

Asian Resonance

Diasporic Experience of Exile in the Novels of M.G.Vassanji

Abstract

Exile is the migration of people from home land to host land. Such a passage may be voluntary, involuntary or a combination of both factors. The exile of the Jews during the Greek and the Roman times was under duress, involuntary and unwilling. Today a large number of Indian professionals migrate to other countries in search of greener pastures. This brain-drain is almost voluntary. In the novels of M.G.Vassanji, there are many varieties of migrations and exiles. The protagonists in his novels yearn to be treated as African natives. Yet, this is just a wishful dream. The plight and predicament of these diasporic settlers is marked by discrimination. They desire to belong but the Africans do not treat them as natives even though they were born in Africa. M.G.Vassanji has portrayed the experiences of the Diaspora in exile from multiple angles.

Keywords: Diaspora, Exile, Racial Discrimination, Ethnicity, Colonialism.

Introduction

All losses are fearful but the most terrible and traumatic loss is being uprooted from one's home. No one would like to be driven out of one's home, yet it has been the luck and lot of man since time immemorial. Man, also, is a social animal. When a member of a social set-up is forced to go away, his heart, his soul, his conscience, his psyche- all suffer sharp and painful pangs. To be with those whom you love and like, admire and approve, esteem and prize is the greatest bliss and happiness that man can dream of. Exile under duress is the most horrifying calamity that can befall man. The first people to be driven out of their home were Adam and Eve and therefore are one of the first Diaspora of the world. The process of exiling has been there since the earliest stages of human existence. The word 'exile' comes from the Latin word 'exilium' which means banishment or expulsion of a person from a country or home. There is compulsion and helplessness. Exile implies isolation, loneliness, deportation; expatriation, etc. thus, exile means to be away from and to be unable to return home. Exile can also be voluntary absence from one's native country. Exile highlights the psychological and emotional effects of loss which outgrows from one's dislocation from the homeland.

Objective of the Study

This Paper attempts an analysis of how Diaspora and Exile are inter-related through the novels of M.G.Vassan Ji. This paper focuses on the themes of M.G.Vassan Ji: theme of exile, migration, immigration, refugees etc and shows how it is very difficult to stay away from home i.e. heaven.

Review of Literature

Exile is not unknown in history. In the epic Ramayana, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were sent out of Ayodhya because their step-mother wanted it that way. In Rome, the Senate had the power to send people on exile. Sometimes, a large group or nation as a whole is exiled. Such a nation is known as Diaspora or a nation in exile. In Post colonial situation, the term 'exile' acquires a new sense and significance. Bill Ashcroft et al. state that "the condition of exile involves the idea of separation and distancing from either a literal home land or from a cultural and ethnic origin." (Bill Ashcroft et al 92). There was, of course, a time when the terms 'exile' and 'Diaspora' were held valid specifically for dispersion or scattering of Jews. In this age of globalization, exile is often chosen condition accepted for the hope of a better life. Those who settle abroad can't sever their connections with their ancestral lands and continue to look back nostalgically. The literature about exile objectifies anguish; the losses inflicted by exile are basically personal losses. In *Reflections of Exile*, Edward W. Said remarks, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human



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being and a native place, between the self and its true home: it's essential sadness can never be surmounted."(Said 173) True exile means a loss that cannot be made up. Yet, it has been employed as a powerful and enriching motif in modern culture. Said says that modern period is "spiritually orphaned and alienated."(Said 173).

If the terms 'exile' and 'Diaspora' are scrutinized in their proper perspective, it will be discovered that they have a very large overlapping area in common. The term 'Diaspora' belongs to a network or complex or structure of concepts which are couched in such terms as exile, migration, immigration, expatriation, émigré, refugees, etc. by and large, these terms convey almost the same thing i.e. leaving the home under various pretexts. 'Diaspora' itself is a word from the Greek language describing a process of sowing the seeds by scattering them. The Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary offers two meanings of the term 'Diaspora' as follows:

1. The dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel.
2. The dispersion of any people from their homeland.(Soanes 228)

Diaspora literally denotes "communities of people dislocated from their homelands through migration, immigration or exile."(Braziel et al 4). Most people have suffered the anguish of diasporic scattering throughout history, yet the people who have faced the torture and torment of diasporic experiences the most, are the Jews. A human being's vulnerability to dislocation or exile is evident in various circumstances and incidents by which it is necessitated. Diaspora was also formed from the displacement of natives of Asia and Africa from their homelands as indentured labours for agricultural plantations and railway constructions during colonial period. The Europeans established their hold or grip over a large number of countries and converted them into their colonies. For this, a sizeable population of the Europeans settled in the colonised countries and created a diasporic movement. These migrations involved the settlement of millions of Europeans. This had far-reaching effects almost all over the globe.

