. His Indians admire the British might, and he brings it out, however embarrassing it sounds. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, we read:

It was 1953, the coronation year of our new monarch who looked upon us from afar, a cold England of pastel, watery shades, and I was eight years old. They had rather refined accents, their language sharp and crystalline and musical, beside which ours seemed a crude approximation, for we had learned it in school and knew it to be the language of power and distinction but could never speak it their way. Their clothes were smart; their mannerisms so relaxed. (Vassanji, *Vikram Lall* 9)

Vassanji writes of conflicting interests and divided loyalties but he refuses to participate in the heroic narratives of freedom struggles. Unlike many other African and Indian novelists, he writes about the distinct ethnic groups, the Arabs, the Swahili, the Masai, the Shamsis or Khoja and so on. His special take on the master narratives of freedom struggles reminds us that much too often they wipe out embarrassing realities whose memories might make us less self-righteous (Mukherjee, *Oppositional* 178). As the narrator, Vikram Lall, comments:

I have wondered sometimes if I took the easy way out, but always come out with the answer, No. To the African I would always be the Asian, the Shylock; I would never escape that suspicion, that stigma. We lived in a compartmentalized society; every evening from the melting pot of city life each person went his long way





home to his family, his church, his folk. To the Kikuyu, the Luo were the crafty, rebellious eggheads of Lake Victoria, the Masai awkward naked nomads. The Meru prided themselves on being special, having descended from some wandering Semitic tribe. There were the Dorobo, the Turkana, the Boran, the Somali, the Swahili, each also different from each other. And then there were the Wahindi—the wily Asians who were not really African. (Vassanji, *Vikram Lall* 287)

The new diasporic subject reflects and wonders about his own identity, about his possible failure in integrating as an invisible other, always remaining in-between. Narrated by Vikram Lall, a disreputable middle-aged businessman, from his new home on the shores of Canada's Lake Ontario, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is an epic tale of modern Kenyan history, mapped out amid the major transplantations of the Lall family. In the course of about five decades, three generations of Lalls have migrated across three continents in a westward movement followed by a growing number of African-born Asians. As a young man, Vikram's grandfather Anand Lall is shipped from British India—along with tens of thousands of other indentured laborers—to an alien country across the seas to work on the grand Mombasa-Kampala railway. In this adopted land, Vikram's father, Ashok Lall, runs a grocery store in Nakuru before moving to the capital, Nairobi. But the bloodshed engulfing this troubled land has yet to touch the 8-year-old Vikram, growing up in Nakuru. Every Saturday morning, in a parking lot near his father's grocery store, Vikram plays with his little sister, Deepa, their English friends, Bill and Anne, and Njoroge, the black grandson of the Lalls' loyal Kikuyu gardener. By naming his main Kikuyu character Njoroge, Vassanji seems to recall Kenya's preeminent postcolonial writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. But in his complex, politically ambivalent portrayal of African's Asian community, Vassanji appears to be mocking Ngugi's depiction of Kenyan society through the manichean prisms of class struggle and nationalism (Jacinto 31). Indeed Vassanji's view of Kenyan Asians appears as ambivalent as his "in-between" protagonist's identity crisis. There's Mahesh Uncle, a veteran of the Mahatma Gandhi's Indian Freedom struggle and a Mau Mau supporter, and Ashok Lall, a stereotypical Punjabi, loyal to the Queen and a member of the Asian Home Guard troops used by the British to suppress the blacks. And by far the most racist character, Vikram's mother, whose vicious squashing of Deepa's romance with Njoroge mixes the worst Hindu traditions with the nastiest elements of colonialism.

For Vikram, the ambiguity of his identity will morally and emotionally cripple him in later years as he turns—impassively and without too much reflection—into a money-changing middleman. In the newly independent Kenya, where power has shifted to a group of black elites headed by Jomo Kenyatta, the country's first president, Vikram's community has suddenly slunk from protected colonial collaborators to potential victims. Wealthy, apolitical and intentionally keeping themselves culturally and economically apart from black Africans, the Indians face two possibilities: pack up and flee to Britain or survive amid political corruption. In this climate, Vikram is the ideal invisible go-between, the middle-man who can be trusted to transfer slush funds and hold awkward secrets. Years later, while snow-

bound in his Canadian home-in-exile, Vikram is dispassionate about the moral choices he has made:

