



A Study of Diasporic Sentiments and ‘Trishanku’ Consciousness (Gujarat-Africa-Canada) in M. G. Vassanji’s No New Land

DR. SALONI S. NANDAN

Faculty of English

R. C. College of Commerce, Ahmedabad.

Gujarat (India)

Abstract:

Diaspora Literature mirrors the life of the migrants and the uncertainty that surrounds and fills them in the alien land and the struggle they face to discover their own identity. They are situated in a complex space between several worlds and cultures: they can neither forget their home country they have come from and which would be different if they returned to it now; nor can they fully assimilate into the new land they have adopted. The prime focus of this paper is the study of diasporic memories, sentiments and consciousness that the characters in Vassanji’s novel No New Land experience while living in a postcolonial society. The writer’s concern is not new here. In 1906 Haji Lalani from Gujarat travelled to Africa, but in 1970s when the situation in Dar became unsupportable, his son Nurdin Lalani with his family set on another voyage to Canada. Canada’s multiculturalism, cultural diversity and liberal democracy do attract the migrants but soon they realize that it cannot appear as a new land for them. Canada is a land of opportunities but at the same time it becomes the space of cultural dislocation. Uma Parameshwaran uses the term “Trishankus” to indicate the state of the Indian diaspora. No New Land is Vassanji’s second novel which describes how Indian immigrants struggle to find their place in host countries such as Africa and Canada. Through this paper, my endeavour is to explore the phenomenon of the second and subsequent diaspora and understand new facets of diversity in the Indian diaspora.

Keywords: *Diaspora, homeland, nostalgia, roots, struggle, double consciousness, multicultural Canada.*

Diaspora is not just physical displacement but it refers to a feeling of nostalgia accompanied by alienation. The immigrants feel that they have snapped their roots, and have several issues related to identity. They have a mental image or illusion about their original homeland and continue to feel emotionally attached to their native country. They are not able to cut the umbilical cord—the dynamic pull from the country of their origin. After defeating Ravana in Lanka, Lakshman wanted to take over the gold-made kingdom of Lanka but Ram refused and said:

अपि स्वर्णमयी लंका न मे लक्ष्मण रोचते ।
जननी जन्मभूमिश्च स्वर्गादपि गरीयसी ॥

(युद्ध कांड)

The immigrants do not find it easy to give up their mother country since it constitutes their essence and thus feel absolutely the outsider in the adopted land. Safran refers diaspora to the expatriate minority communities who are:

“Dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places. They maintain a memory or myth about their original homeland; they believe they are not, and perhaps cannot, be fully accepted by

their host country; and they see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return and a place to maintain or restore.” (Diasporas in Modern 83)

These expatriates want their next generations to continue with their traditions, language, and ethnicity while living in the reallocated nation. They deduce that they have not been fully accepted and fully integrated into the country they are living in and therefore feel partly alienated and often humiliated in the host country.

Writers of the Indian diaspora in Canada tend to portray these cultural contradictions and the vicissitudes of everyday life. The characters in their works come together from various cultures with new expectations and dreams and new business ideas to the developed countries but very soon they realize that it is difficult for them to adjust, adapt, assimilate and integrate into the new environment where they face some sort of discrimination from the host culture. Homi K. Bhabha in his exemplary work *The Location of Culture* discusses that, “it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history- subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement- that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking” (172). In the wake of fresh challenges, the characters desire to go home but occupational and monetary exigencies keep them glued to the new country. Salman Rushdie in the *Imaginary Homeland: Essays and Criticism* stated that migrants “straddle two cultures ... fall between two stools” as they suffer “a triple disruption” (5). Uma Parameshwaran in her notable work on diasporic understandings entitled *Writing the Diaspora: Essays on Culture and Identity* uses the term “Trishankus” or “The Nowhere Men” (27) to point out the state of the Indian diaspora. Trishanku’s predicament is analogous to that of the diaspora who have left their homelands behind them and at the same time do not feel at home in the country that they have emigrated to. Their pendulous state between several countries and cultures and their nonentity compel them to look for the definitions of their identity and they need to etch space for themselves in the new land. According to Prof. Milton Israel who was the Resident Director of the Shastri-Indo Canadian Institute, Delhi:

