

M.G. Vassanji: Realtor of Imaginary Estates and Anchor of Pragmatic Awareness

- Anjum Khan M.

Abstract: There have been several imaginary territories: verbally sketched, mentally visualized and whimsically dwelt. Literature has facilitated many such 'imaginary lands' accommodating ideals, fantasies, facts, histories, counterfactual histories, and pragmatism. M.G. Vassanji is one such architect and realtor of fictional territories which are accommodated by ideas cohabited alongside fictional characters. The Imaginary villages and towns constructed in the premises of Vassanji's creative terrain penetrate into the lives of few individuals who collectively constitute the fictional community of Shamsis and Gadivaras.

Keywords: M.G. Vassanji, The Gunny Sack, No New Land, The Book of Secrets and The Assassin's Song.

"Your greatness lies in imagination. The ability to imagine is the largest part of what you call intelligence" (Crichton 335).

There have been several imaginary territories: verbally sketched, mentally visualized and whimsically dwelt. A Sion or a utopia is one of the favorite visions and most sought after mission of scientists, clairvoyants and artists. Writers, painters and other artistes succeed in manifesting the genesis of a new world by means of compelling imagination. On the other hand, the scientists and the sci-fi fiction writers envisage an experiential existence silhouetted against scientific and futuristic theories. However, imaginary terrains are constructed on the ideological scaffold as well, in order to corroborate the reality. Literature has facilitated many such 'imaginary lands' accommodating ideals, fantasies, facts, histories, counterfactual histories, and pragmatism. These fictional backdrops resonating fictional voices and reflecting narratives, more often than not, produce a mirage of reality. Similar to R. K. Narayan's 'malgudi' and Thomas Hardy's 'Wessex', enlightening on multifaceted and multilayered phases of human verve, there are imaginary terrains constructed beyond geographical demarcations to put forward the wedged realism. M. G. Vassanji is one such architect and realtor of fictional territories which are accommodated by ideas cohabited alongside fictional characters. There are fictional terrains which can be roughly located on world map in East Africa, Northwest India and North America. Kikono, Matamu, Rosecliffe Park and Pir Baag are few of such imaginary lands accommodating the fictional individuals and their community. In addition, the East African coastal towns and major cities like Dar-es-

Salaam are the vernacular milieus. Nevertheless, Vassanji's endowment for writing is less familiar in African writing and in East Africa which constitutes almost principal segment of his fictional backdrop: "M G Vassanji is one of the unsung greats of African literature" (Foden 38). The contemporary global issues claiming attention are satisfactorily debunked in Vassanji's fiction. The dread of militanism; the rise of religious fundamentalism and need of religious tolerance; the two waves of migration across continents; the rampant immigration to US and Canada for economic and other concerns; the demise of past; are few of the present issues delineated in his novels. These issues are implicitly interwoven with the plot of the fictional episodes provoking opinions and rationales. Vassanji opens one of his recent essays thus:

The condition of the world today brings home to us—those of us who had forgotten—the pervasiveness of smaller ethnic, communal, or sectarian identities and the tenacity with which they survive. We have seen pluralism-based national identities—built on the idea that human equality and fraternity should ultimately override ethnic or other communal differences—disintegrate and these smaller components reasserting themselves, shaking off the old idealism and taking up apparently where they last left off. Neighbours turn against neighbours, communities that once joined forces to fight colonial domination and conquest take up arms against each other to settle scores and gain points in a new struggle for power, definition, and survival. (111)

Matamu in *The Gunny Sack*, is M. G. Vassanji's maiden creation, situated in the coastal region of East Africa and to be particular, in Tanzania. It is a small village in the vicinity of Bagamoyo and a settlement of Indian shopkeeper community flanked between the natives and the European colonizers. The narrative excavating into the memories of individuals commence in the remote past and in a distant land. Matamu is a trade friendly village promoting commercial operations owing to its proximity with the sea. Dhanji Govinji, the forerunner of this shop keeper league's entrance in matamu explains this:

Dhanji Govindji landed at Bagamoyo. While the Europeans, the hunters and porters, the seasoned Swahili traders, went inwards to seek greater fame or fortune, my forebear joined a small caravan going southwards on the slave route. Thirty-six miles on foot and donkey later, he unloaded his stuff at the village of Matamu. The caravan marched on towards Kilwa, and Dhanji Govindji walked into the nearest store and asked: Where is the mukhis store? (11)

