Frontiers in Health Informatics
ISSN-Online: 2676-7104
www.healthinformaticsjournal.com
2024; Vol 13: Issue 8
Open Access

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF M.G. VASSANJI

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Cite this paper as: Milindra Sukhadeve ,Prof. Sanjay Palwekar (2024), Quest For Identity In The Novels Of M.G. Vassanji. *Frontiers in Health Informatics*, *13(8) 4662-4669*

Abstract: - An in-depth analysis of M.G. Vassanji's novels shows how the characters change in identity and attitude as they travel and double migrate. The characters' constant fear of not fitting in forces them to seek their identities in the new location. M. G. Vassani's story deals with a never-ending search for identity because of an unmet dream they had before their relocation that has become a persistent ghost. The imaginative worlds of diasporic authors like M.G. Vassanji are shaped by this awareness of perpetual exile, the feeling that we belong but no longer do, and a need to return to our place of origin. Arnold Itwaru's aforementioned statement sums up the circumstances facing Indo-Canadian writers from Africa and the Caribbean. M. G. Vassanji, an African Indian who immigrated to Canada in 1978 and joined the University of Toronto as a lecturer and research associate, also revisits his heritage.

His need for a house and his need to establish his religious identity are the two main causes. Both are important and intricate aspects of identity. Two experiences—the psychological tremors of the indenture, a form of exile from India, and subsequently his exile in Canada—have had a significant impact on his writings. He differs from the so-called mainstream literary aesthetic because of this. He is aware that he does not conform to the dominant paradigm of aesthetics and literary theory. He is aware that non-white diasporic writers have been marginalized as "immigrants" by the prevailing Western ideology.

Keywords:- Individual identity, mental, emotional, physical status, Quest for identity, and exile.

Introduction: - As a result, he deliberately selects the group Fanon referred to as "the wretched of the earth." He writes about marginalized, oppressed, unheroic, and hyphenated category individuals. The history of people who are displaced, neither here nor there, is written and

recreated by him. The primary focus of this dissertation is Vassanji's novels, which discuss diasporic Indians residing in East Africa and their subsequent migration to other regions. The impact of these movements on the lives and identities of those who are displaced is the subject of his novels. As a secondary topic, he and other members of his community of Indian Muslims who belong to the esoteric Shamsi sect later migrate again to the United States, Canada, or Europe.

Vassanji investigates how these migrations affect these characters, who serve as a barrier between the native African population and the colonial government. The most significant aspect about him is the imposing presence of India, the legendary homeland. India is a spiritual dilemma for the author as well as for the characters. I grew up in Dar es Salaam, on the East African coast, and the sight and recollection of that city and continent make me feel a strong sense of place and nostalgia, writes Vassanji. However, India seemed to do something to the soul, giving it a sense of comfort, a sense of coming home, and a different kind of nostalgia (Vassanji, 8). For diasporic writers, this yearning acts as a draw. Returning to his roots is what motivates Vassanji to write about his community's members, who are a minority inside a minority. India is significant since she carries his community's mythical ancestry.

Through the character of Ramji, who makes every effort to define who he is throughout the book, the author of Amriika attempts to examine the quest for identity. He finds it quite difficult to accomplish this goal. There are several obstacles in his path. Vassanji presents us with a picture of the country through the eyes of this immigrant university student in Boston. It is the bleak, and not particularly lovely, image of America that lies behind Donna Reed, Madona, Elvis, and the Kennedys. In a setting like this, Ramji is preoccupied with unpleasant emotions. Because of his relocation from Africa to America, he feels as though he has lost all sense of who he is. His desire to fit in seems like a pipe dream. His whole existence has been called into question amid this unfamiliarity.

He believes that he lacks a suitable place to live. He understands that people treat him as an outsider. He experiences inequality and bigotry constantly. He thus gradually requires a place to live. It is the bleak, and not particularly lovely, image of America that lies behind Donna Reed, Madona, Elvis, and the Kennedys. In a setting like this, Ramji is preoccupied with unpleasant emotions. Because of his relocation from Africa to America, he feels as though he has lost all sense of who he is. His desire to fit in seems like a pipe dream. His whole existence has been called into question amid this unfamiliarity. He believes that he lacks a suitable place to live. He understands that people treat him as an outsider. He experiences inequality and bigotry constantly. He thus gradually requires a place to live.