I am actually quite the simpleton. I long believed that mine were crimes of circumstance, of finding oneself in a situation and simply going along with the way of the world. I've convinced myself now that this excuse is not good enough [...] that's what many of the killers in Rwanda would also say. Thank you stars you did not find yourself there during the genocide, going along, as you say [...]. There are different ways of killing Mr Lall. (Vassanji, *Vikram Lall* 372)

While Vikram has sought refuge in Canada, this new country seems to barely impinge on his consciousness, intent as he is on recording his past in a distant, dangerous land. Vassanji's Africa is an inhabited space, where the baggage of history jostles with the actions (or passivity) of its inhabitants, and where hope, generosity and personal responsibility wrestle with despair, greed and corruption. Its people are in-between, the feelings of belonging and not belonging are very central to the book: "and so the years pass and before you know it you've lived here decades and unwillingly, unwittingly, belong. *Belong*, I echoed her word and asked myself, Can I too learn to belong here?" (Vassanji, *Vikram Lall* 370). The question of what it is to be home arises when he presents the experience of the South Asian diaspora as a life of dislocation seeded in a history of transplantings. The landscape of memory becomes a more significant place of habitation than the real place and the South Asian's existence is characterized by ambivalence.

A number of key questions are elicited at this point. When a Canadian writes a novel primarily about Africa from the perspective of a South Asian, to which national literature does the text belong? Is Vassanji's text, then, postnational, crosscultural or a part of Canada's quest for nationhood in the literature of its writers? Just as the concepts of history and home are found to be shifting, unfixed and constructed, 'nation-ness' and national literatures are problematized as well (Bucknor 15). Is there any danger involved in the inclusion of these other writers as part of the national literature of such countries as Canada? As Mishra suggests,

diasporas may be romanticized as the ideal social condition in which communities are no longer persecuted. But diasporas also remind settler nation-states in particular about their own past, about their own earlier migration patterns, about their traumatic moments, about their memories, their own repressed pain and wounds, about their own prior and prioritized enjoyment of the nation [...] We need to look at people's corporeal or even libidinal investments in nations (as denizens or as outsiders); we need to read off a modernist 'transcendental homelessness' against lived experience... and we need to think through critically the effects of the aesthetic (as dialogic expressions, discrepant discourses or as 'minor' literature) on both diasporic and host citizens. (Mishra 21)

The remains of the past are also frequently assembled by the imagination to form a new, and kaleidoscopic, design, one which, in Homi Bhabha's words, "does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the



performance of the present” (7). It is Stuart Hall who most effectively sums up this point in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”:

Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference [...]. It is because his New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to the “lost origins” [...]. And yet, this “return to the beginning” is like the imaginary in Lacan – it can neither be fulfilled nor required, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery. (Hall 235-36)

Our interest in Vassanji’s novels centres not on the liminality of the Indian settler, on his anxieties of ethnicity, but, rather, on his continuous crossing of ethnic and cultural boundaries; the Indians who have made Kenya and Tanzania their home, whether Hindu or Muslim, may be deeply rooted in their individual cultural traditions, which originated in India, but they themselves do not look back at India (Barat 90). Nowhere in these novels do we see a present that is unmarked by the past. It serves primarily as a frame that the narrative throws around a multilayered recollection of the event being described. No place is significant except insofar as it is like or unlike other places.

Vassanji’s use of the multigenerational saga is a crucial manifestation of the immigrant narrative’s continuous project of straddling several times, spaces, and languages. As the narrative maps the lives and travels of several generations, it also marks the changing political map of the world in which these generations live. The Shamsi sect, though invented by Vassanji, is similar to existing organizations. The sect has a worldwide network that serves as a support system for wanderers or immigrants who need to be made at home in an unfamiliar place. Immigrants articulate a sense of home amid homelessness by building on familial and communal ties, ties that intrude on the individual’s sense of independence and self-interest in ways that only family is allowed to do. Vikram Lall comments in first person:

I simply crave to tell my story. In this clement retreat to which I have withdrawn myself, away from the torrid current temper of my country, I find myself with all the time and seclusion I may ever need for my purpose. I have even come across a small revelation —and as I proceed daily to recall and reflect, and lay out on the page, it is with an increasing conviction of its truth, that if more of us missing verb? Our stories to each other, where I come from, we would be a far happier and less nervous people. (Vassanji, *Vikram Lall*, n. pag.)

