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"Asians in Africa": Examining the Implications of the "in-between" place and Hyphenated Identities in M. G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*

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Abstract

As a writer of the diaspora, M. G. Vassanji has travelled three continents: Asia, Africa and North America. As a result, he is in the best position to write about homeland, past, memory and identity. The memories and heritage associated with homeland eventually gives identity to the characters. This identity becomes hyphenated over the years post migration. The place of origin provides identity, roots as well as a sense of belonging to an individual. The notion of identity is deeply connected to one's homeland. Vikram Lall, though has roots in India, establishes tender connections with Nakuru (his birthplace) in Kenya. For him, Kenya is the homeland, whereas for his grand father Anand Lall, his father Ashok Lall and mother Sheila Lall, India is the motherland. The notion of homeland varies for every person and generation. It is only during his self-imposed exile in Canada that Vikram feels a strong longing to return to Kenya. Even though the Indians have made Kenya their home, the Africans do not wholeheartedly accept them. The Asians were not treated fairly and thus were pushed to an in-between position. Vassanji dexterously articulates the predicament of the double migration of his characters. Their displacement, dislocation and the eventual disillusionment finds a comprehensive account in the novel.

Keywords: Memory, Homeland, Identity, In-between, Hyphenated, Ancestral.

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Introduction

Moyez Gulam Hussein Vassanji is an Afro-Asian author who was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 and brought up in Tanzania. He shifted to the USA after having obtained a scholarship and presently he resides in Canada. Vassanji is primarily placed in the diasporic realm as he has vaulted three continents. Therefore, issues related to homeland, past, memory and identity predominantly gain a centre-stage in his novels. The characters ascribe special attachment to their respective homelands. Vijay Mishra writes, "Recalling homelands from a diasporic space is not uncommon among writers of the diaspora" (179). This can certainly be attributed to M. G. Vassanji. In his works the significance of the ancestral place in the lives of the characters can be seen. As the characters are always on the move, it is but natural that the memories of their homeland cling to them dearly.

Summary of the Novel

M. G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) won the celebrated Giller Prize for fiction. It is notable to indicate that M. G. Vassanji is the only Canadian writer to have won this award twice. It is a poignant novel of corruption, vulnerability and grief that focuses on the convolution and mayhem of Kenyan society over the past fifty years. The novel is plentiful in imagery and historical insights and contains an overwhelming story of obsessive betrayals on one side and political carnage mingled with racial tension on the other. The novel begins in 1953, with the eight-year-old Vikram Lall testifying the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. At the same time, the Mau Mau guerrilla war for independence from Britain begins to gain force. In a land torn apart by idealism, scepticism, political upheavals and horrifying acts of violence, Vikram (Vic) and his sister Deepa endeavour to find their place among a new generation in Kenya. Neither colonists nor African, neither white nor black, they find themselves exactly in between in their group of companions: Bill and Annie, children of a British couple, and Njoroge, an African boy. We follow Vic through the changes in the East African society, the enormous promise of the fifties and sixties. Eventually, those hopes come tumbling down. The hideous face of betrayal, corruption and violence gains momentum. Vic is drawn into the Kenyatta government's course of power-broking. Njoroge, his childhood pal, can neither forsake the charm and belief in his youth nor his pure love for Vic's sister Deepa. No one could control Mwangi, the gentle gardener and Njoroge's grandfather, who is the dreaded Mau Mau oath-giver. He is brutally killed by the British. Mahesh Uncle, Vikram's charismatic uncle, is a surreptitious Mau Mau sympathizer and also a Marxist revolutionary. He is later deported to India by the new African leaders. Njoroge's idealism ultimately leads to his assassination. Only Vikram ascertains the capricious disposition of the period appropriately and shrewdly refuses to take sides. He desired his place in the middle and scrutinizes events as they occur in quick successions. This is where the title of the novel gains momentum.

Vikram Lall always finds himself "in-between" the relationships both on the personal as well as the political front. He feels himself as a facilitator for Njoroge and

Deepa when they meet each other. Both of them find a trustworthy confidante in Vikram. His married life doesn't last long. Vikram is made the scapegoat of the political storm that sweeps Kenya. Wealth and holdings centred only among the rich and as a result the capitalist model of economy was a sheer failure. He was made to be a part of the lethal game where money changes hands. This covert operation with its ever-widening nexus demanded much caution and discretion on the part of VikramLall. It is enthralling to observe Vikram who is always caught in-between people, politics, family members, situations and events. As a catalyst to a situation or a relationship, he feels smothered and is caught between two worlds. He says, "I didn't believe I was anymore guilty than a hundred others, and I was certainly less guilty than many I could name" (Vikram Lall, 376). Because of the Gemstone Scandal, money started disappearing from the national treasury. Influential and greedy politicians like Paul Nderi manipulated VikramLall because of his Asian-African identity. His own financial investments landed him in the company of the prestigious and powerful Kenyans. He remarks about his plight, "And I the guilty one in the middle, the perilous in-between"(Vikram Lall, 279).