He has an identity dilemma because he is an immigrant. He is still a vacillating figure. Despite his many contradictions religious, ethnic, and personal we never really experience their impact. Vassanji's narrative is icily distant; according to a plan. The three hundred pages don't make Ramji any stranger. At first confident in his identity, Ramji is brought down by the political and civil society pressures of late 1960s Middle America. The trip a migrant or migrant community takes in quest of identity, belonging and security is typically disrupted by uncertainties, difficulties, and never-ending feelings of despair, as the story of Ramji clearly illustrates.

Writing about his community's identity is something Vassanji feels compelled to do. The focus is on the group experience. Individuals are not as essential as the community and kinship relationships. He is a member of the Gujarati Khojas2 community, whose beliefs are influenced by both Islam and Hinduism. Vassanji composes without considering internal contradiction or mainstream traditions, my relationship with India was inexorably characterized

by syncretism, a joyful fusion of mystical and devotional Hinduism and Islam.

At least locally, far from the prying eyes of orthodoxy, the development of such inclusive belief systems was evidence of an essential historical trait of India: tolerance and flexibility, a certain laissez-faire attitude in issues of the spirit (Vassanji, 9). Therefore, in contrast to the Western aesthetics of exclusivism in the name of race, gender, and color, India and Africa offer not just an identity but also aesthetics. Arun Mukherjee's definition of "oppositional aesthetics" (Vassanji, 8) is supported by Vassanji, indicating that Vassanji remains opposed to the prevailing theories of literary and cultural analysis in Europe.

Vassanji states in an essay titled "Community as a Fictional Character": "My literary project has been to trace the origins of a community, its development in a British colony, and the postcolonial era, its dispersal." This allows me to view the current century from the viewpoint of a small village as it changes, becomes more urban-minded, and loses a significant portion of its traditional identity. It is possible to argue that history acts upon such a community, causing it to become part of historical consciousness. But the person in the community is the most important factor in all of this. In a final reversal, they have mythologized the community by fictionalizing it, even as my novels make it historical, mirroring what the modern world has done to it (Vassanji, 13-18).

Due to their lengthy history of multiple migrations, the characters in Vassanji are doubly estranged and removed from their roots, trapping them in the maze of identification. Vassanji attempts to convey these feelings of estrangement and their ties to their land. Vassanji's protagonists travel back to their home countries—Kenya, Zanzibar, Tanzania, Kilwa, or India—to discover their ambivalent connections. They discover that their circumstances are constantly in between. The more they investigate, the more mysterious the identification gets. This identity mystery exists on a spiritual as well as a material and physical plane. Vassanji's debut novel, The Gunny Sack honors the spirit of the early Asian immigrants from India who migrated to East Africa in the early 1900s. Vassanji concentrates on the troubled union of South Asia and East Africa in this book. Most Asian-African characters, like Dhanji Govindji and his descendant Salim Juma in this book, share this need for new homes. The story of the Shamsi community's survival in the face of displacement, racial subordination, marginalization, and oppression is a vibrant tale of alliances, rivalries, triumphs, and setbacks. Stories and recollections of family life as well as the pivotal public events of over a century are interwoven throughout the book.

"Vassanji combines an encyclopedic memory with magisterial literary technique in his first novel The Gunny Sack" and "presents a comprehensive view of its history," according to Frank Birbalsingh's highly significant analysis of this thrilling tale and its technique. He also objectively demonstrates that "the Shamsis — as the Ishmaelis are called in The Gunny Sack—to be preoccupied mainly with survival, and therefore not greatly concerned with moral niceties." (1995, 165) The narrator addresses the gunny sack as an emblem of origin that is rife with identity issues at the opening of The Gunny Sack. It's likened to the endlessly narrating 'Shehrazade' from The Arabian Nights.

These never-ending tales result in a variety of intermediate circumstances for migrants. Because the Gunny Sack is similar to Vassanji's own experience as a migrant writer battling for identity and cultural survival in a foreign land, Vassanji has referred to it as Shehu. In the same way that Scheherazade in The Arabian Nights is forced to create a variety of stories to delay the threat of death due to her fear of dying, migrants are compelled to create narratives with significant elements for social and cultural survival due to the terrifying prospect of marginalization and the fear of losing their identity. Through the character of Salim Juma, M.G.

