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No *Entente Cordiale* But An Entanglement: Migration Is No More Alluring in M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*

M. Shanthi, M.A., M.Phil.

On Defining *Diaspora*

The term *diaspora* refers to the movement of any population sharing common ethnic identity who were either forced to leave or voluntarily left their settled territory, and became residents in areas often far removed from the former. The term became more widely assimilated into English by the mid-1950s, with long-term expatriates in significant numbers from particular countries or regions also being referred to as a diaspora.

In academic field, diaspora studies are now well-established, relating to this contemporary, more general sense of the word. In all cases, the term diaspora carries a sense of displacement; that is, the population so described finds itself for whatever reason separated from its national territory; and usually it has a hope, or at least a desire, to return to their homeland at some point, if the "homeland" still exists in any meaningful sense. Some writers have noted that diaspora may result in a loss of nostalgia for a single home as people "re-root" in a series of meaningful displacements.

Largest Asian Diaspora

The largest Asian diaspora outside of Asia is that of the Indian diaspora. It constitutes a diverse, heterogeneous and eclectic global community representing different regions,

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languages, cultures, and faiths. Writers of the Indian diaspora have been fairly centre-stage in the last decade primarily because of the theoretical formulations, which are now being generated by the critiquing of their work and the growing interest in cultural studies. Language and cultures are transformed as they come into contact with other languages and cultures.

Quest for Identity

The diasporic experience includes the quest for identity which has a broad spectrum meaning and it has been manifested in various ways in the will to exist despite all odds and to survive all odds. The diasporic literature focuses on the unsettlement or dislocation of an individual or race and consequent alienation. Alienation leads to a sense of loss but life consists not in losing but in rediscovery of self.

Imaging India to the World

Apart from their political and socio-economic importance, the diasporic Indians have been performing another important role. They have been imaging India to the world. The more recent among the Indian writers in diaspora are Salman Rushdie, M. G. Vassanji, Bharati Mukherjee and Rohinton Mistry, among many others. They too are alternately lauded and reviled in their ancestral homeland. Distance, temporal and geographic, often lends the works of these diasporic writers an “important insider-outsider perspective on India – a perspective of value within as well as outside India” (The quote is from the front page of the book ‘No New Land’ given by M. G. Vassanji).

There’s no new land, my friend, no
New sea; for the city will follow you,
In the same streets you’ll wander endlessly

The pervasive sense of futility is captured in the above epigraph, a quote from “*The City*” by Cavafy.

M. G. Vassanji’s *No New Land*

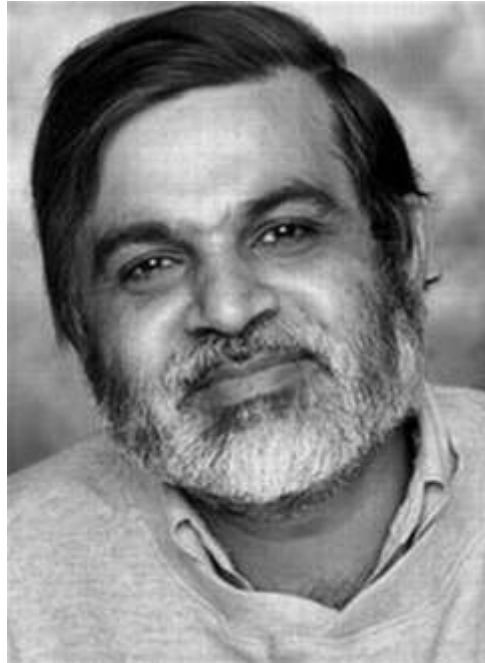
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M. G. Vassanji

Courtesy: <http://dbnweb2.ukzn.ac.za/cca/images/tow/TOW2005/bios/Vassanji.htm>

If one were to speak of what the novel is “about”, it is about the immigrant population in Toronto, forced to begin a new life in a strange and often unwelcoming land, confronted with obstacles, prejudices and disillusionment.

The central figure of the novel is Nurdin Lalani, a former shoe salesman in Dares Salaam, who is forced by changing political realities to emigrate to Canada with his family. He is appalled by the lack of opportunity, and tormented by temptations and repeated failures. Vassanji attempts to explore the immigrant’s journey through the experience to self-awareness.