At the end of the story, we find Vikram Lall coming back to Kenya from his exile in Canada with efforts to patch up with the Kenyan Government and to disclose the identity of the people involved in the scams which made him a scapegoat. However, coming out clean is not easy for him. The novel as a bildungsroman is a record of Vikram's life and the circumstances which victimise him.

Focus of the Paper:

This paper predominantly focuses on two main ideas:

1. The past or the homeland of the characters which is the place of "memory". It is the ancestral place of the characters in discussion.
2. The memories and heritage associated with homeland eventually gives iden tity to the characters. This identity becomes hyphenated over the years post migration. Here, the insinuation of the in-between space is elaborated.

The ideas of homeland and place of birth figure prominently in the novels of the diaspora. For a writer like M. G. Vassanji straddling the three byzantine continents of Asia, Africa and North America, place becomes a strategic issue which he has precisely worked upon. In the contemporary scenario, globalization, transnationalism and multiculturalism have become vital concepts. Citizens today are inclined to shed their parochial and nationalist tendencies in order to adopt a global and a universal outlook. The question then arises as to why the topic of ancestral place or the homeland is given undue attention. The answer, of course, is a veritable part of the question itself as the very word 'ancestral' has links with history, heritage and place. The place of origin provides identity, roots as well as a sense of belonging to an individual. The notion of identity is deeply connected to one's homeland. An individual is assigned with an identity as he is associated to a particular place. The homeland, thus, plays a fundamental role in the formation of identity. The individual's past is essential in determining his present. The characters in Vassanji's novels operate largely

on past and memory. Their ideas of their homeland form a substantial part of the novels. Since they leave their motherland and move elsewhere, they are always anxious of their future in a different country.

Negotiating in-between Place and Hyphenated Identities in the Novel:

Vikram Lall pledges his allegiance to Kenya. As a Hindu – Punjabi (Indian) in particular and an Asian at large, he belongs to the third generation of Indians in Kenya. In a conversation with Njoroge he openly asserts that Nakuru was his home and that he never wanted to return to India:

> And would the Asians go home to India? I didn't want to go to India... I knew of no world outside my Nakuru, this home, this backyard, the shopping centre, the school; this town beside the lake of flamingos, under the mysterious Menengai crater where we sometimes went on family picnics, passing the European area on the other side of the tracks. *(The In Between, 49)*

It is indeed remarkable for Vassanji to give a Hindu-Punjabi identity to his protagonist Vikram Lall. His grandfather like many others came to Kenya as an indentured labourer to work on the railways. Since then, the family made Kenya their home. Vikram is particularly attached to Nakuru. He only heard about India from his parents. For him, Nakuru is his home and he is very much close to it. He says quite explicitly,

> We have been Africans for three generations, not counting my own children. Family legend has it that one of the rails on the railway line just outside the Nakuru station has engraved upon it my paternal grandfather's name, Anand Lal Peshawari, in Punjabi script- and many another rail of the line has inscribed upon it the name and birthplace of an Indian labourer. *(The In-Between, 15)*
>
> Anand Lal, my dada, stayed on in the new colony after his indentureship, picked Nakuru as the spot where he would live. *(The In-Between, 16)*

Vikram always wondered, "What makes a man leave the land of his birth, the home of those childhood memories that will haunt him till his death-bed?" (17). As his grandfather had made his home in Nakuru, the family stayed there for the successive generations. The involvement and contribution of the indentured labourers from India in Africa has been colossal. Vikram, in fact, pays a gleaming tribute to those labourers in the following passage:

> The railway line running from Mombasa to Kampala, proud "Permanent Way" of the British and "Gateway to the African Jewel," was our claim to the land. Mile upon mile, rail next to thirty-foot rail, fishplate to follow fishplate, it had been laid by my grandfather and his fellow Punjabi labourers-JumaMolabux, Ungan Singh, Muzzafar Khan, Shyam Sunder Lal, Roshan, Tony – the cast of characters in his tales was endless and of biblical variety – recruited from an assortment of towns in northwest India and brought to an alien, beautiful, and wild country at the dawn of the twentieth century. Our people had sweated on it, had died on it: they had been carried away in their weary sleep or even wide awake by man-eating lions of magical ferocity and cunning...