Vassani contemplates the vast genealogical tree that begins with Dhanji Govindji and concludes with the narrator's solitary and aloof existence.

His great-grandfather, Dhanji Govindji, is Indian by birth. He moved to Zanzibar in search of greater business prospects and became a prosperous and luxurious merchant, as well as the Mukhi of the Shamsi community. It is unclear where the primogenitor Govindji came from, indicating that there were no caste, village, or professional antecedents. His sole assertion of self-identity is that he is a Shamsi, a hyphenated person in terms of religious practice and culture, half-Muslim, and half-Hindu. Huseni, Dhanji's first kid, is a marginalized "half-caste" who is unable to claim his ancestry, illustrating the mystery of identity. The union of a colonizer and a colonized person is represented by huseni.

There is no religious or social legitimacy for this particular branch of the family tree of half-caste offspring, and their identification is uncertain. The narrator, Salim Juma, too has a hybridised identity. He bears the weight of an organized communal memory of the generational quest for selfhood as well as a problematic self-consciousness. His dark appearance and African name, Salim Juma, cause him agony. He is assigned to the farthest National Service camp in Northern Tanzania because of the color of his skin, where he is the only Asian African among many native African coworkers. He experiences ongoing skin shame and outrage due to his pigmentation and fractured identity.

Juma's life is likewise affected by this discrimination, and the sense of exclusion and prejudice forever marks her identity. Juma is unable to find his place in the community and is unable to unravel the mystery of identification. The idea of discontinuity and indeterminacy is thus represented by the family saga genealogical tree connected to Dhanji Govindji. M.G. Vassanji raises the subject of origins in The Gunny Sack, which lacks a set coordination of time and space and instead consists of a few fictitious, fluid locales created by memory. Vassanji addresses the colonial and post-colonial history of East Africa, as well as the conflict between European imperial powers like Germany and England over African territories, by fusing memory and myth with history. The Indians of the East African coast have a difficult future because of the terrible effects of the World Wars and the decolonization of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zanzibar, and other countries. Vassanji uses the nexus of myth and history to negotiate both individual and collective identities. Vassanji provides a voice to the Indian Shamsi community's experiences as immigrants to Canada in No New Land. These immigrants constantly face a destabilizing polemical condition of In-betweenness and are challenged and ruptured by multiplicities of ambivalent attachments. As a result, in an unfamiliar setting, people experience a loss of their inherited native identity.

Vassanji addresses issues of race, culture, tradition, and identity in this book. It centers on the protagonist Nurdin's lifelong struggle with an identity mystery and an unachievable hallucination following his migration to Toronto. In No New Land, the main character attempts to confine himself to his universe. With their ancestors' quirks, Vassanji enhances the characters throughout the book. There is an ambiguous clash between the customs and cultures of the diaspora and the country. Vassanji draws attention to the sense of isolation and exclusion that East Indian immigrants experience from Canadian society at large. The population of Canada is known as a "melting pot" due to the blending of many cultural groups.

Vassanji uses the characters in No New Land to illustrate the contrasts in class, racial discrimination, and generation within this multicultural environment. The identities of these characters are not all the same. They are all lured into a maze of many identities, which is the most prevalent factor. No New Land may be interpreted as Vassanji's own experience, primarily

his African origins, but he reveals the hyphenated identity that the Multicultural Canadian federal government placed on the immigrants through the figure of Nurdin. The diasporic situation of the Ismailia community in Africa and Canada is reflected in the novel. Despite having a straightforward plot, the story is outstanding.

The Book of Secrets, which focuses on Tanzanian history, begins with the end of German colonial authority and ends at the end of the 1980s. African, Indian, Arab, and English cultures were merged in this region of Africa in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The Book of Secrets examines the conflicting identities of Indian and British migrants in East Africa while illustrating the events of the colonial and post-colonial eras. Pius Fernandes, a former Goanese schoolteacher, tells the tale of forbidden liaisons, seething vengeance, family secrets, and cultural exiles. In addition to offering commentary on Corbin's diaries, the narrator puts himself in Corbin's shoes and shares his ideas with us.

Since both of them are outsiders and their identities and status are still unknown, he believes he is closer to Corbin. The Book of Secrets is an intricate work of literature. The story is divided into two main parts: the present, where Pius, a retired history teacher of Indian descent, finds a diary kept by Corbin; and the past, which consists of the diary's entries, the gaps of which Pius creatively fills with his own story. This book tells the story of a person's emotional and physical uprooting as well as their quest for a place to call home in a shifting political landscape where political conflict has caused borders to fluctuate.

