

**EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION IN M. G. VASSANJI'S
NO NEW LAND: A STUDY IN DIASPORA**

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Abstract:

In his second novel, *No New Land*, Vassanji describes the Lalanis who earnestly look up to Canada as the Promised Land. Their arrival in Canada from Dar es Salaam is marked by anxiety and apprehensions regarding their future. The plot spins around the predicament of the Lalanis who are transplanted into a land of alluring potential but also laborious struggle. Nurdin Lalani, the protagonist of the novel represents those emigrants who envisage that Canada is the land that heralds bounties. Nurdin Lalani's family feels they can attain prospects of a decent standard of living and a secured identity. On the contrary they are greeted with disillusionment and gloom on their arrival in Canada. The plot spins around the predicament of the Lalanis who are transplanted into a land of alluring potential but also laborious struggle. Nurdin Lalani, the protagonist of the novel represents those emigrants who envisage that Canada is the land that heralds bounties. Nurdin's children noticeably imbibed the Canadian ways of living and even despised their father who carried out menial jobs. In contrast, Nurdin is in a state of anxiety and confusion.

Keywords: Migration, Anxiety, Identity, Disillusionment, Struggle, Crisis

Introduction:

Born in Nairobi, Kenya on May 30, 1950 to parents of Gujarati descent, Vassanji ancestry can be traced to Gir Gadhada, Jam Jodhpur and Porbandar in the Gujarat state of India. His ancestors had moved to Kenya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and both his parents were born in East Africa. Vassanji completed his school studies in 1969. Thereafter he spent three months in the Tanzanian military service and some weeks at the University of Nairobi. Having taken a scholarship to the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States of America in 1970, he graduated with a Bachelor of

Science degree in 1974. In 1978, he obtained a Ph.D in theoretical nuclear physics from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1978, Vassanji moved to Canada.

No New Land: A Summary

No New Land (1991) is Vassanji's second novel. Vassanji describes the Lalanis who earnestly look up to Canada as the Promised Land. Their arrival in Canada from Dar es Salaam is marked by anxiety and apprehensions regarding their future. The plot spins around the predicament of the Lalanis who are transplanted into a land of alluring potential but also laborious struggle. Nurdin Lalani, the protagonist of the novel represents those emigrants who envisage that Canada is the land that heralds bounties. Nurdin Lalani's family feels they can attain prospects of a decent standard of living and a secured identity. The plight of the Lalanis in Tanzania was dismal and their economic sustenance was minimal. That's the reason they decided to migrate to Canada. They eke out a living by doing odd jobs. Nurdin's children extensively imbibe the Canadian ways of living and even detest their father who does menial jobs. In the beginning of the novel we get to know that Nurdin is charged of sexual assault. This event has been mentioned in the very first pages by the novelist to draw our attention to the crashing of the ideals and dreams of Nurdin. He could not bring himself to terms with the incident.

Migration and its consequences in *No New Land*:

The novel opens on ambivalent note as the two contradicting concepts of place and identity collide at the very start. This is a precursor to the conflicts in Nurdin's life that follow in quick succession. The Lalanis belonged to the Shamsi community had migrated to Canada in search of better prospects. Their arrival in Canada from Dar es Salaam is marked by anxiety and apprehensions regarding their future. The plot spins around the predicament of the Lalanis who are transplanted into a land of alluring potential but also laborious struggle. Nurdin Lalani, the protagonist of the novel represents those emigrants who envisage that Canada is the land that heralds bounties. The following quotation from the novel reveals how the "ghosts from the past" cannot be shaken off.

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. (*No New*, 9)

Zera, Nurdin's wife successfully handles domestic pressure to earn a living. It is the younger generation that manages to find a way out for themselves in the diaspora much comfortably and effortlessly than Nurdin and Zera. Nurdin contemplates the attitude that Fatima, his daughter adopts to deal with the new world, new people and new ideas.