“For many Indians, Trishanku represents a journey continuing long after their arrival in Canada-a psychic oscillation between old home and new-apparently assimilated over time but reminded of their distinctiveness and sent back to recover an understanding of who they are.” (In the Further Soil 85)

This saga of global up rootedness and unstable migration is dramatised in Vassanji's *No New Land*. M. G. Vassanji is a diasporic writer who writes about the migration and displacement that takes place in the African nations like Kenya, Tanzania. The facets of ‘diaspora’, ‘ambivalence’, ‘in-between space’ that are portrayed through the lives of the protagonists are quite similar to the personal life of the writer. He was born in Kenya, brought up in Tanzania and studied in the United States before coming to Canada to settle there. He himself is a victim of several migrations so the sentiments and apprehensions of marginality and alienation are very well infused by him in his characters. *No New Land* is Vassanji's second novel which describes how Indian immigrants struggle to find their place in host countries such as Africa and Canada. The narrative of the novel is a fictional documentary which exhibits the agony of the double migration of Shamsi community, “an Indian Muslim sect, [...] somewhat unorthodox, hence insecure” (*No New Land*. 13). In 1906 Haji Lalani from Gujarat travelled to Africa as an apprentice to an Indian firm. Soon he prospers and sets up his own shop like other Asians who emigrated under the ascendancy of British. His son Nurdin Lalani too achieves a respectable place in Africa as a shoe-salesman. But when African independence and nationalization movements of the 1970s make the situation in his hometown of Dar unsupportable and when Lalanis are denied economic sustenance in Tanganyika then Nurdin like other Asians embark upon another voyage in search of sustenance and migrates to Canada with his wife, Zera, and their two children, Fatima and Hanif. The second voyage begins in the sixties from postcolonial Africa towards Canada considering it as a “Shangrila for international refugees” (Kavitha M. G. “Vassanji’s 2012). But this second wave of migration by these characters makes them realize very soon that Canada cannot appear as a new land. Like a keen

observer Vassanji portrays how the immigrants have no option except to keep on living on the alien land and discovering:

“We are but creatures neither of our origins, and however stalwarts we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, and the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off” (No New Land 9).

These words are so much in consonance with the opening epigraph of *The Desirable Daughters* where Bharti Mukherjee writes:

“No one behind, no one ahead. The path the ancients cleared has closed. And the other path, everyone’s path. Easy and wide, goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way” (12).

The novel *No New Land* depicts the hardships that the characters have to undergo while living in an alien society or ‘Third Space’ as in Bhabha’s term where two or more cultures meet. The immigrants that go and live in Canada, take up jobs and try to adapt to the multicultural environment and by virtue of their nationality, they become contributory towards a multiethnic society. But their memories of the country of origin constantly keep coming up as points of comparisons and nostalgia. Within such turmoil the quest for their identity can be defined in the phrase: “hybridity, double consciousness and subalternity” (Moreiras *Hybridity and Double* 1999).

The plot of the novel revolves around the predicament of the Lalani family who are relocated to Canada which is considered to be a land of hope with promising prospects. Canada figures as an inexhaustible reservoir of consumable commodities as Vassaji writes: “you’ll want more. And you will get it. This is Canada.” (No New Land 36–37). The dawning of pleasant feeling and exhilaration when one sets its foot on Canada installs an illusion that all the monetary differences might be shelved, but when people from developing countries like Africa and India enter Canada they are welcomed by a series of negative experiences:

“These are the first days and you hate yourself for arriving in winter. Braving the punishing cold, you beat the footpaths, searching for vacancies. You don Yonge Street, then Bloor, Dundas, and Queen, the East End, then the West. Taking refuge in donut shops” (No New Land 44)

The Lalanis abode in Toronto represents a microscopic view of the India’s macrocosm in Canada. Canada is a land of opportunities but at the same time becomes the space of cultural confusion and disconnection. People give much preference to the colour of the skin rather than the person. This first experience of the overwhelming winter can be seen as the representation of the cold and aloof behaviour of the host country. Rohinton Mistry in his short story *Squatters* says that:

“The Multicultural Department is a Canadian invention. It is supposed to ensure that ethnic cultures are able to flourish so that Canadian society will consist of a mosaic of cultures—that’s their favourite word, mosaic—instead of one uniform mix, like the American melting pot. If you ask me, mosaic and melting pot are both nonsense, and ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigner” (168).

