Research Paper English Literature

Diverging Worlds and Conflicting Identities: Perspective of Migration in Vassanji'samriika

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KEYWORDS

Migration entails movements and border crossings, which in turn involve a physical as well as psychological dislocation from the land of origin, and subsequent relocation in the land of adoption resulting in issues related to identity crisis, exclusion and inclusion, fixity of 'home' and ambivalent affiliations.In case of twice migrants, the phenomenon of displacement and readjustment further problematizes the concepts of identity, home and belonging. These issues evolving out of a state of migrancyare conceptualized under the term diaspora and form part of diasporic fiction.Vassanji is one such writer whose fiction delineates the double migration of his fictional Shamsicommunity, first from India to East Africa and later from East Africa to Canada and North America. His novel *Amriika*, focuses on the character of Ramji, a Shamsi Indian born in Africa who migrates to America for his higher studies at the prestigious "Tech" in Boston, in August of 1968. The novel is written in the form of a memoir of its central character, who now middle aged and lonely looks back at his life when he had first arrived in America with his friend Sona twenty-seven years back.

As Ramji tells, he writes "this account not without encouragement – to imagine beginnings . . . and more, to sustain them and guide them to my present condition, here in the obscurity of these rented rooms near a beach." These memoirs, as Ramji believes, will heal "my wounds" and "even save my soul from endless torments."In an attempt to reclaim the past, Ramji, in the introductory chapter aptly titled "Beginnings . . .," begins from his community's origins in the medieval times and traces his roots back in India when a mystic from Persia told his ancestors about "better worlds." He narrates:

The furthest back I can go is to a medieval time, a tumultuous epoch in which I see a mystic mendicant who left a Persia ravaged by the Mongol Khans and sought refuge in the rich and chaotic soil of Hindustan – the larger India, today's South Asia – and found the people of my race and whispered to them of better worlds. (2)

It is to seek out a "larger world" in the west that the community founded by the mystic moved from India to Africa. In Africa they waited for the promised arrival of the avatar from the west. However, as Ramji asks, "How far was this west? Where did it begin?" (3), it is apparent that spatial boundaries are not rigid rather they are fluid and floating changing according to the needs and perceptions of the community depending on the concept of the western haven as promised to them in the medieval times. The boundaries defining the east-west divide, as the community's quest exemplifies, keep shifting. From India, west was Africa, from Africa it shifted to America. As Ramji says, "My people sought it [west] first in Africa, an ocean away, where they settled more than a hundred years ago. But in time this west moved further, and became – America; or as Grandma said it: Amriika" (3). Ramji's movement from East Africa to America, therefore, becomes metonymic of his community's subsequent migrations in search of "better worlds."

Ramji and Sona arrived in America away from the politically unsafe atmosphere of Tanzania, quite hopeful and enthusiastic for their futures. However, once they arrived there they faced an unknown world far different from what they had dreamt back home in Tanzania. America was culturally, politically, socially and economically very different from where they have come from. American culture was free of sexual inhibitions and Americans enjoyed a greater degree of political freedom. Ramji's decision not to succumb to the temptations of the new world, "to uphold his identity and faith. . . . [and] To return intact" (26), falls to pieces in the freedom of the American society and culture. His first sin was his affair with Ginnie, his hostess, who introduces Ramji to the robust and exciting world of America. Ramji had a sexual encounter with her that culminated in a short affair. It was Ginnie to whom he lost his virginity. Pricks of conscience trouble him, but the closer he gets to the new culture the more he is able to ward off such feelings. Ramji reflects, "And the sin he'd just committed, the guilty secret. . . . He didn't think about it, not then, this was one glorious night without darkness, and he slept hugging his pillow" (62). Indulging in adultery, and sex before marriage comes in conflict with the old world morality. However, Ramji, wards off his feelings of guilt, at least for the time being.

