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## MAPPING DIASPORA IN M. G. VASSANJI'S *THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL*

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*The reign M.G. Vassanji is beginning to cast a long shadow on the diasporic horizon. He is an Indo- African Canadian writer who has lived through several migratory experiences himself. Vassanji's prose succeeds in articulating the pangs of an ambivalence that haunts a diasporic identity, whether it is the old diasporic subjectivity or the generation next. His characters live in the double migration of South Asians. He is mainly concerned with the diasporic experience of exile. The In-Between World of Vikram Lall follows the histories of three generations. The book challenges the trauma of diaspora through the stories the first generation, second generation and third generation exiles that are Indian.*

**KEYTERMS:** Alienation, Diaspora, Exile, History, Politics.

### **Introduction:**

*The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is the fifth novel written by M. G. Vassanji and takes place in colonial and post-colonial Kenya during times of political turmoil. This is a sprawling, epic and absorbing story of an Indian immigrant family's fight for existence stretching from the 1950s to the 1990s. Vassanji mixes personal narrative with political history very smoothly in this Radiative novel. The novel's narrator-protagonist, Vikram Lall, is in his 50s and offers a backward look at his family's ascent and decline amid the fast-shifting Kenya. A self-exile from the shores of Ontario in Canada, Vic admits that "I'm Number one of corrupt men in Africa!" Based on my suspicion that V. Lall hid, but ironically expanded, his sins. Vassanji takes real historical incidents and uses them as a way to offer a curious blend of history and invention. The story is opened with a mention of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953, noisily celebrated in Kenya when the narrator was eight years old. Open shows colonial power in total authority." Over time Kenya was thrown into full scale

political chaos, through to the late 70's and Axelle is set in the days of British rule and the uprising of Mau Mau unrest against colonialism. The rest of the book shifts towards scenes of Ghanaian independence in 1965 and subsequent post-colonial governance, where we see the Indian immigrants take a hit. The novel suggests Harminder Dhillon is a tale of "immigration, aliens' dream and their fight for survival in a culture so different from theirs" (2). The book is primarily based around three characters, just namely Vikram and his sister Deepa who features from a Punjabi Hindu family living in Kenya as well as an African guy called Njoroge - their friend.

The novel captures the plight of an Asian minority that had a foot in each camp in a world sharply divided between Kenyans and the British. This existential 'in-betweenness' of their existence, where the ambiguous position it keeps raises them to questions on identity. In particular, the Indians of post-colonial Kenya find themselves in an unfortunate middle not because of what they did or how they acted but due to the fact that a dominant African regime now does not perceive them as real (i.e., black) Africans after having worked, however dubiously, against the locals while aligned with colonizers. In post-independent Kenya Asians not even Kenya born but Africa-born Indians are expelled from the country, simply because Asians do not mix with Bantu, refuse to intermarry as they believe that they are much superior to their black compatriots. This novel is about "the tyranny of history and memory, [and] the individual's place and responsibility in lawless times", writes Heaven Ali.

Vikram Lall's mother is so thoroughly diasporic. Her father Verma is a Police inspector. She arrived in Kenya in late 1944. Everything about her subsequent career was a perfect copy of the diasporic problems of exile. Even in a foreign land, where people knew no difference between their own country and the so-called nationals of that foreign country, she makes an effort to breathe life into native customs, culture and lifestyle. Her attire is always pent with Punjabi Dress- Salwar Kameez. She fondly remembers her pre-partition India childhood spent in Peshawar. That little corner of the world she's left behind, it remains with her in memory. She was concerned with the increasing intimacy between her daughter Deepa and Njoroge. Her Indian but diasporic sensibility can never fantasize about interracial marriage. She is a racist Punjabi Diaspora who can never get why her only daughter would go and fall for Njoroge that Kikuyu. The Indian migrants in the diaspora perceive caste-like discrimination against blacks. Here we cannot escape racial parochialism, for the Indians believe in unconsidered and wrong divisions of religions, superstitions, regions, languages, manners, rites etc., constant to their narrow thinking conduct and continue the former by marriage or society. The thought of bringing up 'miscegenated' children repulses Sheila. She vividly marred our memory by pathos and touched us with sorrow. It seems that lights and shadows of life give her a more of a bitter taste than a sweeter one. She was absolutely distraught over the interracial marriage.