The reminiscent narrative of Jibai's gunny sack succeeds in painting a hazy, nonetheless, vivid picture of the people and their place. Politically defining the state of Matamu, it is evident that there is no local administration apart from Indian Mukhi. The German imperial rule governs the administration: "By the time Dhanji Govindji brought his bride Fatima out of Zanzibar five years later, Matamu and much of the coast were under German rule, bought from the Sultan; the mainland behind it was simply annexed in the name of the Herr Doktors treaties" (15). The social and economic condition of Matamu is extensively influenced by the Indian

shop keeper community who are involved in either of inland and external trade. The Indians live in the hub of the tank town which is surrounded by woodland where the natives inhabit. Taratibu's role in the novel connotes that slave trade is in practice: "She was called Bibi Taratibu, Gentle One; a slave, discarded to an Indian on the slave route from Kilwa. The slave trade was over, but the keeping of slaves, especially women, still persisted on the coast" (12). Vassanji furnishes the readers with a demographic report of the Matamu village as well. This small settlement is constituted by few Indian shops and their houses; a mosque; few native habitats and two German farm houses: "Outside Matamu were two German farms, a coconut plantation belonging to Herr Graff and a cotton farm to Herr Weiss" (17). In fact, these two farm houses policing the area function as the work stations of the German colonizers. However, this equanimity of the settlement is roughly disarrayed by the Anglo-German clash as a result of the Great Wars. The lives of the Indians come to an important cusp of time and events, culminating an era of Matamu vicinage. The clamor of war and conflict engulfs an entire settlement, plunging it into shadows. The life like rendering of the communal space of the Indian traders represents liminal margins spaces which lie between and beyond margins. Such, spaces are readily eclipsed by slightest of tumult and head on route for apogee:

The community in Matamu, fifty years old and more, vanished overnight. The traces they left behind were the boarded-up stores with some possessions in them, the empty mosque where Raghavji Devraj and Dhanji Govindji had once presided, the cemetery where they buried their dead, the platform behind the mosque where they assembled for festivities. Retainers had been kept to watch over the homes; but there was a sense of finality in this parting, as there were in the events around them. The men had their wives and children with them, they had their money, one-rupee notes stuffed gunnies, and their wives' jewellery tied around their waists; after they took whatever else they could carry. (55)

Pursuing the same vein, Vassanji's Kikono represents another microscopic version of Indian settlement in East Africa. It resembles Matamu of *The Gunny Sack* in several ways, nevertheless, possess a few idiosyncratic lineaments. Kikono frames an important backdrop of the novel, *The Book of Secrets*. It is in fact, limned as an exclusive haven for the Indian shop keeper community: "What manner of town was Kikono, an Indian haven improbably placed miles away from the railway at the western edge of Taita country?" (26). Kikono is another imaginary tank town constructed in Vassanji's fictional terrain. Despite the fact that, there are some geographical references integrated in the narrative, the small village like town of Kikono is utterly fictional. Kikono is founded by an Indian family to facilitate and endorse trade. The trouble-free access to railways and other commercial resorts add advantage and make it another immigrants' caravan on standstill. Subsequently, the small town is established on the foundation of concrete profit and livelihood. The chronicle narrating Kikono's foundation is as follows:

There is a railway to the north and a railway to the south - how can a town fail to grow between them? The young man's father boasted in Lamu. All that is needed is a line to join the two and pass through the village for it to become a town, a city. A few months later two men arrived from India, and later their families. Grocers, dispensers, sellers of cloth, jewellery, and hardware: a line of dukas sprang up. Where there are two Shamsis, as the adage says, let one be the headman, father and priest - the mukhi - and let the other form the congregation. (27)

Similar to Matamu of *The Gunny Sack*, Kikono is principally composed of Indian shopkeepers who live in the center of the village with their shops and community mosque. The natives dwell in the adjacent woodland region, keeping aloof from Indians whom they consider the imposters and their masters who are the English. Unlike, Matamu, Kikono is under the governance of English imperial rule. An Assistant District Commissioner is stationed in the small town to take care of administration and legal issues. Politically, Kikono is under English administration, nonetheless, threatened by German power from the borders. Consequently, it is a sandwiched province lying between two European regimes and under the pressure of inter-colonial rivalry. Except for political insecurity, Kikono is a sanctuary for the Indian immigrants conducting Peli-peli and other commercial ventures. Indian culture punctuated with East African nuances is axiomatic in the settlement. Besides, the general observation, there are mystifying rituals practiced by the Indians and the Natives. The ambiance of Kikono is perceived from a colonial official's perspective and for this reason, the *modus vivendi* of the inhabitants is considered inscrutable. His diary acting as the chief source of narration, furnishes with topographic particulars:

Kikono was situated close to where the seasonal Kito stream dipped southwards before meandering back north and away. To the east, in an area heavily wooded with shrubs and thorns, was the station of the MCA on a ridge that marked the beginning of the Taita hills. . . . In the south was shrubbery and the Taru desert, and the Pare Mountains were dimly visible directly in the southwest. It was a beautiful country. There were forests, lakes, and craters, and hills overhung with blue mist. And there were plenty of animals. (37)

Transference of fictional milieu from the small tank towns in coastal part of east Africa to the metropolitan city of Canada characterizes a fast-moving imagination. M. G. Vassanji is very resourceful in erecting diverse and poles apart imaginary lands. His imaginative construction moves from one continent to other, traveling through space and time. This shift in the backdrop is perhaps owing to the speckled experience of the individuals accommodated in the fictional narratives. *No New Land* presents another of Vassanji's fictional landscape, situated in one of the suburbs of Toronto. Rosecliffe Park Sixty-five is a residential building, by and large, inhabited by Asian immigrants. The majority of the Asian immigrants are Indian migrants from East Africa who floated along the

second wave of migration to North America. This multistoried edifice conciliates more than human presence. In other words, it is an abode for immigrants' dreams in conjunction with their fear anxieties: "After their initial excitement, the days of wonder when every brick was exotic and every morning as fresh as the day of creation, came the reckoning with a future that they held at bay but was now creeping closer. They had come with a deep sense that they had to try to determine it, this future, meet it partway and wrest a respectable niche in this new society" (42). Rosecliffe Park Sixty-five is located in the suburbs of Don Mills which is again, an exclusive immigrant-friendly domain. In addition to the Rosecliffe Park residential apartments, there are other facilities alleviated for the benefits of the inhabitants. There are special shopping stalls selling second-hand goods, fulfilling either of the criteria of affordability and adaptability. Moreover, there are community halls, mosques and user-friendly transportation conveniences in the vicinity. The novel opens with a picturesque, yet, insightful description of the neighbourhood which sets the tone and backdrop of the narrative:

Rosecliffe Park Drive runs its entire short length in a curve, along the edge of a rather scenic portion of the Don Valley. . . . On the side facing the valley the drive itself is lined by apartment buildings identified only by their numbers - the famed Sixty-five, Sixty-seven, Sixty-nine, and Seventy-one of Rosecliffe Park whose renown, because of their inhabitants connections, reaches well beyond this suburban community, fuelling dreams of emigration in friends and relatives abroad. (1-2)

There are physical and emotional facets attributed to this fictional, nonetheless, more than realistic realm. The elevator bustling with residents commuting up and down the apartment structure; tea parties on the terrace; social assemblies for condolence and celebration; constitute a panoramic setting of the indoors building. In addition, modest life style flanked between ambitious prospects and social containment supply the atmosphere. It is palpable that the Rosecliffe Park representing the immigrant experience of the Indian shop keeper community is itself an important character and essential backdrop in the novel, *No New Land*. It is a character, as it can be viewed as a personification of different experiences: including, the excitement of novelty; the fear of unfamiliarity; the anxiety to assimilate and adapt; nostalgic past lingering over the present and attempt of mantling disintegrated pieces of communal life. Chelvakanaganayakam observes: "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" (57). This renders a dichotomy of diverse and analogous experiences leading to awareness of individuals. Vassanji expands his imaginary dominion beyond North America and East Africa, way back to India. Infact, it is discernible that he retraces the steps of his fictional immigrant characters from India from where they have basically arrived. However, the imaginary territory established in India deviates from immigrant experience and, in lieu, focuses on religious fundamentalism and