The novel deals with the most turbulent period of American history since the second world war when America had hopes for a just and democratic world. The America to which Ramji and Sona arrive is full of violence and protests, of clashing ideas and anti-establishment movements, "a home for heresies," and also a place for "homeless tortured spirit" where to "comfort your loneliness and doubts," "Everywhere, gurus, pirs, psychologists, zealots of every stripe were fishing for disciples" (29). Ramji gets involved in campus radicalism and anti-war protests, and movements against the American government. Though he joins the meeting of radicals he is not clear about his affinities "wondering if he had not said yes too hastily" (72). He realizes that his concerns did not lay with the "large events" affecting the American and world history. Coming from a small community his interest lay in the "the woes that befall shopkeepers . . . small people" (74).

Since the political atmosphere could not be avoided anymore, it became important to take sides and show clear allegiances. However, very soon Ramji abandons the movement and was even critical of the ways adopted by the radicals to protest against the government.It is because of his position that he occupies in the scheme of things as an immigrant that he was not sure of anything he did or that he ought to have done. His ambivalent relations with the country of adoption keep him away from an intense opposition of the American politics on third-world. Because of his roots somewhere else and his immigrant status, he could not attach himself very strongly with any cause.His stay at the ashram of the guru Anandswamywas not because of his faith in the path of spirituality. All he desired was "some space . . . to be. To be left alone from the past, not worry about what I'm called, and what I'm *supposed* to be. . . .I am what I am" (140). To shelter himself from the outside world of demanding affiliations, Ramji hides himself in the security of the ashram. Though he never could make himself interested in its spirituality, yet it served as a

temporary retreat to assuage his afflicted self. Later he leaves the ashram for the world of science and reason, eventually coming back to reality,though devoid of his faith and belief in god.

The personal and political awakening of the protagonist, makes the novel very much like a bildungsroman. According to Arun P Mukherjee, the novel has a quest motif and it "has a picaresque feel to it" (88). Ramji was clear about his political affiliations when he first arrived in Boston. He was criticized by his fellow students for his lack of political passion and was termed a Gandhian for his theorizing leftism. The Indians as a minority community in East Africa had not integrated themselves with the natives and functioned as a buffer zone between the colonizers and the colonized colluding with the Empire. They, therefore, had not suffered colonial oppression the way the natives had endured it. Ramji, therefore, could not accept the anti-imperialist idealism of the radicalists. The America that was part of his mythology was the America of Elvis, of Kennedys. It was the America that was "saving the world from godlessness" (9). Ramji's allegiances are ambiguous and full of contradictions, religious, ethnic, personal and political. He was unsure of his political affiliations against American involvement in the Vietnam war. As he says, "I am so far behind them in how far I can go". This represents the dilemma of the immigrant when he is unable to decide his allegiances and the extent to which he can affiliate with the new country. Commenting on the reason for the plight of the migrant, Vassanji says in an interview:

If you are from the outside, you're always an outsider because part of you belongs there; part of your loyalties, part of your concerns are about history in other parts of the world. . . . When you lose community, when you lose the faith that held you so close to it, and you lose home, then what replaces all that? Political ideology, in the case of the character Ramji.But where does that take him? Basically to a no man's land. (Fisher)

The ongoing conflict within Ramji's consciousness that does not let him form strong allegiances is congruent with the atmosphere of conflicting values and cultures outside. Ramji is lost between the worlds of his past and present. The present pulls him towards the new world of sexual, political and social freedom while his past forces him to keep himself intact, tied to the traditional principles of old world morality. He keeps shifting between different lives of sexual, political and spiritual involvement, never completely attached to any one kind of life and finding peace nowhere. He becomes a cultural hybrid suspended between two cultures and two worlds very much like the Schrödinger's cat whose present condition in America remains a mystery to his grandmother back home in Tanzania. Ramji finds himself suspended between the old world and the new, caught between the traditional and modern values symbolized by two opposite worldviews. He becomes a hybrid character occupying what Bhabha calls an inbetween, "liminal" space, falling in the middle of two worlds—neither completely here, nor completely there.