Diaspora and Exile

In neo-colonial era, the term 'Diaspora' has been applied to voluntary migrations of skilled workers, intellectuals, academicians and professionals to the developed countries like England, Canada and the U.S.A. for better job prospects. With the passage of time, the number of diasporic people is increasing very fast. The people from once colonized nations are migrating to the developed nations and are contributing a lot in their progress and development of these foreign lands. Several thousands of professionals, students on scholarship, business men, artists, writers, scientists and teachers are moving from formally independent countries to the developed nations because these countries remain economically or culturally dependent on West. During colonialism, enormous global shifts of populations occurred as the colonizers used a wide range of practices like trade, plunder, enslavement, and warfare to establish their empire. In the 21st century, the immigrants from decolonized nations are being

appropriated and exploited by Europe for the growth of its own industry. In neo colonial period, the rule of Europe is indirect. The immigrants in these lands have to face various dilemmas. This phenomenon is taking place all over the world. This development adds new dimensions to the idea of exile. The diasporic groups are so many that it is a problem to categorize them. Each individual has his own angle and each family has its own nostalgia. Diasporic settlers lead a life of tensions, ambivalence and uncertainties. The state of Diaspora suggests a sense of loss and separation from home by willing or unwilling dislocation from a literal homeland or from a cultural or ethnic origin. Migration from one culture to another distorts ethnic identity of the migrants. The loss of motherland invokes visions of 'imaginary homelands' that the immigrant wants to recreate on the alien land. Being a Diaspora means to be at the receiving end. Homelessness is a curse and affliction. The discomfort that the diasporic settlers suffer is real and substantial. The hot reception that the Diaspora migrants suffer varies from place to place, time to time and ethos to ethos. In the African countries, the sufferings and privations of the Indian diasporic migrants were real.

Since the beginning of Indian immigration, the colonizers used Indians to maintain their authoritative administration in African continent. Indians always sided with the government in order to keep themselves secure. During German colonial period, the Indian settlers helped the Germans to advance their colonial interests who used oppressive whipping system to subvert the anti-colonial Maji Maji movement. The Indian Diaspora showed no sympathy for the oppressed locals. After World War-I British government set up viable economic infrastructure in this zone to boost the trade. By 1939, the situation of Indian Diaspora was one of relative privilege. Their position was somewhere between the European community at the highest rung and the local Africans at the lowest rung in the scale of privilege, power and prestige. The Indian Diaspora extended absolute cooperation to the colonizing officers to subjugate the African anti-colonial rebellion, i.e. Mau Mau which led to the friction between the two communities. In East African countries after independence, the Indian Diaspora encountered resentment and violence for being indifferent and unconcerned to wretched and pathetic condition of local Africans. In the independent colonies, they became victims of racial hatred which installed fear and insecurity in their minds. They were exposed to exploitation and harassment in the name of socialization and Africanization planned by foxy African politicians like Idi Amin in Uganda, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania. The process of Asian Exodus in 1973 was initiated in Uganda by Idi Amin which later on seized other African nations also. Because of impending danger to their ethnic and racial identities in the wake of economic and racial injustices, a good proportion of them migrated to Britain, Canada and the U.S.A. those who did not migrate to Europe or West found that their privileges were curtailed by the nationalistic governments.