The Book of Secrets highlights cross-cultural empathy, cross-cultural marriage, cross-cultural breeding, and homoeroticism across racial and cultural barriers, despite the characters' opposing traits. Gregory identifies with the postcolonial state, Maynard becomes a native and a savage, and Corbin, although being a British administrator, becomes a local. Pius identifies with Gregory, whom he secretly loves, and with Corbin, whose story he tells, while Pipa is recognized as a Shamsi. As a result, the story dismantles the concept of borders and compartment alienations altogether, with characters' identities trapped in mysterious mazes. The Book of Secrets is a far more sophisticated book than Amriika. Nonetheless, the issue of identity and the significance of the past in shaping the novel's plot are equally important.

The novel's protagonist, Ramji, bemoans his current circumstances after his beloved Rubina abandoned him and left him all alone. Ramji receives regular visits from the three college kids whose parents were part of his generation. They frequently talk about "sex and aids, religion and intermarriage, the hang-ups of their immigrant parents; and their impending futures. Ramji is reminded of his historical past age by their conversation about their ages. Ramji brings to recollect his ancestors' earlier history on his identity. He claims that his Hindu forefathers later converted to a branch of Islam, which Vassanji has referred to as the Shamsis in The Gunny Sack. He also recalls the 1960s, when he made the decision to pursue higher education in America but was horrified to learn of Kennedy's treacherous assassination.

He faces the startling realities of extremism, fanaticism, racial discrimination, and identity loss in America. Similar to his quest for identification, the place he dreams about becomes a chimera. The In-between World of Vikram Lall exhibits a thematic shift. While previous books express concern about the Shamsis, a large portion of the novel's plot revolves around Punjabi Asians in Kenya as they see the start of the end of colonial power. Love, passion, loyalty, treachery, and—most obviously—identity are its central themes. An excellent illustration of a post-colonial novel is this one. The sub-theme of identity crises serves as its foundation. White colonists controlled the whole nation during the colonial era, and all native Africans suffered as a result.

Asians suffer because they are "in-between"—neither African nor colonists, not white nor black while Africans demonstrate their revolt through the Mau Mau Independence movement. Vassanji's novel effectively captures the In-Between World of the title, the unique cultural experience of being an Indian living in colonial Africa, and the tension between the traditions of one continent and the customs of another. It is narrated from present-day Canada by an exiled and remorseful Vikram.

Vikram Lall lives in a world that is "in-between": between his ancestral home in India and the Kenya he adores; between fleeing political violence and returning home, which may come at a high cost. The book tells the story of Kenya's colonial past as well as its post-colonial and neo-colonial present. It focuses on the intersection of three races—African, European, and Indian—that shaped the country's current reality at the time. Indentured laborers, Vikram's forefathers choose to settle in Kenya after falling in love with the country's natural beauty. The narrator wonders, "What makes a man leave the land of his birth, the home of those childhood memories that will haunt him till his deathbed...?" when their identities are marginalized as a result of migration (Vassanji, 18).

Vikram Lall works to answer these important questions. He understands that this movement has made him a victim. He feels that, in contrast to his grandfather, his home is Kenya rather than India when he hides in Canada. He flees his home as "one of Africa's most corrupt men," rather than as an economic migrant like his grandfather. According to Vassanji, deciphering the past can help us understand the present. Vassanji only cares about historical events and local politics. Although he analyses how colonial and post-colonial conditions impact individual lives, his works are not individual-centered. Human relationships and identity are approached in a convoluted manner.

Unavoidably, there is a sociological framework that addresses relationships between communities while also shedding light on links between India and Africa. At the same time, Vassanji examines the matter carefully and confronts history head-on. He explains, for instance, how India and Africa had a relationship that was partly colonizer-colonized. Arun Mukherjee notes something very important about this that Vassanji documents in his books. The mythic and calendrical temporalities are the two that Vassanji employs. The mythic time scheme suggests that Indians had been going to the east coast of Africa for centuries.