It was at a reunion party of an old friend Jameelathat Ramji met Rumina and fell for her. However, like in his previous involvements with other women and other causes, he is not very certain about his future with Rumina, in "how far" he would go or would he "give up everything, if the moment were right? . . ." (233). The relationshipwas very soon broken when Ramji came to know about Rumina's family background. His one day escapade with her was the last peg on his troubled marriage with Zuli, which however, lacked any passion to save itself from such infringement of a moral code. Ramji says, "If he deceived anyone, it was himself. He should have known he could not cheat successfully; he should have known he could not belong to two worlds at the same time, that he was liable to fall off into the space between" (243). Though the comment is in relation to his unsuccessful relationships with Zuli and Rumina, it can aptly be applied to Ramji's whole life, as he becomes a victim of belonging to two places, two mindsets at the same time in which case he could conform with none. His betrayal of one world in order to grab another results in a loss of both the worlds.

Rumina represents Africa. She is associated with the Swahili language and taarab music.Ramji rejects Rumina because of her shady past that was related to the Shamsi community's predicament as they were forced to leave Africa. Later he accepts her and the time that he spends with Rumina is one of the best periods of his life. The breaking up of his marriage with an Indian Shamsi girl and his relationship with Rumina symbolizes his eventual coming to terms with his own past and his allegiances to Africa. With Rumina he was finally not living an "alien existence" and therefore, "in a manner of speaking, she had brought him home" (283).

The novel depicts nostalgia for the old world of the past located in East Africa. Ramji tells:

There's a game I sometimes play with myself . . . I try to imagine what it's like back at home, now. But which "now"– nine o' clock Friday night or, taking the time difference into account, Saturday morning at five? Depending on my mood I imagine either . . . Friday night at nine, Uhuru Street is empty, people have come back from mosque, the shops are closed . . . (87).

As evident from the passage, there are differences between the old world and the new. Even the dates vary and the imagination could not be hitched up with time. Yet the migrant does not regret the choice of coming to the new place. Nostalgia in the strict sense of longing for the old world is absent in the migrants' new life in America. There is only a faint remembrance in which they indulge to rescue their souls from torments of guilty desertion of the places that demanded allegiances. Ramji's earlier plans of going back to Tanzania and help in its development did not materialize nor did he marry the Shamsi girl of his grandmother's choice. He informs, "And so I followed the route of so many visitors to this country. I allowed convenience, the temptation of the good life, and the assurance of safety and freedom to detain me, even as I held on to the image of the errant patriot, needed, missed in his native land (166)". The guilt of betrayal gnawed at his conscience. Lucy Anne's accusation "*You betrayer of your world!*" turns out to be at least partly true and Ramji could never absolve himself of the guilt of "breaking free" of the past and leaving everything behind though Africa remained "a world always vivid in his mind, strongly beating in his heart" (396).

Ramji realizes the impossibility of "breaking free" of the past. Nevertheless, he also knows the impossibility of forming connections with that past in the old way. The chasm that divides his present being from his past existence has continuously widened in the intervening years as he tried to accommodate himself in America. The sea reminds him "of home, a bit, but, home's on the other side of the ocean, straight ahead of us." He further adds, "Only it's not home any longer," and "we're not who we were" (282).

The political issuesthat the novel explores are the excesses of governments and religious fundamentalism. Vassanji's sect of Shamsi Muslims is syncretistic, fusing elements of Hinduism with Islam.Sona's preoccupation as a scholar is to explore this identity of his religious faith. The religious institutions that govern the faiths aim at exclusionary aspects and division forcing the community to reject syncretism in favour of orthodox principles of mainstream Islam.There are obvious parallels between Vassanji and Sona. Sona's quest for his roots and his objective to explore the history of his religion mirrors Vassanji's own desire to write the history of his community and his frustration with any kind of "purification."He says in an interview with Susan Fisher, Sona "represents the frustration that I sometimes feel when I see history being rewritten before my eyes as it were. Ideas that aren't comforting and are in the syncretistic tradition are erased in the interests of purification even by my own people."Sona's views echo Vassanji's disa-

greement with essentializing notions of purity. He therefore, speaks out against the purist notions of mainstream followers of Islam, saying, "They are rewriting history – my history, our history. They are hiding books and manuscripts, burying them away, either out of ignorance or fear of the orthodox, mainstream reaction. Someone has got to speak out – " (205).