We find that the characters in the novel move back and forth between Indian practices and Canadian reality in order to pursue a better livelihood. They are prepared to bear hardships, cultural shocks of unfamiliar policies, contrariness of climate and are even inclined to live far away from their family, relatives, and friends all for the desire of attaining economic security.

In *No New Land* Vassanji by portraying different incidents draws the attention of the readers on the themes of deportation, estrangement, nostalgia, identity crisis, the quest for self in alien culture and

community. The eagerness to create one's own familiar dwelling place and space in the newly adopted land is evident from the characters' anxiety. Nurdin desperately attempts to transcend the difference and create a space for himself in the new country:

"Taking refuge in donut shops, using precious change to make phone calls doomed by the first word, the accent. I am a salesman, I was a salesman. Just give me a chance. Why don't they understand we can do the job. "Canadian experience" is the trump they always call, against which you have no answer. Or rather you have answers, dozens, but whom to tell except fellow immigrants at Sixty-nine. You try different accents, practice idioms, buy shoes to raise your height. Deodorize yourself silly" (No New Land 44).

There is a Herculean task of learning the new language and understanding the new culture before the migrants may even fully accustom themselves with the new land. The difference in culture and language keeps emerging in Nurdin's continual attempts to secure a job other than the "daily jobs, invariably menial" (65). Though Zera gets the job immediately and the children easily adjust to the new situations, Nurdin finds himself jobless and rootless. It seems to him awkward to find himself fed by his wife's earnings.

Vassanji through his characters in the novel beautifully portrays some Indian traditions and customs. Touching the feet of the guests always signifies welcoming an elderly person with respect in Indian tradition. When the Missionary comes to Nurdin's apartment, the females dressed in white, welcome him in a traditional way by touching his feet and cracking the Knuckles and by garlanding him. At another instance when Nurdin and Romesh visit Sushila's house at Kensington Market they do not forget their Indian tradition to take sweets and fruits along with them. The Indian flavours can be experienced through the cuisines and the manner in which they are prepared that Vassanji illustrates in No New Land:

"The cookers at Sixty-nine are on full blast. Saucepans are bubbling, chappatis nest warmly under cloth covers, rice lies dormant and waiting. Whatever one thinks of the smells, it must be conceded that the inhabitants of Sixty-nine eat well. Chappatis and rice, vegetable, potato, and meat curries cooked the Goan, Madrasi, Hyderabad, Gujarati, and Punjabi ways, channa the Caribbean way, four-fou the West African way" (No New Land 65).

Sixty-nine Rosecliffe Park becomes a miniature homeland and indeed a zone of comfort for the immigrants.

Roots play a significant role in the lives of immigrants. The Lalani's live in Rosecliff Park which is a small heterogeneous locality comprising of Asians migrated from Africa. This diverse neighbourhood tries to live in an Indian-Canadian-Asian way. Their behaviour, attitude, and modes of life all seem to be formulated by their roots. Nurdin has his roots in India. His father went to Africa many years ago with certain innate Indian characteristics. Nurdin inherited these characteristics and came to Canada with them. Only two things give happiness to Nurdin and other immigrants: the past memories and their own community people in the host country. Nurdin feels alive when he sits in the armchair looking at CN tower's blinking light through the open window of Sixty-nine Rosecliffe park:

"The CN Tower blinked constantly in the darkness. At times like these, all to himself, he would on occasion think of the old days.... of his stern old father who had terrified him so much...of his brother and sisters and the family...of his schooldays... of his buddy, Charles, and the days and nights they spent in the forest together on their way to sell Bata shoes....." (No New Land 169).