Impact of Depressing Events

The novel deals with two depressing events in the life of the Lalani family: the young daughter Fatima receiving news of her getting admission to Arts and Science instead of the coveted and prestigious pharmaceutical college, and the father Nurdin being accused of assaulting a white woman. Though angry and dejected, Fatima the young woman of seventeen could accept her plight and decide that “Arts and Science was not so bad after all” (207), she and looks forward to joining the medical school later on. But Nurdin feels defeated and dejected and knows not where to look since the accusation of rape is a charge against not only his innocence but his inbred beliefs on morality. He had been brought up by the disciplines of Islamic religion and his father used to whip his children in German fashion. Sandwiched between the goddess Laxmi in the building of ‘sixty nine Rosecliff Park Drive, a symbol of a burgeoning Toronto and the huge jabbing in the skyrise building of CN Tower,’ between the

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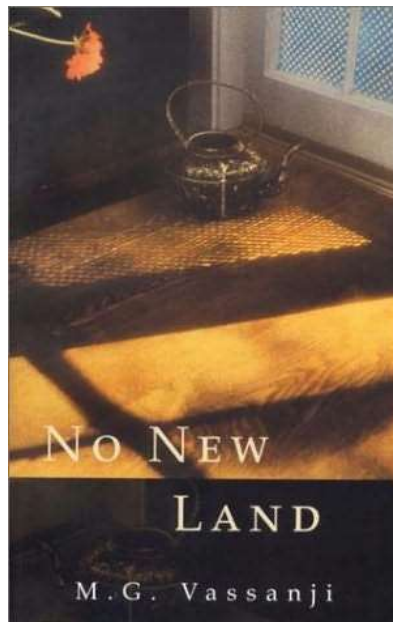
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dreams of the riches, comforts and security and the constant futile battle against the harsh realities of the new land, between the values of his cultural origins and the problems of existence and survival in a new country, the Lalanis are at the crossroads of their life. The novelist comments:

We are but creatures of our origins and however stalwartly we march
Forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our
Pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off. An account of
Nurdin Lalani's predicaments must therefore go back in time and
Begin at a different place. (9)

Nurdin's father Haji Lalani who had settled in Dar-es-Salaam in East Africa was born in an Indian Muslim sect, the Shamsis and was a man of strict disposition, "to whom the harsh German justice epitomized in the whip made of hippo hide and the name 'Hand of Blood' given its wielder by the natives – was not alien in spirit. He could have taken, bought a black woman.....to while away the lonely nights.....Instead he prayed and fasted and became friendly with the Fathers with the sheikhs at the mosques". (13)



The Guilt – Strict Moralist

A German Young girl who is accompanied by her servant girl comes to a gift shop. Haji Lalani happened to see her and found himself staring at her. There was no scope for Haji even to touch her; yet he feels guilty as if he had really raped the girl and believes that he should have been whipped though neither of his friends (Father and Missionary) considers him guilty of any crime. Afterwards Haji decides to marry and settle down in the material world.

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Nurdin belongs to such family background where the father is a strict moralist of the old school where even the desires are considered immoral acts and must be punished. However in Nurdin's case there neither is any desire nor any deliberate action vis-à-vis the white woman.

One morning at 11 o'clock Nurdin was pushing a squeaking trolley with bed linen at the Ontario Addiction Centre at the basement level which was quiet and windowless, but bright and gleaming in the artificial light. In the lobby he saw a girl in blue jeans sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall and her head was lowered. Her face was puffy and red. He hurried towards her and called:

'Madam – Miss – is anything wrong? Can I be of any help?' (178)

As there was no response he almost squats beside her with his hand on her shoulder waiting for her response. Before that moment he had never been so close to a white woman and also he becomes aware of her femaleness. But the response was quite shocking when she cried,

Rape! He's trying to rape me!

Nurdin was taken aback as the situation turns threateningly against him and he goes to his friend Romesh in the same building:

There was an oppressive empty feeling in the pit of his stomach which was to stay with him for a long time to come. (179)

A Cave-like Situation

Vassanji has created almost a cave-like situation, the darkness inside the shop and the windowless artificially lit part of the basement corridor near the elevator. The frustrated plain looking Adella suffers from hallucination in the mystic surrounding of the cave in India, whereas the young white woman cries "rape" to exploit and get money from the plain-looking Muslim immigrant from Africa.