(The In-Between, 15)

In *The Gunny Sack* too there is a reference to the railway line construction by Indians. Dhanji Govindji narrates to JiBai his adventures to the innermost parts of the African continent as a part of his search for his half-caste son Huseni.

> The railway goes all the way to the lake in the interior, and everywhere the train stops there is an Indian settlement. The line was built by our Indians, every station master is an Indian and every conductor is also one of us. Our people are doing well under the British, Bai. *(The Gunny, 35)*

Even though the Indians have made Kenya their home, the Africans do not wholeheartedly accept them. When Mwangi, Njoroge's grandfather and the family's gardener asked Vikram's mother why the Indians have been delaying going back to their homes in India since they have made enormous fortune in Africa, she retorted, "But they don't want to go, it's been a long time, Mother told him. This is their land too now, where their children and grandchildren were born. Isn't that true?" (106) In the same way, Paul Nderi, the Transport Minister and also Vikram's boss comments cynically about the Indians, "you people have your feet planted in both countries, and when one place gets too hot for you, you flee to the other" (314). In response to the minister's disrespect for the Asians, Vikram contradicted, "It's rather that "we people" as you call us, don't have a place anywhere, not even where we call home" (314). This riposte by Vikram fittingly reiterates the dilemma of the Asians in Africa. There is no such thing as permanent home for the Asians who are considered as in-between by the Africans.

Vikram's mother had visited her homeland India twice since her father's death. Now she believed that "India was calling her, that she was ready to end her African sojourn and return finally home" (315). For her, getting back to/her homeland would provide ultimate solace and peace. Allon Gal, Athena S. Leoussi, Anthony D. Smith write about this condition in the introduction of their book *The Call of the Homeland: Diaspora Nationalisms, Past and Present:*

> The similarities and differences between the host country and the diaspora's homeland are also relevant and important: frequently, the greater the contrast between the modernity of the host country and relative backwardness and conservatism of the country of origin, the weaker the attachment. By the same token, when the homeland is relatively developed and dynamic, and somehow attuned to the emigrants' destination, the diaspora tends to consistently sustain the homeland and cherish its call. (Gal et.al. xv)

Vikram Lall's mother is shown as a typical Hindu-Punjabi Indian woman who decorated her room with idols of Indian gods and goddesses. She was resolute in opposing Deepa's decision to marry Njoroge voicing resolutely that inter-racial marriage is not an Indian custom. Even in Africa, Vikram's mother endeavoured to keep their traditional customs thriving. Gijsbert Oonk notes about the people of South Asian origin in diaspora:

> They may want their children to prosper in their adopted countries, but at the same time they may prefer them to adopt Indian family values, marry other

> Indians, and share their common culture. In other words, many South Asians living overseas tend to reproduce their Indian culture, values, language and religion as much as possible. (Oonk, 9)

Sarcastically, in the end of the novel we see that Vikram's father (after his wife's death) lives in with his African mistress. The novel portrays Vikram's childhood in detail. He evokes the family gatherings every Sunday, when topics of mythology, politics, sports, trade and commerce would be debated with genuine and sincere interest. In the present when he is in Canada, he tenderly recalls "Nakuru, the place of my childhood" (303) and it was there during his childhood that he spent those happy moments which now are a part of memory, "...and we were all alive and the world was wonderful" (45). There are obvious references to the ancestral places of Vikram Lall's parents. The feeling of exile experienced by his mother and his uncle are also elaborated in the novel. Vikram's mother encounters a sense of exile as her homeland is lost to Pakistan.

> When Rama's exile was the subject of the stories, it was never far from our consciousness that Mother and her brother shared a deep sense of exile from their birthplace, Peshawar, a city they would never be able to see again because it had been lost to Pakistan. And since Peshawar was the ancestral home also of my dada Anand Lal, the rest of our family could somehow share in that exile, though not with the same intensity. *(The In-Between, 85)*

Vikram takes pride in his "Nairobi Punjabi Hindu" (221). Years later, the family moved to Nairobi for widening their horizons in education and business. India, however, "was always fantasyland" (19) to him. Members of the first generation of migrants have a greater affinity towards their homeland. Gijsbert Oonk explains how migrants' sense of belonging in a multicultural location has various implications.