For the crime of being her father when he wasn't anything like what she had in mind. She was ashamed of this little Paki-shitty-stan of Don Mills, as she called it. She didn't belong here, she would pull herself out of this condition: everything about her attitude suggested that. She would rise to where they had neither the courage nor the ability to reach. Where had she picked up this abrasiveness, this shrillness, this hatred of her origins? (No New, 167)

Nurdin's children noticeably imbibed the Canadian ways of living and even despised their father who carried out menial jobs. Fatima disengaged herself from the Shamsi community in Don Mills. In fact, she was more akin to the Canadian way of life and strived to be one of them. Interestingly, characters like Jamal, Romesh and Sushila have an advantage in the diaspora and chose Canada as their new home instead. Nurdin's children stand for the transformed Asian-Canadians who are not troubled by their pedigree or nostalgic reminiscence. Nanji and Jamal too moved to Canada but Nanji felt that his dreams were not fulfilled whereas Jamal survived by doing odd jobs. Here home turns out to be an unachievable dream. The promises that Canada once held for Nurdin are unfulfilled. "No new land" is thus, "no new home" as the same experience of disillusionment that the Lalanis had left behind in Dar es Salaam gets repeated in Don Mills. Ian Chambers is of the opinion that, "The migrant's sense of being rootless, of living between worlds, between a lost past and a non-integrated present, is perhaps the most fitting metaphor of this (post)modern condition." (Chambers, 27)

In the novel there is no indication that any of the members of the African Indian community are in contact with their original homeland, India. Dar es Salaam, rather than India is the place of memory for the characters. They do, however, correspond with Dar es Salaam, especially Zera, who consulted with Missionary over traditional Shamsi reactions to events of daily life in Toronto and requested him to join them in the West. Vassanji thus finely validates that the act of looking back, which is often enveloped in nostalgia and a longing to return, forms part of a multifaceted psychological negotiation of guilt. Vera Alexander writes,

The Afro-Asian network of immigrants to which the protagonists belong plays an important but ambivalent role in their trials of initiation. In practical terms, the community facilitates their access to the 'new land' by providing help-lines and familiar social structures. The safety in numbers alleviates the newcomers' sense of inadequacy and insecurity. On the other hand, the modern lifestyle in Canada exposes the immigrants to problems for which they have no traditional panacea. (Alexander, 200)

Canada is where the present time of Nurdin Lalani and his family is mediated. Hence, the nation is at the core of our discussion in the context of diaspora. Speaking of Canada as an open space which has embraced migrants and refugees, Asma Sayed observes,

Open space may function as an indicator of the country's openness as a multicultural society, or the potentiality and growth of self, identity, and home; or, on the other hand, as something more negative – the opening of a wound, for example, or of separation, loss, isolation, in-between-ness, or a site of displacement for the diasporic individual. No matter the endless interpretations, Vassanji primarily perceives the openness of Canada as a canvas that allows for a plurality of voices and narratives of identity, home, and belonging, and creates a palimpsest for the layering of stories. (Sayed, 24-25)

The Lalanis' movement from Tanzania to Canada involves a complex transformation. No recognition is given to the individual's ethnicity as Nurdin experiences a sense of loss aggravated by the surrounding social context in the Don Mills suburb. For Nurdin Lalani, Canada is a hostile space. At job interviews he is written off as he lacked a "Canadian experience" (44). He experienced racism on a personal level. His ambivalence finds expression in his victimization. He felt a moral and a cultural shock in Canada. He attends a peep show which comes as a moral shock for himself too. On a familial level, frustration and disorientation sets in as his children do not regard him. Nurdin manages to generate a frail appearance of internal stability by embracing certain traditions, Islamic values and attitudes such as going to the Mosque every Friday. The Lalanis' settlement in Sixty nine, Rosecliff is conceived as a segregated space. Sixty nine Rosecliff is associated with stereotypes and myths of backwardness, its diversity is marked and populated by migrants who have continually become a more settled and permanent population. Though there are some poorly maintained housing estates, the members manage to earn a living for their survival.