The case of Mahesh is a blatant instance of the crudest form of racial discrimination. He visits

India in connection with the last rites of his father. He doesn't get the permission to enter Kenya when he is on his way back. He pleads hard that he is an assistant to Okello Okello, a minister in Kenya. All his forceful pleas fall on deaf ears. Nobody listens to his plea that his application for citizenship is pending. The argument that his wife and children are in Nairobi cuts no ice with the Kenyan authorities. It saddens the readers because what Mahesh gets is a case of betrayal. His moral and material support to the Mau Mau does not enthuse the local authorities. This discrimination multiplies the diasporic problems of exile manifold. It shows the African leaders in a very poor light.

Vikram Lal's father is the second-generation Diaspora who does not feel a compelling desire to return to India like other first-generation Diaspora. He does not experience the emotional trauma of separation from his homeland like his wife Sheila as he was born and brought up in Africa. During his visit to Peshawar, he was clean bowled by Sheila, the flamboyant daughter of Inspector Verma. His interview with the inspector was most uneasy but he was asked to send his relatives to negotiate the marriage. He was a thorough votary of colonialism. He sided with the British colonizers to overpower the local Africans. He was most unhappy about Mahesh's indulgence in the African freedom movement. He is a witness to the notorious work of Vikram Lal for laundering American money for fighting communism. He helps Vikram Lal to enter Kenya on a fake passport. Life for him is not always a bed of roses. In short, he experiences most of the troubles and tribulations which are an integral and inseparable part of the diasporic experience of exile. His psyche is that of such Diaspora people who go out of their way to admire the efficiencies and integrity of the colonizing British rulers.

Anand Lal Peshawri, the grandfather of Vikram Lal was one of the Punjabi laborers who had travelled all the way to Africa under the yoke of colonial oppression to lay a railway line running from Mombasa to Kampala, a proud "permanent way of the British" and "gateway to the African Jewel" (*V. Lal* 15). The last key had been driven home in 1897 when these indentured laborers were "recruited from an assortment of towns in North-West India and brought to an alien, beautiful, and wild country at the dawn of the twentieth century" (16). These Punjabi laborers had suffered from many diseases such as malaria, sleeping sickness, elephantiasis, and cholera. They had been bitten by jiggers, scorpions, snakes and chameleons. A photograph shows the grandfather as one of the four Punjabi coolies on a railway inspection trolley. The grandfather had etched his name on a rail in Punjabi script. The indentured laborers were the real Diaspora who had passed nightmarish days. Vassanji makes very profound comments on the reasons that weigh with a person migrating to some other land:

What makes a man leave the land of his birth, the home of those childhood memories that will haunt him till his deathbed? ... Indians abroad in Africa, it has been said that it was poverty at home that pushed them across the ocean. That may be true, but surely there is that wanderlust first; that itch in the jowl, that hankering in the soul that puffs out the sails for a journey into the totally unknown? (17)



Vassanji has analyzed the problems faced by these people in their own country which forced them to migrate to distant lands. At home, they faced penury, and social and economic insecurity while in a foreign land, they experienced marginalization, discrimination, and alienation.

The Englishmen in Kenya were also diasporic people though they were holding power positions. Colonialism had its foundation in domination, appropriation, and exploitation which placed the colonizers and colonized population in an antagonistic relationship. British settlers denied and distorted indigenous social, cognitive, and cultural structures. They did not occupy a tenuous status like the Indian Diaspora but held the highest position in a multi-layered social setup in Africa. English Diaspora exercised their domination over the locals through coercive methods which led to anti-colonial resistance. Vassanji describes how the Mau Mau militants were killing and attacking British men, women, and children for riding the Africa of British colonialism. Vikram Lall, the protagonist, was haunted by the brutal murders of his childhood English expatriate friends, Bill Bruce and Annie Bruce. Vassanji refers to another more chilling and blood-curdling incident in which an English Lady, Janice's husband, and two sons were murdered by Kikuyu militants. The Mau Mau gorilla freedom fighters struck terror among the English Diaspora as they aimed at handing over the control of African countries to the African leaders and making them leave the continent bag and baggage. Janice did not go back to England as she was psychologically attached to the place where her husband and children were buried.