The diasporic space in the words of Salman Rushdie is, "not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy." (Rushdie 15). The writers of Diaspora delve into the problems of homelessness, alienation and cultural conflicts through their fictional and non-fictional works. In the contemporary South-Asian writing, the writers like Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, V.S. Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Meera Sayal, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharathi Mukherjee and many others are depicting the diasporic experiences most poignantly. Themes and techniques of their writings revolve round the traumas and tensions of displaced identities in foreign lands. Another name that has begun to loom large over the diasporic horizon is that of Moyez Gulam Hussein Vassanji. He is an Indo-African Canadian writer who has passed through multiple diasporic experiences himself. He is the descendent of Indian immigrants in East Africa. He was born in racially stratified colonial Kenya and was brought up in Tanzania. Later on, he settled down in multicultural Canada, where he now writes about the bitter experiences of South Asian Diaspora in Africa. The good reviews of his first novel *The Gunny Sack*, which was published in 1989, helped Vassanji to become a full time novelist and end his career in Nuclear Physics. He and his wife founded and edited *The Toronto South Asian Review (TSAR)* which has survived under a new name: *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*.

He has written six novels so far: *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), *Amrika* (1999), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), and *The Assassin's Song* (2007). In addition, he also has to his credit two short stories collections: *Uhuru Street* (1992) and *When She Was Queen* (2005). In all his works, his major concerns are "the complex issues of exile and migration, as well as communalism and its impact." (Yasmin 2008). Vassanji's prose is successful in capturing the pangs of dilemma which vex a diasporic identity, be it the old diasporic subjectivity or the new generation. Vassanji's works depict double migration of his South Asian characters. All his novels are noteworthy for elegant and lucid writing. His characters move and restrain the reader at the same time. He deals mainly with the diasporic experiences of exile. Sometimes, his novels go back into the remotest past to suggest that exiling has been the luck and lot of the progeny of Adam and Eve since the remotest times. In fact, the phrase 'the burden of exile' applies as much to him as to any other writer immigrating to the West.

In his first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji gives an account of the clouded history of a Shamsi migrant family whose ancestor Dhanji Govindji migrated to East Africa in 1885 in order to escape economic instability in his native village in Gujarat. Salim Juma, the narrator, is one of the heirs of Dhanji who receives the ancient gunny sack containing the forgotten relics of the past from Ji Bai. Vassanji describes how the four generations of the Shamsi community pass through a variety of historical realities: German imperialism, British-German war in the region, British colonization, anti-colonial

movements which led to liberation of East African colonies and subsequent exile of Asian Diaspora from Tanzania under the influence of Idi Amin. The novel traces countless events and episodes in the history of family through three sections entitled 'Ji Bai', 'Kulsum', and 'Amina' respectively. There are hints about miscegenation in the family of which Dhanji Govindji's clan wants to get rid of by burning the gunny sack as this ancient memento might disclose their Negro blood.

No New Land is the second novel of this celebrated novelist. The novel focuses on the ambivalent process of cultural negotiation that an Afro-Indian family undergoes in an alien land. Nurdin Lalani and his family reach Toronto, Canada after losing their foothold in decolonized Tanzania. They seek adjustment in a new country without compromising their customs and traditions. They select Don Mills which is only a suburb of the town for their residence. They are horrified to find that they can't get rid of the world and its values. Nurdin Lalani is a genial orderly at a downtown hospital. There is a charge against him that he has assaulted a girl, but he is totally innocent and blameless. Yet, he has a strong sense of propriety which urges him to test the purity of his own thoughts. Ultimately, he enters into a friendly association with Sushila, an enlightened woman. This provides him an attractive chance to free himself from a troublesome past that haunts him. He begins to look beyond a marriage that has become routine. He also breaks free of the difficulties of dealing with teenaged children. Vassanji introduces the reader with a cast of vividly drawn characters who belong to an immigrant community. He is a keen observer of lives which have been caught between one world and another.

The Book of Secrets, Vassanji's third novel, is an award-winning novel. How history may affect the present and how personal and public histories may overlap is a major theme of this novel. It is the personal history which is contained in the diary written in 1913 by Alfred Corbin, a British colonial administrator. The novel portrays Asian community's history in East Africa through this diary which Pius Fernandes, a retired school Goan teacher, living in Dar es Salaam, finds in 1988. The events recorded in the diary gradually connect the past with the present and help to reveal the colonial tensions in which the Asian community was caught up in East Africa. The narrator learns about the past of the Shamsi community once living in Kikono under the colonial rule and discovers that he himself is revisiting his own personal history. The reader gets a chance to comprehend the fates and lives of a large mass of exiles who taste the bitter-sweet experiences in a distant land called Canada. This spell-binding novel is rich in detail and description. It explores how human beings come to terms with the vicissitudes of life when they live in exile from their homes and from themselves.