These are not just the memories with which the immigrants are able to survive the daily travails of the alien land but also are able to create their identities. Stuart Hall in his article on “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” says:

“Diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference... It is because this 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” (236)

Nurdin while remembering his past life always feels proud of his father who could manage the family well which Nurdin fails to do. The series of past memories bring some smile on immigrants’ faces.

Another aspect which surfaces in the diaspora is that their children are attracted by western culture and they wish to adopt host culture than their homeland culture. Nurdin's children imbibe the Canadian ways of living and even detest their father who does menial jobs. They stand for the transformed Asian-Canadians who are immigrant children and they face the problem when they mingle with children of other communities. To avoid this comparison they learn to follow host culture and become a stranger in their own homeland.

“One envies these children, these darlings of their mothers, objects of immigrant sacrifice and labour, who speak better-sounding if not better English: one envies them, their memories when they are grown –up. Take this girl in hijab, standing in the elevator, head covered, ankles covered, a beautiful angular face, long body, who could have come straight from northern Pakistan. But when she opens her mouth, outflows impeccable Toronto English, indistinguishable from that of any other kid’s discussing what?-last night’s hockey game. In her arms, covered with a decorated green cloth, is a heavy book also apparently in hijab. She’s on her way to Quran class, on the fourteenth floor. What will she remember when she is twenty, thirty, what will she write?” (No New Land 63)

The restlessness of a diasporic life, crestfallen dreams, agonizing experiences and cultural differences are some of the important issues discussed in M.G. Vassanji’s No New Land. In Canada, their condition is totally different as they are always in dilemma about following their culture or host culture. The cultural implications of globalization demand a double perspective. The author’s description of transplanted people swinging between their past and present is worth noting:

“This was the thing to do, act like Canadians, for chrissakes! All this playing cards and chatting and discussing silly topics while glugging tea by the gallon and eating samosas- is not Canadian” (No New Land 129).

Nurdin Lalani epitomizes the attributes of a person who has forsaken his individual respect and individual identity with the homeland. He finds that the old world and its values still pursue him.

Residing in a new country is beset with risks and challenges, economically as well as culturally which means the diaspora has to either be strong or become strong in order to survive and succeed in the adopted land. Most of the immigrants suffer when issues of race are raised. Each and every immigrant encounters this once in her/his life. When they arrive in Canada or any other developed nation people start to pinpoint them because of the colour of their skin. There are people of mixed identity living in Canada which is a nation with assorted legacy but at times this racial discrimination can turn violent too. Nurdin is accused of raping white girl merely because he is of different skin colour:

“Instinctively he hurried towards her, parking the trolley on the way. “Madam-Miss – is anything wrong? Can I be of any help?” He tried again. “Miss, shall I call a doctor?”... “RAPE!” she cried. “He’s trying to rape me!”(No New Land 179)

The girl is an immigrant as she is a Portuguese and dwells in a different locality of fishermen and butchers. But after this incident, everyone looks at Nurdin with suspicion and labels him as a rapist without investigating. Everyone believes the girl because she is white. This made Nurdin excessively enraged on this society where people give importance to race and colour. “I thought in this country a man was innocent until proved guilty,” said Romesh, Nurdin’s friend (No New Land 180). But all is not as it seems. In the entire novel we can see there is a thin veneer between the reality and the seeming appearance.

Thus Vassanji has prolifically sketched the transitional phase in an individual’s life interwoven within the multicultural setting of Canada. No New Land is one of the best novels which explore the life of immigrants especially the people who migrate for the second time. Nurdin and his family are the examples of people who are suffering out of their homeland. More than one migration is not always easy; it makes people lie suspended between different cultures. Multiple migrations make people seek their identity in their homeland and as well as host country. Vassanji writes about the frequent oscillation of his characters setting them in a crucial and even controversial situation where they for the longing of getting something, lose something else. They long for their nostalgic past to a great extent in their endeavour to adjust to the new land. People constantly live in the dilemma as once they leave their homeland it becomes extremely challenging and tough to return back and one often asks a question: “why step foot into a world in which we don’t belong” (No New Land 148).

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