While anthropologically speaking, the orientation provided by culture is still flexible enough in the young to shift with a change of surroundings, the old in *No New Land* can only compensate by a conscious effort. Interestingly, there is one other group of people that succeeds in Canada apart from the young generation – those who have occupied marginal positions in the homeland and thus have an advantage in the diaspora. Outsiders like Jamal or Sushila, a Hindu are the new marginal men and women: i.e. those flexible enough to be open to and eager for innovation. For them, Canada is a welcoming space, unlike Nurdin. After her husband's death, Sushila, who also has lived in London, does not go back to Africa but chooses Canada as a new home instead, because she is sure that it allows her a distancing from traditional gender roles:

“I was not going to slave for my fat mother-in-law and the fat aunts and grandmothers. And I would not choose that life for my daughter either. So by and by we heard about Toronto.” (No New, 154)

In the same manner, Jamal and Nanji prudently prevent the new land from becoming the old because they value the new over the old. Having been transplanted to Canada, the Lalanis encounter a new cultural landscape which they (especially Nurdin) find extremely strenuous to deal with. Dan Ojwang observes,

The travails of the Lalanis are complemented by Nanji’s ruminations about religion, his paralysis in the face of racism, and his inability to find love, among other existentialist themes of futility and anxiety. The sophisticated nature of Nanji’s thinking acts as a narrative counterpoint to Nurdin’s bewilderment in the face of a new cultural landscape. (Ojwang, 43)

Nonetheless, the text does not point out that Zera is as disgruntled as Nurdin with the downward mobility experienced by the family’s movement to Canada. There is a social and cultural continuity to her life. She keeps herself busy by mingling with the neighbours. In fact, food becomes one of the most important means for her to socialize with the people at Don Mills. Though the setting and the kind of people whom she needs to deal with socially have changed with their migration to Canada, her essential role as a woman and her personal integrity has remained largely unchanged. Nurdin pondered about the attitude that Fatima, his daughter had adopted to deal with the new world, new people and new ideas.

For the crime of being her father when he wasn’t anything like what she had in mind. She was ashamed of this little Paki-shitty-stan of Don Mills, as she called it. She didn’t belong here, she would pull herself out of this condition: everything about her attitude suggested that. She would rise to where they had neither the courage nor the ability to reach. Where had she picked up this abrasiveness, this shrillness, this hatred of her origins? (No New, 167)

In contrast, Nurdin is in a state of anxiety and confusion. Much of this emotional turmoil is manifested through his sexuality. As the son of a successful and a wealthy businessman, and as an educated and skilled entrepreneur in Tanzania, he is now forced to do demeaning work in Canada. He works as a counter clerk at a donut shop and as a caretaker at the Ontario Addiction Centre. His friendship with Sushila, daughter of the cobbler in his hometown in East Africa, slowly turns romantic. Later, he is burdened by guilt and decides to remain faithful to his wife. But his faithfulness to his wife is not predicated on passionate love or emotional intimacy. The social freedom that is available to him in Toronto, i.e. his

inhabited space, is undermined by the social strictures of his traditional marriage to Zera, and by his economic and social marginality as an immigrant in Toronto. Vijay Mishra underlines the impact of diasporas as they are also a record of the host nation's memory and evolve a critical thinking of the nation's aesthetic. He suggests,

We need to look at people's corporeal or even libidinal investments in nations (as denizens or as outsiders); we need to read off a modernist 'transcendental homelessness' against lived experience.... and we need to think through critically the effects of the aesthetic (as dialogic expressions, discrepant discourses or as 'minor' literature) on both diasporic and host citizens. (Mishra, 21)

The remains of the past are also frequently assembled by the imagination to form a new, and kaleidoscopic design, one which, in Homi Bhabha's words, "does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (7). It is Stuart Hall who most effectively sums up this point in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora."

Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference [...]. It is because his New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plentitude, 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 requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery. (Hall, 235-36)

Conclusion:

The sense of powerlessness that Nurdin feels at the social, emotional and sexual levels of human experience is characteristic of the loss of the social status and the cultural pride that was associated with his cultural heritage as a South Asian living in Africa. Immigration to Canada does not diminish the sense of loss he experienced in East Africa. Ironically, the country that supposedly promises political, social and personal freedom sustains the kind of degradation that Nurdin went through in his homeland. Dislocation and displacement have produced disillusionment which Nurdin Lalani finds extremely challenging to grapple with.

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