They were there before colonial powers got interested in Africa. They were there to trade in slaves, ivory, cloves, and hides. … India imported slaves from Africa and continued to import them right up to the nineteenth century (Braun, 174). She analyses the purchasing of sexual services and concludes that "India's relationship with East Africa is seen in terms of sexual domination" (Braun, 175). Reading The Gunny Sack she brings our attention to an unknown and yet very important chapter of history that "there was an influential lobby in India that wanted East Africa to become an Indian colony (Braun, 177).

Vassanji is curious about his community's past. He feels compelled to write about his community's religious and historical heritage. "The suffering of his people due to the global emigration becomes a motivating force for his attempt to reconstruct the concept of the diasporic identity," according to Bakeel Rizq Ahmed Battah (Sheela, 64). Battah also believes that Vassanji writes with a sense of religious urgency to preserve ethnic heritage and assert religious identity. Battah highlights that Vassanji is fixated on the theological historical urgency in all seven of his novels. For instance, Vassanji illustrates the four-generation diasporic religious history of Dhanji's family in his debut book, The Gunny Sack.

Salim Juma, the narrator, describes the startling events and behaviors of his family

about their loss and disappearance. He expresses his disapproval of both the African and Canadian policies of exploitation and prejudice against his people in No New Land. Amriika elaborates on the trauma experienced by immigrants in the host country, as well as the wounds of displacement and disappointment. Vikram Lall's In-Between World portrays both his ethnicity's in-betweenness and Kenya's whole history. The history of Sufism in India and its disastrous involvement in the strife and dispute between Muslims and Hindus is presented in The Assassin's Song. These "attempts to pigeonhole him along communal or other lines... he considers narrow-minded, malicious, and oppressive" (Barber, 212) is undoubtedly a reflection of Vassanji's writings on his religious background. He is a far more skilled and nuanced writer. His primary areas of interest are sexual dominance, ambivalent connections, ruptured identities, the enigma of return, the history of origin, and the evolving paradigm of the relationship between East Asians and Africans. The mainstream culture and policies that disregard, marginalize, oppress, and obliterate one's heritage, culture, and identity are rejected by Vassanji. His depiction of Indians' diasporic situation in Africa and other places leads to a fresh perspective on history and the intricate, unsolvable issue of identity crisis that exiles experience.

This is also true of Vassanji's No New Land. Through Nurdin Lalani, Vassanji tries to examine the search for identity in this book. Lalani makes an effort to forge his own identity. His efforts are thwarted by his family, the town, and society. The development of an autonomous personal identity is impeded by displacement, racial prejudice, and generational disparities. His negative perception that he has lost his identity as a result of moving from Africa to Canada is his obsession. He begins to feel as though his exile has forced him to adopt the new identity of an Asian-African immigrant. It doesn't matter if he loves this new identity or not.

The sense of alienation that permeates Nurdin's surroundings is devastating since everything is new and unfamiliar. He indulges in reminiscence. He recalls that he had a sense of self back in Africa. There, he knew many people. Many people knew him as well. They respected and honored him. However, he is not recognized in Canada. Therefore, he looks for a sense of familiarity in the big, strange metropolis. He goes to Sixty-nine Rosecliff Park in this endeavor. He discovers his community members there. He finds relief in this attempt. He believes that he is not an outsider in his new home. Nurdin believes that several people have influenced his life. He is unable to survive alone. He feels as though he lacks an identity because of his father's influence throughout his early years. Nurdin believes that he has no place in his family because he is unable to create his voice. Someone else is defining the boundaries, and he is being restricted to a specific area. His family, society, and the place in which he lives all contribute to the identity he possesses.

Conclusion: -

Through the characters' connection to their hometown and feelings of estrangement, Vassanji attempts to depict his own neurotic experiences. M.G. Vassanji gives voice to the Indian Shamsi community's experiences as immigrants to Canada in No New Land. These immigrants are constantly faced with a destabilizing polemical condition of the in-between, and they are challenged and ruptured by various cities of ambivalent attachment. The Book of Secrets tells the tale of a person's emotional and physical uprooting and quest for a place to call home in the face of shifting political conditions. Amriika addresses issues related to identification. The themes of love, passion, devotion, betrayal, and more are prominent throughout Vikram Lall's Inbetween World. When M.G. Vassanji's chosen works of fiction are examined through the lenses of psychoanalysis and autobiography, a fresh perspective on the work is revealed, and the current endeavor demonstrates how the psychoanalytic study of the migrant minds in the work leads to an aesthetic analysis of the characters.

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