Amrika is another marvellous work of fiction by Vassanji. It is a novel which features personal and political awakening. The story covers three decades and explores the eternal quest for home. *Amrika* is a novel of betrayal, disillusionment and discovery. It

pertains to three stormy decades in the history of America. Ramji, a student from Dar es Salaam, arrives in America. The New Land is poles apart from the land he had been dreaming about. It is a land beset with anti-war demonstrations, revolutionary ways of life and spiritual quests. Ramji finds that he is under the pulls and pressures of the stormy upheavals of these troubled times. Events sweep him away like a straw in the wind. The aftermath of these tempestuous episodes would continue to give him sleepless nights. Decades pass and there are phenomenal changes in America. Ramji has recently walked out of a marriage and suburban way of life. He is passionately in love in spite of his progress in years. He finds that he has walked into set of horrifying circumstances and these events hover and hang over him horrendously. All these disturbing reminiscences and distressful recollections of the past pose unanswered and unanswerable questions and queries ruthlessly.

Vassanji's fifth novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* has been hailed as "a political, a historical or a coming-of-age novel" (Apte 2008) which deals with the problem of political and personal survival of the Indian Diaspora in colonial and post colonial Kenya. Vikram Lall, the protagonist, narrates the history of his family that is twice alienated, first from their family in India whose village has become a part of Pakistan after partition of India and then from the majority population of Kenya. Vikram, in self-imposed exile in Canada looks back over the last fifty years of his life. The Lall family that sided with the British colonizers during the colonial era paid a heavy price for hobnobbing with the British in post-independent Kenya. Vikram became a pawn in the new Jomo Kenyatta regime and came to be known as the most corrupt man of Africa. The author also vividly portrays gruesome killings of British Bruce children, the childhood playmates of Vic during Mau Mau anti-colonial movement. These killings forced the Lall family to move from Nakuru to Nairobi, a safer place where Vikram's father became a real estate agent after the independence. Njoroge re-enters the lives of Vikram and Deepa to renew his friendship. Deepa is determined to marry Njoroge but her mother opposes this inter-racial marriage tooth and nail. Vassanji describes the complexities, anxieties and difficulties of an Indian immigrant family in a foreign land that seeks adjustment but is rejected on account of being Asian in the new decolonized Kenya.

The Assassin's Song is Vassanji's sixth great novel. This is the first novel that has been set principally in India. the novel's present pertains to the year 2002, the times when Karsan Dargawalla, the narrator, returns to his village. This is the period following terrible communal riots in Gujarat. In 1960, Karsan was a child-heir to the Pirbaag shrine in Gujarat. As he grows up, he struggles with the burden of divinity. His role as 'gaddi varas' comes in the way of his desire to train as a cricketer. He takes a bold decision to immigrate to the U.S.A. and avails of a Harvard scholarship. He leads a busy life in a suburb when a tragedy changes him into a hermit. He is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim because the Dargaas

are neutral. The novel deals with the dangers of taking a neutral position. The book takes the readers back into the 13th century also, when Nur Fazal arrived at the gate of Patan and people began to worship him. He became the Pir Bawa. His legacy would fall on the shoulders of Karsan centuries later. Finally, it is wasted life vacillating between duty and individuality. Karsan is really a hollow man and the forces outside his control sweep him on all sides.

All the novels of Vassanji are novels with post modern components and constituents. They violate the paradigms of the plot as laid down by Aristotle and his apostles. The novels depict the fables not of one hero, one heroine and one villain, etc. On the other hand, Vassanji flings his net much too wide. The upshot of this approach is to create such situations that enable the novelist to record and trace the vicissitudes of some families over many generations. Vassanji traces the history of three or four generations in his novels. It is natural that there should be fundamental changes in the life of the men and women who constitutes these three/four generations. The setting is provided by the volatile, unstable and unsettled situation in the East-African countries. Human moods and dispositions change from generation to generation. The uncertain and unpredictable politics disturbs the diasporic exiles who try to weather the political storms and tempests as best as they can. No surprise if the status of the different generations undergoes unforeseen and unforeseeable changes as the hands of the clock moves forward.