Partly a novel of exile, of longing for a home where one was not fully at home, partly a *bildungsroman* charting an increasing loss of innocence and idealism, this novel also talks about corruption, violence with the Mau Mau uprising, producing fear and insecurity. The ‘in-betweenness’ of the title is more than that between a Kenyan past and a Canadian present: the Asian was the brown presence between the white rulers and the Africans. *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is



“political and historical, social and moral: public immorality finally is also private – that is, of the individual” (Sarvan 84). The parallels with V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* are obvious. Like Naipaul’s Ralph Singh, Lall is caught in violent events beyond his emotional and psychological capacity to respond to. Lall is, however, a much simpler character than Singh; he has been formed by two experiences: as a member of a racial minority that does not rule, he has always felt that the colonizers and the natives must be more at home in their bodies and in the world than he himself is. He is certain that Indians in India must also be more real than he is. Lall has suffered trauma as well: he is unable ever to know love because, when he was eight, he had given his heart to a white girl who was murdered by the Mau Mau. The children’s friendship symbolizes the promise of the nation on the verge of independence:

I call forth for you here my beginning, the world of my childhood, in that fateful year of our friendships. It was a world of innocence and play, under a guileless constant sun; as well, of barbarous cruelty and terror lurking in darkest night; a colonial world of repressive, undignified subjecthood, as also of seductive order and security –so that long afterwards we would be tempted to wonder if we did not hurry forth too fast straight into the morass that is now our malformed freedom. (Vassanji, *Vikram Lall*, n. pag.)

Love in nationalist novels leaps across politically unbridgeable chasms, such as intercaste, interclass, and interracial marriages and sexual unions. Though such “impossible loves” are doomed to fail, according to Anderson, their presence in the nationalist novel serves to eroticize the nation by making its narrative one of love and passion. Vikram’s sister, Deepa, in love with the African Njoroge personifies this frustration when their parents reject their union:

What do you mean you will marry anyone whom you want? Apa exploded. We are not Europeans, remember that, we are desis, Indians. Proud Indians, we have our customs, and we marry with the permission and blessings of our parents!... She and Njoroge had declared their love and committed themselves to each other the previous morning. When she revealed that declaration to me [...]. I recall a shiver at the back of my neck, a quiver of excitement, of fear for them both.... She did not seem to understand the seriousness of her offence, not to me but to the values of our times and people. We did not marry blacks or whites, or low-castes or Muslims; there were other restrictions, too subtle for us of the younger generation to follow: Hindu Punjabis were the strong preference always. Times were changing, certainly, but Deepa in her typical impulsive way had leaped ahead of them. [...] Get this in your head, Deepa, he is an African, Papa said. He is not us. Not even in your wildest dream can you marry an African. What do you mean? What’s wrong with an African? I am an African. What hypocrisy!... Mother took a deep breath and replied, there’s nothing wrong with being an African or Asian or European. But they can’t mix. It doesn’t work. (Vassanji, *Vikram Lall* 185-89)

Vassanji emphasizes the racial dynamics of the country, especially the degree to which the Indian diaspora in Kenya created an exclusive world from which



outside entry was impossible. Even then, though, one of Vassanji's key characters, Deepa, never breaks off from her African lover Njoroge and is finally rejected by her people. Vikram himself marries Shobba, daughter of the owner of Javeri jewelers, as a mere formality and seeks love elsewhere. Against the backdrop of the Mau Mau rebellion, Kenya gets its independence, and its first president, an ex-Mau Mau himself, is Jomo Kenyatta. The latter's ascendancy as the leader of all East Africans is short-lived as corruption spreads and the economy begins to collapse. Still, interesting as the political and economic contexts are, they are not significant to the craft of Vassanji's fiction. Two matters emerge in Vassanji's version of the twice-displaced diaspora. First, the East African Indian diaspora in Canada cannot replicate the vibrancy of life in Africa where, in the end, even Vikram Lall's conservative father ends up with an African mistress. Second, there was in the racial/sexual dynamics of life in East Africa an emotional substratum that can only be captured in art (Mishra 171-72).

As Rocío Davis comments, the negotiation of place and the attempt to recreate a home through memory and writing have been a common undertaking for many writers in the new literatures in English (323). It is the fragmentary nature of these memories that makes them evocative for the 'transplanted' writer who is concerned with either developing or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place. For these writers, setting is of particular value, since their home locations have been historically constructed as peripheral (Davies 324), and thus "the intersection of language and place is at the very centre of post-colonial identity politics [...]. [Writers] from these locations struggle to construct a viable representation of the 'self' as a located 'self'. At stake here is [...] a landscape against which the 'I' can authentically figure" (Warley 25).