Vassanji portrays the 'lives of the second-generation Diaspora whose relationship with India, the land of origin, and Africa, the adopted land, is drastically different from that of the first generation. While Sheila Lall expresses utmost attachment to India, Ashok, her husband, who has visited India once for marriage found "everything in India dirty and poor, and for the most part he had a miserable time of it" (*V. Lall* 20). He makes sarcastic remarks against India that "even to see the Taj Mahal you had to walk over gutters and touts everywhere" (20). The mindset of the second-generation Diaspora reflects their dilemmatic position as they are being pulled into two different directions. They have dual identities: there is a conflict between their ethnic heritage and their desire to belong to the fostered land. For Vikram Lall, India is a "fantasy land" and he ruminates: "Would the Asians go home to India? I didn't want to go to India, to the tumult and the dust and where you stepped into shit even in a posh taxi, as Papa described it. Not even to the enchanted forests of Ram and Sita, as a mother would have it. I knew of no worlds outside my Nakuru, this home, this backyard, the shopping center, the school" (*V.Lall* 49). Vikram Lall's state of mind originates from his ambiguous and conflicting status that 'migrancy' has imposed upon him. Vikram's sense of belongingness to India differs from other members of the family due to his birth and upbringing in Africa.

All Diaspora must face certain unavoidable problems. When Indians settle down in a continent like Africa they forfeit many advantages. Benefits like those of birth, race, culture, or faith do not avail

them. They are the people, says Harminster Dhillon, who is “not accepted by their adopted lands, and forgotten and disowned by their native ones” (3). It is clear that persons like Vikram Lall are homeless waifs. India, their land of origin, is more like a fantasized romance for them; therefore, they show no keenness to go back to India. Diasporic settlers feel various types of pressures and tensions and are simply nonplussed because ethnic and racial discrimination make them the victims at the hands of locals. During the Asian Exodus, many of them traveled to such countries as England, Canada, or America instead of moving to their homeland because the West or Europe would provide them with better opportunities and better standards of living.

The in-between position of Vikram Lall is not only different but also metaphorical. He becomes a metaphor for the dangling man, one who is pitch-forked between two different cultures. Vikram occupies a perilous position in Africa which compels him to rethink his place and identity. Vic dwells upon the pain of loss and of not being firmly rooted in a secure place as he realizes that rather than being an authentic African he is an outsider, belonging to land overseas. This predicament or position is the lot of all those who settle in host lands or lands other than their own. There is one more peculiar thing about him that he is neither on this side nor on that side. He is positioned like a barometer keeping a watch on the various types of pressure as they begin and snowball later. Later on, most often he casts a longing and lingering look behind at his history. He remarks on such occasions: “I therefore prefer my place in the middle, watch events run their course. This is easy, being an Asian, it is my natural place” (*V. Lall* 306). Vic discovers that it is almost impossible to survive in free Kenya without the support of local politicians. His efforts to get adjusted to the changed social milieu throw him into an eerie state of affairs. He becomes an important link between America and Kenya for laundering illegal money to earn the goodwill of the political elite. It is true that he too pockets massive commissions as he basks in the sunshine of illicit dollars. He relishes his role as such and prefers his place in the middle. He fails to realize that the noose can tighten around his neck at times. Playing with illicit dollars must become shaky for him as he occupies the unsafe position of an outsider. He has been playing the role of a conduit for a long time. No mercy is shown to him when his usefulness as a tool becomes dubious. The novel highlights the predicament of the protagonist who is drifting helplessly in the muddy mire of East African politics. He finds shockingly that his world is one of racism, fanaticism, brutal power struggle, and blatant corruption. Thus, the thematic complex of the novel grows from Vikram Lall’s odd position. He wonders about his identity in Canada as he doesn’t know which place he belongs to. He feels himself to be on the periphery of things, on the outside looking in. He yearns to be accepted as Kenyan but the Kenyans look upon him as an Asian. Like most other diasporic settlers, he is a dangling man, a nowhere man suffering from the pangs of a Diaspora in exile.

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