The various terms like exile, migration, immigration, etc. grow from one basic and fundamental reality, which is couched in the word 'home'. The concept of home itself is slippery, devious, tricky and shifty. The novels of M.G.Vassanji show that the East African Asians cannot make use of history to reinforce their claims to East African countries as home. This, according to Godwin Siundu, is the outcome of "the shifting mean of home as defined and understood by the majority of East Africans, those widely seen as indigenous to the place." (Siundu 2007). In the native countries, there is no place so sweet as home. It is a reality that people keep shifting their places of residence. U.S.A. and Canada, India and Nepal, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Iceland are a compact unit where entry is without any passport system. Thus, there is no final concept of home. Some people have one foot at one place and the other at a different place. The concept of home becomes very difficult to define in such cases. Multinationals and globalization are undermining the concept of home in their own way. A wide-awake post colonial savant like Salman Rushdie is very pertinent and relevant when he broaches the concept of imaginary homelands. In short, the concept of home is evasive and almost indeterminate. Yet, things can't be left in the lurch like this. There is provocative drama and exciting tension in Robert Frost's celebrated poem, *The Death of a Hired Man*. The husband and the wife debate the concept of home. Silas, their servant, returns. Mary says, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there/they

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have to take you in.”(Frost 48). Almost all critics try to define and delimit the parameters of home. It becomes all the more significant when the status and position of Indian Diaspora in East Africa is subjected to conceptual scrutiny. John McLeod meditates upon the concept of home and states, “...the perilous intermediate position that both migrants and their children are deemed to occupy: living ‘in-between’ different nations, feeling neither here nor there, unable to indulge in sentiments of belonging to either place.”(McLeod 214) McLeod tries to throw light on the in-between world of the migrants and their descendants. This truly is the status of the different generations of the Diaspora in the novels of Vassanji. Amitava Kumar, however, looks at the perception of home from a different angle. He asserts that “the idea of home is delusion; it never existed in safely pure form.”(Kumar xviii). It is indeed harsh to reconcile oneself to the position that the idea of home is a delusion. Yet, the angle from which Amitava looks at the whole situation, some iota of truth does seem to be there.

In *A Bend in the River*, V.S.Naipaul also depicts how a Gujarati Muslim community conducts its trading activities round the coasts. The descendants of Dhanji Govindji face the same predicament as the Gujarati Muslim settlers in Naipaul's novel. The first preference of these settlers is the coastline. Chandani Patel remarks about *The Gunny Sack* and *A Bend in the River*:

These texts offer insights into the relationships between different groups, Indians, Africans and Europeans and illustrate the conflicting perceptions and constructions of identity amongst this migrant community at a time when political policies were unfavourably implemented against its members. The resulting homelessness felt by these Indians causes them to rethink their relationship with Africa and their imaginary homeland, or the India of their minds.

(Patel 2007)

These novels provide insight into two Indian networks, revealing the particular experiences of these members. There is a total mix up of culture also. Indian Muslim community abroad may celebrate the Diwali and recite from the Quran. In Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the Brahmin family celebrates the Christmas. In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri relates how the Ganguly family celebrates Christmas to placate their children. On the whole, both Naipaul and Vassanji record the vicissitudes of Gujarati Muslim traders who are repeatedly uprooted and find their final settlement only in Europe.

Asian Resonance

Conclusion

Vassanji's fiction deals primarily with the experiences of Indian Diaspora in East Africa whose identities are affected by historical and political elements. The colonial history of East Africa serves as the backdrop in his novels. He also incorporates prime historical figures that exercised their authority in the region and influenced lives of the native Africans as well as diasporic settlers. Vassanji alludes to Vasco de Gama, the first European who reached East African coast. Vassanji hints at various multitudes of people who populated several belts of East Africa from all the corners of the world such as Portugal, Arab, India, Germany and Britain. Portuguese subdued the African area in 1500 after whom Omani Arabs established their foothold in the region in the early 18th century. Vassanji speaks of Omani Sultan Seyyid Said Majid in *The Gunny Sack* who took Mzizma by peace and named it Dar es Salaam- the haven of peace. Vassanji has amalgamated history, biography and politics deftly in all his novels. He has made adept use of period details through which his immigrant characters pass through.

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