> The diaspora as a *type of consciousness* emphasizes the variety of experiences, a state of mind and a sense of identity. This is described as *dual or paradoxical nature*. This nature has various connotations. First, it refers to the experience of discrimination and exclusion, and at the same time, the positive identification with the highly praised historical heritage of the Indian civilisation. Second, the awareness of multi-locality, the notion of belonging 'here' and 'there' as well as sharing the same 'roots' and 'routes'. The awareness of the ability to make a connection here and there, making the bridge between the local and the global. Third, double consciousness creates a 'triple consciousness', that is, the awareness of the double consciousness and being able to use it instrumentally. In addition to the identification with the host society, and the homeland, there is the identification with the locality, especially in the discourse of multiculturality. (Oonk, 18)

Vikram Lall belonged to Kenya and had an identity there. The identity is a hyphenated one. He is an Afro-Asian who follows Hinduism. In a meeting with Lieutenant Soames, he declared and upheld his Kenyan citizenship zealously, "I said I was a Kenya citizen and currently studying in Dar es Salaam" (235). In a letter to Mzee Kenyatta requesting a personal favour, seeking permission for Mahesh Uncle to

enter Kenya as a permanent resident, Vikram makes a direct reference about his ancestor's service to the nation, "Your Excellency may not be aware, I wrote, that my family's service to the nation did not begin with me. I informed him that my grand father had worked on the construction of the railways" (307).

As a matter of fact, Part 4 of *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is circumspectly titled 'Homecoming'. As soon as Vic lands in Nairobi, he sensed that, "There is something immeasurably familiar in the cool Nairobi night that tells you,you are home, that for better or worse, this is where you belong" (382). Once when his father stated that they could also have joined the emigration rush to England after independence, Vikram replied, "We stayed because this is our country. And Mother would have gone to India, not England – you know that" (384). Here again, Vikram endorsed his Kenyan national identity apart from being a Hindu-Punjabi with roots in India. R. Radhakrishnan mentions that "the diasporic location is the space of the hyphen that tries to coordinate, within an evolving relationship, the identity politics of one's place of origin with that of one's present home." (Radhakrishnan, xiii)

In Korrenburg, Canada, he feels alienated and detached though he feels that it is a "calm retreat" (371). Here, he gets plentiful time to ruminate and to come up with a plan to get back to Kenya. It is going back to Kenya – his homeland that is foremost on his mind. Seema Chatterjee, his friend in Canada asked him if he "unwillingly, unwittingly" belonged to that place i.e. Korrenburg, Vikram doubtfully asks himself, "Can I too learn to belong here?" (370) He immediately wanted to return to Kenya and settle things with the government and to come out clean.

> Do I belong here – in this wonderful country where the seasons are orderly, days go past smoothly one after another? This cold moderation should after all be conducive to my dispassion? No. I feel strongly the stir of the forest inside me; I hear the call of the red earth, and the silent plains of the Rift Valley through which runs the railway that my people built and the bustle of River Road; I long for the harsh familiar caress of the hot sun. *(The In-Between, 371)*

This same feeling resounds in an essay titled "Canada and Me: Finding Ourselves" by Vassanji. He is compellingly attached to Africa as he has his roots there. Of course, one cannot forget the place where he/she has childhood memories. As a young boy he used to go along with his mother for shopping and realized the struggles that a young widowed mother faced. He writes of his days in Africa where he spent his happy childhood:

> I remain strongly attached to Africa, the continent of my birth; its music, the sight of its grasslands, its red earth, or its mighty Kilimanjaro, stir me to the core. I have happy memories of my childhood there. (Vassanji, 20-21)

Vassanji dexterously articulates the predicament of the double migration of his characters. Their displacement, dislocation and the eventual disillusionment finds a comprehensive account in his works. One is left to ponder about the far-reaching effects of migration on the characters. Amin Malak observes,

> What distinguishes M. G. Vassanji's work from that of other Canadian writers is its vibrant, affectionate depiction of the double migration of his South Asian

> characters. These mainly Indian Muslims of the esoteric Shamsi sect make their first voyage to East Africa in the late nineteenth century as part of the labour mobility within the British empire, working as semi-skilled labourers, small traders, and junior colonial functionaries. As such, they are installed as a buffer zone between the indigenous Africans and the colonial administration. (Malak, 182-183)

Conclusion

Vassanji interrogates his own community's history in his works. He writes at length about the Gujarati traders who migrated to Africa in the late 19th century. Africa and America are the background for his portrayal of Indian lives. Though he migrated to Canada from the United States, his emotional bonding with Africa is unequivocally truthful. A sense of identity and nostalgia about one's homeland has always been exhibited in the writings of the Indian diaspora. Writing from a hyphenated space M. G. Vassanji illustrates that multicultural identities constantly get ripped apart with respect to their language, class, race and gender differences. These disparities get transmuted and reconfigured in the trans-local spaces. The notions of homeland i.e. the places of memory are remembered over and over again. Consequently, the emotional, political and cultural affiliations of the characters become inextricably linked to their identities.

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