Sona's obsession with the history of his religious faith and his anti-establishment views coincide with the phantom author K.Ali'sreligious dissension from the orthodox principles of mainstream Islam. *Inqalab* prints the letters of the phantom author, which were signed anonymously as K. Ali. His letters ferment hostility between conservative and radical Muslims leading to the bombing of a bookstore exhibiting his works causing three innocent deaths. The idea behind such extremism is to preserve the syncretic tradition and the hybridity of the Shamsi tradition. However, extreme activism causes only destruction. In that sense the novel voices an opposition to fundamentalism and extreme forms of activism for promoting identities based on purity or syncretism.

Displaying an impact of interaction of different culturesresulting in unessentializing notions of identity, Ramji objects to the investigator's predisposition to essentialize the core characteristics of displaced communities. He says, "I have little doubt that I and what he thinks I represent are destined for the government's data bank of global malcontents and malfunctionaries. . . . He lumps me with a peopleof the world with grievances. Is he wrong? Can I talk about myself without reference to a group?" (257). At another place in an early part of the novel Ramji questions Lucy Anne's clumping him together with the all third world people without seeming to understand the underlying differences concerning communities like his. He says, "And in my country Indians like me are sometimes called foreigners even though we've been there more than a century. . . . I am Indian and African and all screwed up with Western education, and all she sees is "'Third World'" (152). The passage reflects Vassanji's criticism of the homogenizing tendencies of the first world nations regarding their perception of the third world people. The nuances of difference underlying the apparently smooth, all-encompassing umbrella terms are overlooked in an attempt to generalize the epistemological constructs of the West about the East. By reinstating difference through the portrayals of liminal characters like Ramji steeped in many worlds, Vassanji rejects nation as a homogeneous entity in favour of a transcultural identity. As Rashmi-Jyoti affirms, "Vassanji, by evoking new modes of geographical and cultural perceptions makes a shift from the nationalist tradition taken in homogeneous and monolithic terms" (129). By insisting on hybridity and cultural transition, and by mixing the pure with more syncretistic formations, Vassanjiforegrounds a narrative that "unsettle[s] the centre margin opposition, and expose[s] the empowering strategies of the centre to maintain the status quo" (Jyoti 129).

The title of the novel—Grandma's version of America— itself is a hybridised form of the correct American and an altered Indian pronunciation of the word 'America'. The hybridity accords a stance to the writer for "observing individuals, communities and nation on axes of simultaneity – of time and space" which is "of crucial significance to Vassanji for his objective – certainly implicit if not explicit – of perceiving and evaluating cultures and societies in flux (Kumar and Narang 154). The altered form of the title is also in keeping with the idea of the American dream, which is inherent in the promise of "better worlds" of the west. Though in the case of Ramji the American dream remains unrealised and his life is frought with disillusionment and a crisis of identity.

Past becomes an important factor in moulding the present. Unlike Sona, whose concerns are linked with the historical roots of his community, Ramji tries to cut himself off that past. Sona and Ramji present two different perspectives of migration. One keeps himself intact by immersing himself in pool of history, the other embraces the present cutting of his ties with the past and hence remains afloat betwixt myriad influences surrounding him. For a diasporic subject the past becomes the centre, which holds his being.Ramji's life lacks that centre that can hold his being together. It is only when he comes in contact with his African self, which is symbolized by Rumina that he finds his true happiness. Ironically the *khanga* with the printed motif for the wayfarer to keep looking back was presented to him by the African women of his neighborhood. For Ramji, the solution for his fractured self lies in an acceptance of a transnational and transcultural identity.At the end of the novel, when Rumina is gone, he becomesa lonely person, shorn of allegiances, suspended between the three dimensional space of India, Africa and America waiting for his beloved's arrival with a faint hope that she might return and he might find his tethering somewhere. Rumina, however, has not returned yet, and the migrant's fate is left unresolved.

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