As Forster in *A Passage to India* has made use of the situation to describe the political and racial responses of the colonizers and the colonized, Vassanji uses the situation to highlight the problems that the immigrants face in a new country of the white. Be it India, Africa or Canada, the whites consider themselves superior and accuse the black of crimes they have not even contemplated. The racial prejudices are the same everywhere. It is no Amarpur, not the country where the wells are of gold, pillars of silver, floors that smell of musk and the hearts that are sympathetic.

Exploration of the Psyche of the Rootless

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This episode is central to the novel and Vassanji explores the psyche of the rootless, frightened insecure immigrant Nurdin through this. Neither his father nor his wife ever considered him of any worth. In this alien country even his children despise him, since he could not find any good job and ultimately accepts a menial job quite undignified according to his wife Zera and his daughter Fatima. Zera never lets him near her and he finds himself a lonely unwanted man in the family. His relationship with Sushila, his playmate in Africa is now on the point of turning into a meaningful relationship, when he gets accused of rape. His existence has been so far very painful. In losing the sense of belonging to his country, even to his family, Nurdin has lost the sense of his identity.

In this new country he has only seen the unpleasant side of life both outside and inside his family. There is a sort of Kafkaesque painfulness, agony and isolation he has to undergo in this period of his life in an alien land.

Futility of Explanations

It is through Nanji, the part-time professor at the university, we are made aware of the futility of the western philosophy in explaining the eastern way of life. Nanji, who is always worried about the questions of morality and ethics comments:

The only choice, real choice, man has in the world is whether to go on living..... or to commit suicide, end this absurd existence. (76)

This sounds so Shakespearean – ‘to be, or not to be’ in *Hamlet*.

Nurdin survives his experience through the alternative – of God and Missionary. His experience makes him realize his predicament, the harsh realities of survival and he becomes conscious of his plight.

Impact of Relationship with the Outer World – Freedom from Guilt

It is through his relationship with the outer world, first with Romesh and then with Sushila that he breaks out of his rotten existence, though the guilt of having the companionship of Sushila, the other woman, stays with him and he cannot look into the eyes of his father’s photograph. Next it is the false accusation of rape and his wife’s and his children’s suspicion that really awakens him to his despicable plight, but he feels if they really know about Sushila, they would not doubt his integrity.

With the arrival of the Missionary the clouds of doubt and uncertainties disappear, since the Missionary does not consider him guilty and cuts off the final fearful link to his father. Nurdin feels released from his old ideas of morality, from his past and becomes a new man.

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Rejecting the Existential Relationship with the Culture of the Past

The immigrant has now fully rejected the existential relationship with the culture of his past. He accepts the new cultural situation. It may be painful for the alien to accept it as a price of his awareness; it involves recognition of his own situation in time and space to the total cultural complex of the new world. The absurd drama that his touching a white woman creates is ironically comic; and though he is tortured and tormented in a Kafkaesque manner it is neither on a metaphysical level nor on a tragic level.

At the end when the charge is withdrawn and his innocence is proved beyond doubt he feels that,

the tryst he had almost agreed to – and the freedom it
would have led him to – now seemed remote and *unreal*,
had receded into the distance, into another unknowable world.(205)

Redemption and Peaceful Reconciliation – Ambivalent Affiliation

The experience of being accused of the rape brings about a thorough change in him and makes him aware of his own worth. The novelist has symbolically used the red fez of Haji Lalani to free him from his fear, and sense of being unwanted. And the CN Tower draws him out to the new path of his life – in the new country and new culture.

On the other hand the motif of rape, what Lamming terms “Prospero-Caliban-Miranda syndrome” is used by Vassanji to give new meaning to the existential – exiled life of the immigrant in the country of the white. In spite of Vassanji’s reference to Lawrence Durrell’s translation of C. P. Cavify’s lines from the poem *The City*, “There’s no new land, my friend, no new sea; for the city will follow you, in the same streets you’ll wander endlessly” (<http://laudatortemporisacti.blogspot.com/2009/05/escape-from-oneself.html>), the expatriate is unable to return to the old idea of home despite its certainties and he is unable to find a new one in his adopted land. He becomes aware of the new realities which have to be accepted and in them and through them, he must come to grips with himself.

Thus the condition of ambivalent affiliation is replicated in *No New Land*, where the Asian – African immigrants in Canada are shown negotiating the sense and status of their belonging to yet another continent, country and culture to which they had to immigrate.

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M. Shanthi, M.A., M.Phil.
Assistant Professor of English
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women
Sivakasi - 626 123
Tamilnadu
India
shathashri@gmail.com

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