religious tolerance which is one of the most imperative needs of the hour. Pir Baag from *The Assassin's Song* is M. G. Vassanji's most recent and one of the unsurpassed imaginary lands constructed on fictional canvas. It is posited in Haripur, near Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Vassanji geographically positions it: "A dusty, broken slip road joining two busy highways serviced our village of Haripur, bisecting it. The shrine stood on this road, at the end of the village closer to the Ahmedabad junction. At the entrance, next to the gateless posts, a wooden signboard fixed on two legs carried a faded legend in roman script: Mussafar" (31). Pir Baag epitomizes religious tolerance, syncretic faith: Islamic beliefs and Hindu precepts in concert. It is a sacred place for the Indians, with several shrines and dargas advocating spiritual accord. There are temples affiliated with Dargas, and worshippers confirm their deference to either of the shrines. However, it is ironic that Vassanji has constructed such an apotheosis terra firma, practicing religious broadmindedness in the state of Gujarat which witnessed one of the most ruthless carnage as a part of religious riots. *The Assassin's Song* set in Pir Baag, juxtapose the personal narrative of present with legendary past. In point of fact, Pir Baag is an extraordinary place with legends, history and mythology. It is comprised by the chief shrine of Pir Bawa, few other shrines, temples, mosques, residences and few shops. In addition, there are several mausoleums in the courtyard of the main shrines as tribute to few spiritual leaders and followers of Pir Bawa, Nur Fazal. Gadiwaras are regarded as the spiritual representatives of the Pir Baag:

We were descended, according to legend, from that first disciple of the Sufi, his interpreter Arjun Dev of Afghanistan. This was our connection to history, to the larger world in time and space. It gave greater meaning to our life in this little village, and because of this special provenance we believed we had been endowed with the responsibility to give meaning and comfort to other lives. (49)

During the partition of India, the inhabitants of Pir Baag clung to their fidelity in the canons of Gadiwaras. The custodians of the shrine represent the secular constitution of India where all religions are addressed equally and respect all faiths. Unlike other ethnic sects, the Gadiwaras being essentially Muslims and followers of a religion espousing both Islam and Hinduism do not prevaricate to limit or delimit the geographical boundaries. They reflect on the secular prospects and eventually prefer their domicile of religious tolerance in India. The Gadiwara's adhering to the teachings and principles of the Sufi legend believe in tolerance and harmony. In fact, they strongly trust in the immunity fortification of their community against the uproar of the Hindu-Muslim hostility and deem their position to be tenable: Our village of haripur had been spared such violence in the past, because its shrine of pirbaag lent it an aura of sanctity, having over the centuries drawn countless souls to its gate and comforted them, without regard to caste or creed; and if that sanctity were not enough, the sahebs had been ready with words of wisdom and caution whenever conflagration threatened. (305) Haripur rivets around an image of utopia where the inhabitants tune the strings of Islamic beliefs and vibrate the melodies of Hindu Kirthans. Karsanwala's father the Pir

Baba erects forts of spiritual veneration with judicious mixture of puranic teachings and Islamic ideologies to his devotees. The paragons like love, righteousness, compassion and humility mutually underlying Hinduism and Islam constitute the aura of Pir Baag.

The Imaginary villages and towns constructed in the premises of Vassanji's ingenious terrain penetrate into the lives of few individuals who collectively constitute the fictional community of Shamsis and Gadivaras. The Matamu in *The Gunny Sack*, Pir Baag in *The Assassin's Song*, Kikono in *The Book of Secrets* and The Rosecliffe Park in *No New Land* limn the less popular people, subverted and marginalized by the impending social and cultural hegemony. These ethereal residential areas or asylum of the few who live in caravans are repressed under the pressure of powerful flow of power. Matamu, Kikono, Rosecliffe Park of Don Mills and Pir Baag are manifestations of confrontations and assorted experience. These milieus substantiate and accentuate the underlying themes and ideas wedged between the narrative lines. Tout ensemble, it is conspicuous that M. G. Vassanji's fictional terrains lying in fictional premises are reinforced with observations and purviews which interpret an all-inclusive insight into realism.

References :

- Crichton, Michael. *Sphere*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1987.
- Foden, Giles. "Keeper of an Identity." Rev. of *The Assassin's Song*. *The Guardian Weekly* 179.14 (Sep 19-25 2008): 38.
- Kanaganayakam, Chelva. "Don Mills and Dar Es Salaam." Rev. of *No New Land*. *The Toronto South Asians Review* 9.3 (Spr. 1991): 56-58.
- Vassanji, M. G. "Life at the Margins: In the Thick of Multiplicity." *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*. Deepika Bahri and Mary Basudeva Ed. Asian American History and Culture Series. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996. 111-120.
- ---. *No New Land*. Toronto: Mcclaeland and Stewart Ltd, 1991.
- ---. *The Assassin's Song*. New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2006.
- ---. *The Book of Secrets*. New York: Picador, 1994.
- ---. *The Gunny Sack*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1989.