The themes of Vassanji's discourse are indeed frequently a concern for many other South Asian writers as well as is nostalgia for the past which must be recaptured in memory, one with which the protagonists also must come to terms. There is also the desire for a future, unknown, promising, yet also intimidating, in a setting where the discourse changes from the familiar to the strange. In many of Vassanji's texts there is an acculturation process at work, and the pain involved in it is described with particular insight in his second novel, *No New Land* (1991), a text set both in Canada and in Dar es Salaam, peopled with characters who live between two worlds (Burke 99-100): "We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our past stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off" (Vassanji, *No New Land* 9). However, usually the conflicts in the narrative between the protagonist's memory of true community in the past and his desire for a new life are never really resolved through the events of the plot line. What Vassanji seems to be expressing, with a gentle pessimism, is the difficulty of achieving integration for the first generation. Such desires will be accomplished by the children, but at a price as well. The immigrants are discouraged from looking back, but when they do it all news is bad.

If the construction of nations must remain open, then literature which presents myths of those constructions is likely to be dynamic. The new Canadians who write participate in that construction even if, at first or for the rest of their



lives, they write with their attention elsewhere. Yet, according to Frank Birbalsingh, “[i]f Canadian literature is defined as literature written about Canada, most South Asian Canadian writers tend to become more Canadian the longer they stay in Canada” (94).

While it is clear that nations emerge and literary traditions change, there has been scepticism regarding the acceptance of both immigrants and their literature as integral to Canada. As Birbalsingh points out in the context of South Asian Canadian writers, despite Canada’s own projection as a multicultural space, “the citizenship of their characters is less full-fledged than promised, partly because of their own reluctance to give up the cultural baggage they have brought to Canada, and partly because of the hostility or inhospitality they encounter here” (94). Arun Mukherjee also constructs the ‘ethnic writer’ as ‘melancholy lover’ and establishes Canadians as anxiously afraid to accept the foreignness in themselves. Neither writer makes an explicit connection between the pull and push factors. Perhaps the two reasons are not unrelated, but the problem is not a simple one. Birbalsingh and Vassanji outline South Asian writing in Canada as preoccupied with alienation and displacement. Other immigrant writers like Dionne Brand expose racism, and Canadian dub poets have complained about the exclusionary practices of the literary establishment. Immigrant writers do not support an image of Canada as the great mosaic. Moreover, Vassanji argues, individualism predominates. The fact that “there appears to be no cross-cultural movement in the writing; no borrowing, no cross-reference as South Asian and as Canadian” (Vassanji, “Am I?” 12) supports his claim. But perhaps it is too soon to see the cross referencing. When higher levels of integration arise, the literature and the criticism may begin to reflect it.

Vassanji’s own works might be seen as taking a step forward, since the acceptance of diasporic literature as Canadian literature may contribute to the myth that multiculturalism is somewhat effective. If immigrant literature participates in the construction of the nation, then it may help people accept an emerging Canadian society made up of peoples of different colours and backgrounds. It is clear that the sense of unbelonging is not the same for all groups; for some it is a function of landscape, for others it is culture, for yet others it is race: “Belonging in any one place requires a judicious balancing of remembrance and forgetting. Writing on the discourses that inscribe the modern nation,” Bhabha states: “It is this forgetting [...] that constitutes the beginning of the nation’s narrative .... It is through this syntax of forgetting—or being obliged to forget—that the problematic identification of a national people becomes visible” (Bhabha 310).

Nevertheless, Vassanji’s point above foregrounds the need to assess the extent to which Canada’s great promise of inclusion is effectively operating (Bucknor 24-5). The inclusion of Vassanji’s texts in Canadian courses reveals a desire to break with the institutional perpetuation of rigid categories and indicate the role that literature can play in moving ‘beyond’ such limits. On the one hand, the construction of Canadian literature as an *inter*-national body levels the field for writers and recognizes a commonality that is always differently expressed. As Canada continues to evolve, the inclusion of all kinds of immigrant writings (not only literary prize winners like Ondaatje, Mistry and Vassanji) may indicate the arrival of the great





mosaic. On the other hand, the shifting nature of the South Asian diaspora has drawn new and rigid borders sometimes impossible to trespass. Where is home? What is a nation? What ought to be considered national literature? These questions remain significant in Canada today.

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